KEEPING A PLACE FOR METAETHICS:
ASSESSING ELLIOT’S DISMISSAL OF THE SUBJECTIVISM/
OBJECTIVISM DEBATE IN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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Abstract: Robert Elliot claims that the metaethical distinction between subjectivism and objectivism is unimportant in environmental ethics. He argues that because a sufficiently sophisticated subjectivist can accommodate all the intrinsic value an objectivist can, even in apparently problematic situations where humans either do not exist or do not have the relevant values, and because metaethical commitments fail to have any normative or motivational impact on rational debate, it makes no difference whether an environmental ethicist is a subjectivist or an objectivist. Elliot’s dismissal, however, is unjustified. As it turns out, objectivists argue differently from the way subjectivists do, are motivated differently from the way subjectivists are, and are able to make a greater range of intrinsic value claims than subjectivists are. If Elliot’s arguments have any appeal at all, it is only because he blurs the fundamental metaethical distinction in the first place and defends a subjectivism so objectivist that it is almost unrecognizable as subjectivism.

Keywords: environmental ethics, subjectivism, objectivism, intrinsic value.

A common assumption in environmental philosophy has been that in order to secure not merely instrumental but intrinsic value for natural entities one must adhere to and successfully defend an objectivist metaethic, as opposed to a subjectivist one.¹ Metaethical theories, unlike normative theories in ethics, deal not with what particular things have intrinsic value but with what it means for a thing to have intrinsic value in the first place, and subjectivists and objectivists offer entirely different explanations. Objectivists believe that intrinsic value can only be discovered by valuers, and that value judgments can only be true in virtue of mind-independent value facts (Elliot 1996, 222). Subjectivists believe that intrinsic value can only be conferred by valuers (221), and that value judgments are “recast in terms of judgements involving the psychological

states of valuers” (Elliot 1997, 6). Many philosophers believe that objectivism offers distinct normative and motivational advantages for the environmental philosopher, in part because objectivists are seen as being more committed to act on and more capable of defending their moral judgments and in part because objectivists are seen as being capable of locating intrinsic value across a larger range of natural entities, both actual and possible.

For some time, Robert Elliot has challenged this view, but originally his response was to assert that the subjectivist metaethic is just as powerful and just as motivating as the objectivist one (Elliot 1985 and 1992). Now he has gone further and challenged the relevance of the metaethical debate itself, insisting that the issue has no normative or motivational significance for the environmental ethicist (Elliot 1996 and 1997). He supports this bolder challenge in two ways. First, he insists that subjectivists can make value claims just as extreme and just as nonanthropocentric as those of objectivists. To demonstrate, he examines four specific intrinsic-value claims that one might expect only an objectivist could make and argues that a sophisticated subjectivist could make the very same claims. Second, he argues that the relative impact of being a subjectivist or an objectivist on the dynamics of normative debate and on the agent’s willingness to act on his moral judgments will be the same. His position has evolved in an interesting way: originally his aim was to show that subjectivism could hold its own with objectivism in accounting for the intrinsic value of natural entities; now he insists, largely as a consequence of his earlier work, that the metaethical debate serves no practical purpose in the first place and is superfluous. The metaethical debate, Elliot might say, is a debate over a distinction that makes no difference.

It is important to clarify exactly what Elliot is claiming. He is not, for instance, claiming that no normative or motivational consequences would follow if objectivism in fact turned out to be true. He is also not claiming that no such consequences would follow if subjectivism turned out to be true. Elliot is working on the premise that we do not know which metatheory is better justified, and that neither the subjectivist nor the objectivist can show the other’s position to be wrong, contradictory, or incoherent. The question he addresses instead is whether or not, given that either objectivism or subjectivism may be true, one theory offers value conclusions or normative consequences that the other cannot. His interest, then, is not whether a true objectivism can do more for the environmental ethicist in normative debate but whether it helps the debating environmental ethicist to be an objectivist. His answer, of course, is that it does not.

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2 This description of the two theories and their claims is basically Elliot’s. I use Elliot’s description first because it makes it easier to assess the strength of his arguments and second because they seem closely enough in line with recent literature in environmental philosophy.
In the end, Elliot’s dismissal is unpersuasive. Each of his substantive claims is problematic, and as a result his general conclusion is unjustified. His claim that the metaethical distinction has no impact on the dynamics of debate is false because the distinction results in a clear practical difference in debaters: only objectivists are capable of giving external reasons and therefore of engaging in any interesting form of rational debate over moral judgments. His claim that the distinction will have no motivational fallout is also false, because objectivists experience a motivational bonus in their desire to attain truth and because subjectivists suffer a motivational penalty tied to a particular worry about contingency. Last, his claim that subjectivists can make the same range of nonanthropocentric intrinsic-value claims as objectivists is weak, because his subjectivist accommodation of each of the four intrinsic-value claims he discusses is extremely problematic. As a result, Elliot is wrong, and there is good normative and practical reason to take the metaethical distinction seriously in environmental ethics.

Assigning Intrinsic Value Broadly

In order to assess Elliot’s position, let us carefully examine his two main arguments. The key to Elliot’s first argument is his claim that subjectivists can assign intrinsic value just as broadly as objectivists can. In order to establish this, he examines four problematic claims that subjectivists might be thought to have difficulty making and then shows that there is no difficulty after all. He lists them as follows:

(A) Once upon a time there were trilobites which had intrinsic value.
(B) At some time in the future, well after conscious organisms have become extinct, there will still be some biological complexity and it will have intrinsic value.
(C) Had the course of evolution gone differently, resulting in no conscious organisms but some biological complexity, the world would have had intrinsic value.
(D) Had the course of my psychological development gone differently, resulting in the development of no green values, then wild nature would nevertheless have had intrinsic value. [1996, 226]

Claims like these are commonly accepted as the sorts of thing that only an objectivist environmental ethic can accommodate, since in each situation there is either no valuing subject at all or the subject’s values are very different from his actual values. Elliot insists, however, that a sufficiently sophisticated subjectivism can accommodate each of these claims despite the apparent problems caused by the missing valuer in (A) and (B), the lack of any valuers in (C), or the missing relevant valuations in (D). To see how, we first must understand what Elliot means by sufficiently sophisticated subjectivism.
To begin with, sophisticated subjectivism has it that a thing is intrinsically valuable when it possesses an excess of value-adding properties over value-subtracting properties. An entity’s properties become value-adding or value-subtracting properties when they stand in an “approval relation” or a “disapproval relation” to a certain attitudinal framework. As Elliot explains,

Properties are value-adding if they exemplify the property of standing in the approval relation to an attitudinal framework. In fact the property of being value-adding is identical with the property of standing in the approval relation to an attitudinal framework. This latter property is a second-order relational property which includes necessarily among its relata psychological states, specifically attitudes, of valuers. [1992, 140]

Intrinsic value is thus a relational property, one that exists only when a certain kind of valuing relation holds between a value framework and the properties of a valued thing. Elliot is unclear about whether the intrinsic value attaches to the subject and object together or just to the object. In fact, he seems to believe both, for he states that “it is the whole complex state of affairs, involving both [the valuer] and the [thing valued], to which we are attributing value” but then immediately adds that “the property on which we base our value judgement is internal to, or intrinsic to, the thing valued, although the property itself is relational” (1997, 13). It is clear, though, that “a thing has intrinsic value if and only if it is approved of (or would be approved of) by a valuer in virtue of its properties” (16). Thus, on Elliot’s view intrinsic value is not only subjectivist and naturalist but relational as well.

A second feature of sophisticated subjectivism is that it makes intrinsic value indexical. Intrinsic value is indexed according to particular valuation framework, time, and possible world. This means that something has intrinsic value when a valuing relation holds between its properties and a particular attitudinal framework at a particular time and in a particular world. Similarly, something has intrinsic disvalue when a disvaluing relation holds between its properties and a particular attitudinal framework, time, and world. This indexical element of the theory accomplishes a number of things. By indexing value to valuers, one avoids the threat that subjectivism necessarily implies a kind of relativism where two contradictory assertions can both be true or both be false, since seemingly contradictory assertions will be differently indexed and so will not actually contradict each other. Indexing value to times also accommodates the fact that a valuer’s attitudes can and do change over time. Last, indexing value to possible worlds accommodates our intuition that a valuer’s attitudes might have been different had the world turned out differently. Intrinsic value is thus extremely contextual, not only because it is a relational property but also because the relation itself is multiply ambiguous.
The last requirement of sophisticated subjectivism is that intrinsic value have a hypothetical element. What this means is that a valuer need not actually value a thing in order for it to be valuable. All that is required is the hypothetical conditional that if the valuer were to consider the thing in question from his or her location in time and possible world then that valuer would value that thing. As Elliot explains, “A thing has, and had, [and will have, and would have had.] intrinsic value if, were I to contemplate it from the perspective of my present attitudinal framework, I would value it” (1996, 226). This makes Elliot’s subjectivism incredibly powerful. It eliminates any requirement that there be a direct causal connection between the valuer and the thing valued. As a result, it can not only accommodate the value of an entity as it has been and as it will be but can even accommodate the value it would have had had the rest of the world been different from what it is. This hypothetical element also eliminates any requirement that an actual value judgment be made for intrinsic value to exist. Even if no one ever considers whether or not a given thing is valuable, so long as it remains true that if one were to consider it one would value it, the thing has intrinsic value. Clearly, Elliot’s subjectivist theory of value is more than sufficiently sophisticated; it is extraordinarily far-reaching and powerful.

With his subjectivist theory so formulated, Elliot believes that the four problem claims fall away like dominoes. In claims A and B, the past trilobites and future biologically complex organisms have intrinsic value, even in the past and in the future, because their properties at those times are such that if they were considered by certain subjects with certain attitudinal frameworks in the present they would be approved of. In claim C, the biologically complex organisms that might have existed even if valuers had never existed would still have had intrinsic value because, even though there would be no valuers to value it, certain subjects in this world have certain attitudinal frameworks and would value those organisms were they to consider them. As Elliot explains, “To say that such and such a world, or something it contains, has value is just to say that a consideration of some representation of it would provoke the valuing response” (1996, 227). Claim D falls just like the others. This time the world being considered does have valuers, but only valuers that do not value wild nature. There are, nevertheless, certain subjects with certain attitudinal frameworks in this world who would value that wild nature in that alternative possible world, were they to consider it, and so it too has intrinsic value, even in that alternative world.

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3 Elliot contemplates restricting the conferment of intrinsic value to attitudes that are fully informed, that persist over time, and that we wish to persist into the future (1997, 20), but, as we shall see, he prefers to think of these factors not as restrictions on the conferment of intrinsic value in the first place but as tools to be used in the convergence of value judgments through rational debate.
The hypothetical and indexical nature of Elliot’s subjectivist metaethics makes a given framework remarkably powerful. Even in worlds where there are no valuers or where there are only valuers with values completely unlike your own, your values alone are enough to ground intrinsic value entirely in those worlds. Similarly, if today you hold a certain moral attitude that you vehemently rejected all of your days before and reject all of your days after, today’s attitude is enough to make a thing intrinsically valuable. Elliot insists that it is powerful enough to allow the subjectivist to make the full range of intrinsic value claims open to the objectivist, and he takes this as one clear reason why it makes no difference whether an environmental ethicist is an objectivist or a subjectivist.

Normative Impotence

Before we assess this first argument, let us examine in more detail Elliot’s second argument for his claim that the subjectivism/objectivism distinction is unimportant, the one based on his dual assertion that the two theories have analogous practical consequences, both in normative debate and in the link between moral belief and motivation.

With respect to normative debate, Elliot claims that, even though subjectivists and objectivists will often have quite different accounts of what is occurring during such debate, their “dialogical moves” (1996, 229) during conflict resolution are indistinguishable. Both camps resolve normative disagreements “through a process of giving reasons, listening to reasons and considering reasons” (228). Even though the objectivist will describe the process as something like aiming to uncover mind-independent moral facts and the subjectivist will describe it as “something like working through the implications, and reviewing the contents, of an attitudinal framework” (228), the process is identical. Subjectivists and objectivists both provide reasons, look for inconsistencies, attempt to educate the other, attempt to refine the other’s sensibilities, and attempt to excite in the other something of their own appreciation, and so where the dynamics of normative debate are concerned the two groups are indiscernible.

A big part of the reason for this is because, as Elliot astutely points out, the mere existence of moral facts is of itself useless to the objectivist struggling to gain an argumentative advantage over the subjectivist. Only privileged epistemic access to those moral facts would prove beneficial, access that obviously is not tied to believing in such facts. Though historically objectivists do often act as though they have “a hot line to the divine being,” to use Elliot’s sarcastic phrase (1996, 231), there clearly are no grounds for this kind of illiberal epistemic disrespect. Both sides use the same argumentative steps, and neither side has privileged access to moral facts (if they even exist); and so the dynamics of debate are unaffected by metaethical commitments.
Where our willingness to act on our moral judgments is concerned, Elliot insists that the metaethical distinction has no significant motivational impact on debaters. He believes that our commitment to and preparedness to act upon our judgments of intrinsic value are simply not affected by what particular metaethical position we endorse (1997, 30–32). Elliot admits that objectivists are often seen as more highly motivated to pursue the convergence of belief or to uncover a single truth. He also admits that this may even be true in situations where absolutely no actual or even potential practical conflict over actions or policies will occur, though he warns against exaggerating the truth or significance of this fact (1996, 231–32). He insists, however, that in most cases the practical need to set policy in a world riddled with mutually inconsistent policy choices provides an overriding motivation to subjectivists and objectivists alike. As he explains it, “Strong preferences by different people for conflicting policies will, like the commitment to uncovering the truth, be likely to fuel continued engagement in the enterprise of achieving convergence of moral belief” (230). Thus, the subjectivism/objectivism distinction impacts neither our motivation nor the dynamics of our normative debates. Because of this and the fact that it also has no impact on the range of application of intrinsic value, we are left with a metaethical distinction that makes no difference in environmental philosophy.

When we look carefully at Elliot’s two arguments, all three of his substantive claims prove to be false. As it turns out, metaethical commitments do have a distinct impact on the dynamics of normative debate, affect the motivation to act of individual agents, and affect the kinds of intrinsic value claims that can be legitimately made. To see how these things are so, let us look at each claim closely.

Rational Discussion

Let us begin with Elliot’s claims about the practical and motivational impacts of the metaethical distinction, starting with the former. Elliot insists that the distinction has no impact on the dynamics of normative debate, but this proves to be false because there is a concrete difference in the way that subjectivists and objectivists debate. The difference stems from the fact that only an objectivist is capable of engaging in a genuinely interesting form of rational, or reasons-based, discussion of a moral question or controversy. Perhaps the best way to capture this difference is to say that only an objectivist can give, to use Bernard Williams’s (1981) concept, external reasons for why specific actions should be taken.4

4 Although objectivism does not necessarily imply the existence of external reasons, Elliot acknowledges (1996, 222) that external, attitude-independent prescriptivity is often taken to accompany the existence of moral facts. I offer external reasons not as things that objectivists must necessarily believe in but as things that many objectivists do believe in and that no subjectivist can believe in.
External reasons are reasons that a person has regardless of whether or not the action serves any aim or value of that person. Internal reasons, in contrast, are reasons that a person has only in virtue of having certain aims or values. Subjectivists cannot give external reasons in debate because they do not believe that there can be any reason to act in certain ways in certain situations regardless of what motivations we have. Subjectivists can still engage in rational discussion of sorts, but only in contexts where certain values or ends are already held in common and so where internal reasons gain a foothold. In moral conflicts, subjectivists have no way of broadly defending their moral judgments or attacking those of others; they are limited to searching for common attitudinal ground and working through the practical ramifications of that ground wherever it is found. Only objectivists can put forward external, ends-independent reasons why we should do certain things regardless of what we value or what attitudes we have, and so only objectivists can offer any robust rational defense of their moral positions. This is a clear practical difference between the two, and so metaethical commitments do have an impact on the dynamics of normative debate.

Elliot responds to this difference by downplaying it in two ways. First, he insists that subjectivists have several ways available to them of giving general reasons and rationally criticizing opposing views. In particular, he believes that valuers can make correctable mistakes about what they value (1992, 146) or about what properties a given entity has (1997, 34), can have inconsistencies in their position pointed out (37), and can have properties brought to their attention whose value they have never yet considered (1992, 147), and all of these things allow subjectivists to resolve moral debates rationally. Second, he insists that “there is no kind of move that either . . . the subjectivist or the objectivist could make that is not practically or functionally equivalent to some move the other could make” (1997, 38). He agrees that a subjectivist and an objectivist will have different accounts of what they do in an argument but insists that everything that an objectivist can do in a debate will be functionally indistinguishable from something a subjectivist can do.

Neither of these responses, however, is successful. Elliot’s first response is unhelpful for two reasons. First, it is not at all clear how subjective a theory can be that allows criteria as suspiciously objective as the ones Elliot mentions to be used to disallow candidate attitudinal frameworks. From a truly subjectivist perspective it would seem that any criterion for the admissibility of a moral attitude can only count as a criterion for those who subjectively endorse it as such. Opinions will clearly differ on how many and which criteria are to be used, and it is not clear how a subjectivist could resolve this issue, at least not without making the theory at least partly objectivist. Second, the criteria Elliot considers have little if any potential for grounding any interesting rational discussion, the kind that would allow us genuinely to resolve value conflicts “through a
process of giving reasons, listening to reasons and considering reasons’’ (1997, 36). The only thing that Elliot’s criteria can do for the subjectivist in normative debate is eliminate inconsistent or ignorant value positions from consideration. This will eliminate some (uninteresting) contenders, but there will clearly still be many consistent, nonignorant value positions left over, positions that vary enormously but that all equally satisfy Elliot’s limited criteria. In any interesting moral conflict Elliot’s requirements will be easily met and a genuine conflict will remain, one that only an objectivist can hope to resolve rationally.

Elliot’s second response is unhelpful because it seems plainly unjustified. In order for it to succeed, Elliot would have to mean that subjectivists are capable of offering something functionally equivalent to external reasons, but this is an extremely puzzling and implausible claim. We see just how puzzling and implausible it is when we look closely at Elliot’s own description of how an objectivist and a subjectivist with opposite normative positions would describe a practical conflict between themselves. In that description we see, for instance, that Elliot believes that coming to believe a certain objective moral fact is functionally equivalent to coming to have one’s subjective attention “suitably directed” (1997, 37). We also see that Elliot believes that making someone aware of a given objective moral fact is functionally equivalent to “refining his [subjective] sensibility” (37). Each of these claims gives rise to a very damning question.

How, for instance, can someone’s subjective attention be directed suitably? If suitably directed attention simply means factually or correctly directed attention, then the position is no longer subjectivist but objectivist, and so Elliot’s case dissolves. If suitably directed attention just means attention directed like mine or attention that is suitable-for-me, then how can this purely relative standard influence anyone in a normative discourse who does not already share my attitudinal framework? What is more, why would the standard of being suitable-for-me influence others any more than their own equally valid and already endorsed standard of being suitable-for-them? Similarly, how can someone’s subjective sensibility be refined and not merely modified or changed? Again, if being refined means something like being factually corrected, then once more we are dealing with an objectivist and not a subjectivist account, and if being refined means only being refined-for-me, then why would this relative standard have any impact on others with a different moral outlook, and why especially would it have a greater impact on them than their own already endorsed and completely valid standard of refinement? Elliot is either sneaking objective criteria into the subjectivist’s vocabulary or else dressing up subjective criteria to look like objective criteria, and either way the functional equivalence with external

5 Mark Rowlands (2000, 58–60), makes this same criticism.
Thus, subjectivists and objectivists do not make functionally equivalent normative moves in debate, and so being an objectivist and not a subjectivist will clearly have an impact on the dynamics of normative debate.

Elliot might admit that objectivists can and subjectivists cannot offer external reasons in normative debate but also insist that the requirement to be epistemically humble makes this difference practically uninteresting, because objectivists will have no way of discerning which external reasons, if any, correspond with objective reality. This might be his real point when he says that “belief in objectivism, as such, does nothing by way of resolving . . . disagreement” and provides “no additional leverage” in bringing “conflicting normative views into alignment” (1997, 38). Perhaps epistemic respect makes internal and external reasons functionally indistinguishable because, although the former can be criticized for being interesting only to people with shared attitudinal frameworks, the latter can be similarly criticized for being interesting only to people with shared beliefs about what moral facts there are.

This response can be met by two observations. First, it is at least an open question as to which candidate external reasons actually exist and apply to all of us regardless of our particular attitudes. In contrast, it is clearly a closed question as to which subjective values apply to all of us regardless of our attitudes, because none of them does. Therefore, external reasons, and ultimately normative force, are only possible for the objectivist. For the subjectivist, these things are ruled out entirely. This is important because even if the objectivist must be epistemically humble in upholding particular external reasons this is still better than being assured of defeat in advance like the subjectivist. Second, epistemic respect does not require us to give up using external reasons in debates: it requires only that we strive to demonstrate convincingly to others why our own view about what external reasons there are is the correct view. Certainly we cannot be happy with unconvincing or empty accounts of what particular external reasons exist, but why would this stop us from seeking convincing, substantive accounts? Epistemic humbleness is important, but it does not imply epistemic futility, nor does it require us to abandon the use of external reasons in debates the way that subjectivism does. Thus, the functional contrast between external reasons and sub-

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6 Simon Blackburn uses the term decent in the way Elliot uses “suitably” or “refined” when he says that “our actual practices of argument and persuasion require only the hope that there is nothing else for decent people to think” (1998, 304). Like Elliot, Blackburn is a subjectivist who insists that subjectivists can do more than just search for common ground or “settle for our actual shared commonalities of thought and feeling” (1998, 304). As is the case with Elliot, however, Blackburn’s use of the concept of decency is either objective and thus off-limits or else relativized to his own attitudinal framework and thus uninteresting to those who do not already share that framework. As a result, Blackburn shares Elliot’s inability to provide functional analogues of external reasons in normative debate.
jectivist alternatives remains, and so we have a clear way in which meta-
ethical commitments have an impact on the dynamics of practical debate.

The Motivational Difference

In addition to the subjectivism/objectivism distinction having an impact
on the dynamics of normative debate, there is every reason to think that
this distinction also has an impact on the motivation of debaters. Despite
Elliot’s account of subjectivists’ and objectivists’ respective willingness to
act on their moral judgments, it is extremely plausible, and certainly at
least possible, that objectivists experience bonus motivation that sub-
jectivists do not. What is more, only subjectivists are vulnerable to a
specific worry about the purely contingent origins and causes of their
moral attitudes, one that can sap their conviction and act as a motiva-
tional hindrance. Taken together, this bonus and this hindrance strongly
undermine Elliot’s claim that the metaethical distinction has no motiva-
tional import.

The motivational bonus is very straightforward and is suggested by
Elliot’s own comments. In his discussion on the motivational difference
between subjectivists and objectivists Elliot points out that even though
the objectivist can be motivated by his desire for objective truth the
subjectivist can be motivated by the “not too dissimilar” (1996, 230)
desire to institute policies he prefers. Soon and without explanation he
sweepingly assumes and never defends the claim that “the overriding
motive that disputants have for settling value conflicts is that such
conflicts help to fuel practical disagreement concerning actions and
policies” (231). He further assumes, again without explanation, that
the objectivist’s desire to get to the truth is insignificant and will be
noticed, if at all, only when absolutely no policy issues are even
potentially at stake and the subjectivist has no practical concern whatso-
ever to motivate him. It is far from clear that the desire to set policy is
overriding, but even if, and regardless of whether it is, two facts remain.

First, Elliot never explains, and it is difficult to imagine how he could
explain, why only subjectivists and not also objectivists, or even why
subjectivists more than objectivists, desire to set policy. Unless he can
support one of these claims, the desire to set policy cancels itself out
between the two groups because individuals will desire to set policy
independently of their metaethical beliefs. Second, it is not at all clear why
the objectivist’s desire to find out the moral truth would not, independent

7 Although the term overriding is somewhat ambiguous and can mean either something
like exclusive or something like primary, it seems clear from the broader discussion that
Elliot is using the term in the latter sense. If he using it in the former sense then Elliot’s own
claims do not as strongly fuel my ensuing criticism, but his undefended assumption about the
relative strength of the motive to set policy becomes even more blatantly contentious.
of the policy issue, still provide motivation of its own exclusively to the objectivist and not to the subjectivist. It is at least possible, and certainly plausible, that the objectivist will have this additional motivation, regardless of how motivating the desire to set policy turns out to be. When we combine these two facts, we get a very clear result: subjectivism has no exclusive license on practical concern and so cannot provide any motivational bonus to agents, and objectivism does have exclusive claim on concern for the objective truth. The result is a seemingly undeniable motivational bonus. How strong this bonus will be remains open, but the important point is that at least some motivational bonus, and possibly even a very strong one, accompanies objectivism exclusively.

Elliot also briefly mentions the motivational hindrance but only in the context of another, broader concern. Elliot addresses worries about contingency but focuses primarily on worries to do with moral judgments being contingent upon ever revisable moral attitudes and only briefly on worries to do with moral attitudes themselves being contingently determined. While addressing concerns about having one’s values indexed to a present time that may seem insignificant or fleeting, Elliot mentions the more particular worry that “the attitudes and preferences on which [our] value judgements are based have no more secure a foundation than the social, cultural, and biological influences that have shaped the psychologies of those making the judgements” (1997, 31). This particular worry, that our moral attitudes are determined by purely contingent facts about our particular upbringing and enculturation, is very serious and makes it difficult for a subjectivist to act on such attitudes. We see just how serious this worry is when we slightly alter one of Elliot’s own analogies.

The analogy of interest is one that Elliot offers as an antidote to the more general concern just mentioned. He asks us to consider Jane, a subjectivist environmentalist who learns that she will soon be psychologically manipulated into having a human chauvinist moral outlook. He then asks us the following:

Would her knowledge that these attitudes, which sustain her work on [an environmentalist] project, will change, motivate her to give up the work? Will such knowledge weaken those very attitudes now, contributing to the transformation? Not obviously. In fact it might well have the opposite effect; it might move her to work harder; . . . it might consolidate her environmentalist attitudes for the time being at least. [1997, 32]

This analogy is interesting, but it does not highlight the real concern about contingency. It deals with Jane’s worry that her present moral attitudes might completely change in the future, but it entirely misses the more troubling and motivation-impairing concern that even her present attitudes are extremely contingent. The more relevant analogy is one in which Jane realizes that she has already been psychologically manipulated.
into having all of the moral views that she has right now.\(^8\) This is a very disturbing scenario to consider, and it is difficult to imagine how Jane could maintain her original willingness to act, and especially to have others act, on the resulting moral judgments. The only thing that might help would be the possibility that she might morally approve of the attitudes that she has already been manipulated into having, but this sort of endorsement will always be fatally circular: she would need to use the moral attitudes she has already had forced upon her in order to evaluate those same attitudes.

This analogy nicely mirrors the gravity of the worry that our attitudinal frameworks are contingently determined. If we make the moral judgments that we do purely because of contingent forces that determine our moral views, then our awareness of this seriously hurts our willingness to act, and especially to have others act, on those judgments. There is no way subjectivists can rescue their moral views from this undermining realization, because on their metaethical view there is no noncircular way that they can morally evaluate those views as desirable or good. Any attempt at such a rescue would require normative standards that would somehow stand outside the views being evaluated, but under subjectivism there are no such normative standards. The worry about contingency is serious and has great potential to lower a subjectivist’s drive to set policy according to his or her moral convictions. Together with the motivational bonus associated with the search for the truth, it makes Elliot’s claim that the subjectivism/objectivism distinction has no motivational fallout seem just as weak as his claim that it does not have an impact on the dynamics of debate.

The Four Value Claims

Elliot’s claim that subjectivists can make intrinsic value claims just as robust and nonanthropocentric as those of objectivists is also very weak. This is because the way Elliot handles each of the four intrinsic value claims he discusses is grievously problematic. To see where the problems occur, let us examine each of the four claims in more detail.

The first two claims deal with things past and future having intrinsic value even though the relevant attitudinal framework exists in the present.

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\(^8\) It might be objected that psychological manipulation is much more purposeful or arbitrary than learning or absorbing moral values from friends, family, and society, perhaps on the grounds that the moral values we learn are evolutionarily selected for, conventionally useful, or universally held by all people. In a world, however, where, for instance, adulterous women may or may not be stoned to death depending on where they live, it strikes me that the analogy is very strong. If all we have is subjective value and if our values around the world differ as much as they clearly do then it seems very easy to make the comparison to a situation in which individuals (or families, or communities, or nations) have been brainwashed to value what they do.
In both cases, the hypothetical element of Elliot’s theory allows him to have a current attitudinal framework apply across time, backward in the one case and forward in the other. He does not merely claim, however, that past and future entities would be valued by us now were we to consider them or even that they simply are valued now, but that they actually have intrinsic value at the time. Elliot is very clear about this detail, and declares very specifically that “my valuing it now entails that it had value then” (1996, 226). Having intrinsic value at the time is emblematic of nonanthropocentric value claims about past and future entities, and Elliot insists that subjectivists can make these claims as easily as objectivists can.

On close examination, however, there are two serious problems with Elliot’s accommodation of claims A and B. The first is that it is not at all clear, even if we grant for the moment that the intrinsic value in question can be fixed to a particular time, how we could fix it exclusively to the time in which the valued entity exists. In value claims like A and B, there are clearly two essential elements in the intrinsic-value claim: there are the entity’s properties that exist with the entity in the past or future; and there is the valuing subject who exists now and who transforms the properties in question into value-adding properties by valuing them from his or her current attitudinal perspective. Both elements are clearly indispensable, because without either of them the resulting intrinsic value does not exist at all. If the two things are equally indispensable, though, it is a mystery how the temporal location of the valuer or valuational framework could be completely and always ignored in assigning a verb tense to the intrinsic value in question. The decision seems entirely arbitrary and unjustified. Worse, it seems the less attractive of the two arbitrary and unjustified alternatives, since if we absolutely must assign a temporal location to present subjective considerations of past or future entities it would seem less awkward to favor the present. We see this most clearly when we consider examples involving uncontroversially subjective and relational values. For instance, we would be more likely to say (if we would say either) that Napoleon is our favorite military leader, not that he was our favorite military leader, because even though the characteristics he had at the time are crucial, our present favoring of those characteristics seems most pertinent. Elliot’s emphasis of the temporal location of the valued entity’s properties over the temporal location of the valuer is starkly and problematically arbitrary.  

Perhaps Elliot could avoid this arbitrariness by claiming that the entities in (A) and (B) were, or will be, intrinsically valuable, at the time, rather than that the entities had, or will have, intrinsic value, at the time. This formulation may be less problematic because it does not lock the value of the entity so exclusively to the temporal location of the entity alone, and it seems to retain much of the normative force of the original. Regardless of whether or not the value claim is revised in this way, however, the deeper problem, discussed next, remains.
Although this arbitrariness is problematic, it is not nearly as problem-
atic as assigning a particular time to a fundamentally atemporal concept
in the first place. We set this issue aside in order to explore the additional
arbitrariness of Elliot’s claims, but it is really this problem that is most
troublesome. Elliot makes it clear that, for a sophisticated subjectivist,
“intrinsic value is a relational property” (1996, 224). As a relational
property, it exists because a certain valuing relation exists between some
valuer or valuational framework at some time and some object at some
time. Given this, what is problematic in cross-time examples is not just
that there seems no way to justify always attaching the value in question
to one of these two times and not the other but also, and what is more
important, that it seems incoherent to attach the value to any time at all.
The reason for this is that cross-time, relational properties are themselves
atemporal. Being born prior to someone is also a cross-time, relational
property, one that holds, for instance, between first-born and second-
born siblings, but even though in this case the relation is even explicitly
time focused the relation itself is still completely atemporal. Being born
prior to someone else is basically the same as having a line that starts to
the left of theirs on a time chart, but having a line that starts further to the
left does not itself exist at any specific time on the chart. On the contrary,
it does not map onto the chart at all. It is simply bizarre to say that,
specifically on the day I was born, I had the property of being born before
my brother. Relational properties across time themselves stand outside
time, and so giving any particular temporal location at all to a funda-
mentally relational property seems deeply problematic. As a result, claims
A and B seem impossible for the subjectivist to make.

If A and B are problematic, C is perplexing. Elliot’s solution to entities
in the valuer-free world having intrinsic value is to have attitudinal
frameworks apply not just hypothetically and across time but also across
possible worlds. One cannot help but wonder how this can work. The
challenge that suggests itself is this: if there had never been any valuers,
then there never would have been any attitudinal frameworks, and
nothing would have had subjectivist intrinsic value. The charge is
essentially that when attitudinal frameworks include in their hypothetical
range worlds where the attitudinal frameworks themselves never come
into existence, then either a contradiction or a paradox ensues, and either
way Elliot’s theory is made absurd. Elliot anticipates this reaction and
attempts to deal with it:

Maybe some are troubled by the thought that the subjectivism I have sketched
implies that had the relevant valuer not existed, nothing then would have had
any value. But this thought is flawed. As a matter of fact, for better or for
worse, I do exist. As a matter of fact I value both the trilobites and the future
state of biotic complexity. . . . So, from my unavoidably human perspective in
the actual world I can, and do, judge that wild nature has intrinsic value in
those worlds from which I and my species, indeed all sentient species, are
completely absent. The thought that there could be values even if no valuers had existed is, according to the subjectivist, just the thought that there are possible worlds which contain no valuers but which are valued (by me) from the perspective of the actual world. [1996, 227–28]

This response, though enthusiastic, is fatally flawed. The charge is that if there had never been any valuers then there would be no human perspective and value would not exist. Elliot’s response amounts to pointing out the brute given fact that there are valuers and that value does exist. In essence, he ignores, rejects, or refuses to acknowledge the coherence of the antecedent in the argument. In doing so, he does not respond to the charge as much as avoid responding to it. By avoiding any serious consideration of a world in which there are no valuers by clinging to the actual world in which there are, Elliot effectively fails to take the valuer-free possible world into consistent consideration. His claim, then, that intrinsic values would exist even if there were no valuers becomes contradictory. It can only succeed by taking valuer-free possible worlds seriously some of the time. When Elliot is stating the conclusion, such possible worlds make perfect sense and are treated seriously, but when he is examining the premises in the argument, those possible worlds are too unlike the actual world to be taken into consideration and are not treated seriously. As a result, Elliot is inconsistent, and his handling of the third premise completely falls apart.

In claim D we run into a combination of old and new difficulties. The old difficulties are the same ones we have already seen in A, B, and C: Elliot’s handling of the intrinsic value claim is again arbitrary, puzzling, and inconsistent. As in claims A and B, it is again completely arbitrary for us to fix the intrinsic value in question only to the (in this case) world of the thing valued and never to the world of the person who has the relevant valutional framework, and it is more importantly deeply puzzling how a fundamentally relational property could take on any particular property, in this case the possible world, of either of its two relata. Also, just as in claim C, the intrinsic-value claim can only succeed by taking the alternative possible world we are considering seriously some of the time. When I make the claim that wild nature would have had intrinsic value even if I had never valued it I take very seriously the possible world in which I never have the attitudes I actually do, but when I explain how it is that wild nature would have had that intrinsic value in question I again take a mysterious pause in my consideration of that possible world in which I never value wild nature in order to make a reference back to “my unavoidably human perspective in the actual world” (Elliot 1996, 227).

In addition to this, however, Elliot’s handling of claim D raises an entirely new and very serious difficulty. If Elliot’s theory permits cross-world comparisons of this sort between valuers and entities valued, an unpleasant disjunction appears: either the theory is unjustifiably illiberal
or it is in principle bewildering. Which disjunct we are thrust upon
depends on how we answer the question of which attitudinal frameworks
in which worlds are to count. If the only frameworks that matter for the
existence of intrinsic value are those that exist at present and in the actual
world, then problems of illiberality appear, illiberality very similar to the
illiberality Elliot himself expresses a distaste for. This illiberality is
especially brazen when the worlds we are comparing are past and future
versions of the actual world, where our own attitudinal frameworks
change. How, one might ask, can my present attitudes have more
relevance than my attitudes at other times? What is so special about the
present that attitudes held now but not before and not later can ground
intrinsic values across all possible worlds? Less strongly, but still
significantly, what is so special about the actual me and not about the
me I might have been that my actual attitudes apply and my possible
alternative attitudes do not, especially if we are specifically talking about
the intrinsic value of objects in those alternative possible worlds?

The illiberal path is troubling, but the alternative seems even worse. If
we liberally consider all possible, past, and future attitudinal frameworks,
then intrinsic-value claims become either vacuous and uninteresting or
else infinitely complex and unresolvable. Which of these they will become
depends on whether or not intrinsic-value claims can be summed or
weighed against each other to form more general claims. If intrinsic
value cannot be summed, then taking all possible attitudinal frameworks
into serious consideration makes the concept of intrinsic value essentially
empty, because absolutely everything will be fully intrinsically valuable
and also fully intrinsically disvaluable. Already in the actual world there
is no doubt someone who would value and someone who would disvalue
just about any conceivable thing, and so already the concept applies to
just about everything. Once we allow possible attitudes to count as well,
the conceptual vacuity becomes complete, because for any given thing it
will certainly be possible to value it or disvalue it. Attributing intrinsic
value to something would amount to nothing more than saying that it is
not logically impossible for it to be valued, but this claim is obviously
uninteresting and not worth mentioning. What is worse, using intrinsic-
value claims in debate would become pointless, because they would not
convey anything interesting or informative.

If intrinsic value can be summed, then liberally considering both actual
and possible attitudinal frameworks makes intrinsic value infinitely and
overwhelmingly complex. Comparing and weighing value frameworks in

10 Elliot (1996, 224) says only that his subjectivist theory does not imply that intrinsic
value depends on comparative numbers of valuers, and so he leaves this question unsettled.
Because he specifically does not present any method of systematizing or cumulating indexed
intrinsic-value claims, however, his position seems to be that value claims cannot be summed
or weighed against each other.
the actual world is already formidable, but once all possible value frameworks are included it becomes simply baffling. Elliot insists that “indexing to attitudinal frameworks acts as a brake on the fragmentation of intrinsic value” (1992, 146), but all that this tells us is that individual frameworks can have things in common with other frameworks and can be grouped. This grouping, however, does nothing to reduce the unlimited spectrum of possible frameworks we are suddenly faced with, nor does it change the fact that it only takes one of each framework to ground completely the corresponding intrinsic-value claims. Unless there are necessary and generalizable patterns in the set of actual and possible attitudinal frameworks, and without objective moral facts such patterns seem precluded, summing up the bewildering variety of those frameworks is absurd. As a result, the liberal alternative, however it is analyzed, is no more appealing than the illiberal one, and so Elliot’s handling of value claim D is extremely problematic. In the end, Elliot is unsuccessful with all four claims, and so his claim that subjectivists can make the same kinds of nonanthropocentric intrinsic-value claims as objectivists is completely unsupported.

Elliot’s defense, then, of his claim that nothing of normative or motivational import in environmental philosophy hangs on the subjectivism/objectivism distinction is ultimately quite weak. Objectivists simply argue differently, feel greater motivation, and make a greater range of intrinsic-value claims, and so the metaethical distinction is important after all.

**Diagnosing the Problem**

As a final comment, I would like to suggest that the reason Elliot believes his subjectivist theory can adequately compare with any objectivist theory is that his theory is much more objectivist than he admits. The practical and normative ramifications of the metaethical issue disappear, I believe, only to the extent that Elliot blurs the distinction between subjectivism and objectivism. We see this blurring most clearly when Elliot states that value-adding properties are value adding because they are valued and then goes on to treat those properties as value adding regardless of whether or not they are valued. We see it also in the way that Elliot

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11 Moreover, there would be no way of guaranteeing that green values would appear in any case, since there is no way to know how relatively numerous actual and possible nonanthropocentric value frameworks are.

12 There is one particular paragraph where this conceptual game of musical chairs is most blatant. In it, Elliot first explains that “a thing cannot have intrinsic value unless it is, loosely speaking, approved of” but then goes on to say that “the rainforest is approved of because it is biotically diverse and it therefore has value in virtue of its biotic diversity; it does not have intrinsic value in virtue of being approved of” (1997, 26). Clearly this is a trick. The rainforest does have intrinsic value in virtue of being approved of. Elliot admits this explicitly, immediately before he denies it. The rainforest may have its intrinsic value because it is approved of in virtue of its biodiversity, but we cannot selectively forget the first part of this story in order to put an objectivist, nonanthropogenic spin on the second.
makes his theory of value not just attitude relative but hypothetically attitude relative, where a valuer’s particular valuations become only secondary and the attitudinal framework itself becomes a sort of free-floating, objective measure of value, not applied to the world by valuers but objectively there in the world independent of what valuers consider. What, after all, is really subjective about a hypothetical attitudinal framework that applies the way objective truth applies? If a hypothetical attitudinal framework has its source in a particular valuer’s valuing, how is it that we can apply the framework but so completely drop the valuer himself or herself out of the equation? Elliot’s theory is very similar to a theological theory that states that God’s attitudes objectively set the truth conditions of value judgments, but in Elliot’s case individual subjects somehow have to fill the role that God fills in the other case. In the end, Elliot seems like an objectivist doing his best to wear subjectivist shoes—and I would suggest that that is what is fundamentally problem causing.

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