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Carlo Alvaro

*CUNY New York City College of Technology*

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# Ethical Subjectivism: A Lost Cause

CARLO ALVARO

New York City College of Technology, 300 Jay Street, Brooklyn, NY 11201

Email: [calvaro@citytech.cuny.edu](mailto:calvaro@citytech.cuny.edu)

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Individual relativism, also known as ethical subjectivism, is an attractive theory about morality. It argues that morality is a matter relative to the individual in a way akin to personal taste. For example, subjectivists regard the ethical judgment ‘Stealing is wrong’ as comparable with the judgment of taste ‘I dislike Brussels sprouts.’ Yet, subjectivism is not nihilism. While nihilism denies the existence of moral value, duties, principles and truths, subjectivism claims that they exist, but they are subjective like taste. In this paper, I argue that ethical subjectivism ought to be rejected as it is an incoherent, undefendable, and a pernicious position.

**Keywords:** moral objectivism, moral subjectivism, doxastic involuntarism, Ockham’s Razor

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the oldest meta ethical questions is whether morality is objective<sup>1</sup> or a mere human construct. Both moral nihilism and ethical subjectivism deny the former and affirm the latter. However, these are distinct views. In this paper, I would like to show that all forms of moral subjectivism are incoherent, useless, and even pernicious. This paper is a response to an article published in the same journal by Professor S. Park. The article is ‘Moral Subjectivism vs Moral Objectivism’ (2022), which continues a conversation started in my previous discussion in the article ‘The Incoherence of Moral Relativism’ (2020). As such, this article will not feature a comprehensive discussion of ethical theories. My response will be presented as follows: In Section 1, I explain the difference between subjectivism and emotivism. In Section 2, I show why general subjectivism and moral subjectivism are incoherent and self-defeating views. In Section 3, I explain the true-for-me problem. In Section 4, I show that subjectivist theories face the embedding problem. In Section 5, I show that moral subjectivists cannot have it both ways and introduce the concept of doxastic involuntarism. In Section 6, I consider why cognitive and non-cognitive ethical fictionalisms are not viable strategies in support of relativism. Finally, I conclude by observing that even if arguments for subjectivism succeed, subjectivism must be rejected because it is useless as a guide to action.

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘objective’ is a somewhat controversial term. Here I use the term in reference to morality to mean that, according to moral objectivism, right and wrong, good and evil are not human constructs and do not depend on our personal or cultural judgments. So, objectivity in morality means that if something is right or wrong, it is so irrespectively of what anyone thinks.

## SUBJECTIVISM IS A COGNITIVIST VIEW

In his recent paper in the same journal, S. Park (2022) defines ethical subjectivism as follows:

Moral subjectivism holds that moral statements express emotions, and that moral properties and moral facts do not exist in the world, i.e. they are not part of the physical universe. For example, when we make the moral judgment that eating meat is moral, we express a positive emotion toward eating meat, and when we make the moral judgment that eating meat is immoral, we express a negative emotion toward eating meat. Our judgments about eating meat are neither true nor false (Park 2022: 269).

Park's definition of moral subjectivism is incorrect. According to subjectivism, all ethical statements are *reports* of one's positive or negative attitudes about something; such reports are either true or false for the speaker. Conversely, the meta-ethical theory known as emotivism argues that all ethical statements are expressions – but not reports – of one's emotions. According to emotivism, ethical statements are, as it were, emotional sounds without any truth value. Therefore, Park conflates (or confuses) the definition of moral subjectivism with that of emotivism. If he claims that moral judgments are expressions of emotions, and thus neither true nor false, he is not defining and defending moral subjectivism, but rather emotivism.

## PICK YOUR POISON: SELF-REFUTATION OR VACUITY

Wrong definition aside, it would seem that subjectivism must claim that (a) subjectivism is true and (b) moral claims must be true or false for the subjectivist. But subjectivism denies objectivity in morality. Thus, subjectivism and moral claims must be subjective. But if they are subjective, they are not objectively true for the subjectivist and, therefore, subjectivism is not a theory that is worth taking seriously.

In order to avoid the foregoing objections, Park proposes two versions of ethical subjectivism, 'general subjectivism' (GS) and 'ethical subjectivism' (ES) that he defines as follows:

General subjectivism asserts that all judgments, whether moral or factual, are subjective. By contrast, ethical subjectivism asserts that moral judgments are subjective, but that factual judgments are objective, i.e. that moral statements express emotions, so they are neither true nor false, but that factual statements describe the world, so they are either true or false (Park 2022: 271).

Consider GS, first. Park tries to avoid self-refutation by declaring GS itself to be true merely subjectively. However, it still faces the charges of vacuity and absurdity. Park claims that according to GS, moral *and* factual statements are neither true nor false. This is disastrous for GS. Consider the following questions: what exactly is GS if all statements are neither true nor false? Is it even about morality? If all factual and moral statements are subjective, then even the statement 'GS is a moral view' is subjective. Then, what exactly is GS? What is its doctrine and its contribution to ethics? Subjectivism's contribution would amount to this: Subjectivism is the thesis that in morality everything is relative. Nothing is true (or false) including the thesis of subjectivism! GSvists would not even be able to reliably report whether their emotions are positive or negative – or claim that it is objectively true that they experience certain emotions. GS would make it impossible to have intelligent conversations about morality.

Park also suggests that the GSvist would reject moral objectivism as objectivism is merely subjective. Thus, 'moral objectivists and general subjectivists would be on a level playing field' (271). However, even if true, this would not be a victory. From the point of view of a GSvist, objectivism might be subjective, but not incoherent. Conversely, as I just illustrated,

the GSvist cannot even say that it is true that GS is about ethics! The GSvist is not entitled to saying that GS is about anything at all. The result is the following. A GSvist would assert that all ethical views are subjective, including objectivism. But even such an assertion is neither true nor false. Therefore, Park can pick his poison: if subjectivism is objectively true, it is self-refuting; if it is subjective, it is vacuous, absurd and useless.

It may be interesting to note that Park's strategy in proposing GS is reminiscent of S. D. Hales' (1997: 35–36).<sup>2</sup> As Hales himself points out, many relativists might not accept his conclusion because it shows that global relativism is false. In the words of M. Kölbel, 'Hale's new-and-improved relativism, however, does not seem to deserve the name 'relativism' at all (Kölbel 1999: 100). Also, Hales points out, 'If relativism is true merely relatively, then there is a perspective in which absolutism is true, ... and it follows that absolutism is true and thus that relativism is false' (36).

Next, consider MS. According to Park, a MSvist is a subjectivist about moral judgments, but an objectivist about factual judgments. Therefore, a MSvist should be an objectivist about moral subjectivism but a subjectivist about morality. As Park explains, 'After all, moral subjectivism is not an expression of emotion about moral judgments, but rather a description of moral judgments and thus it is either true or false' (271). He also adds that 'It is coherent for moral subjectivists to take moral subjectivism to be objective on the grounds that it is a description of moral judgments' (271). However, the description would be the only objective aspect of MS to which the MSvist is entitled.

In meta ethics, the issue concerning subjectivism is not subjectivism's description of moral judgments. The dispute is not over whether there exist people who claim to be MSvists and recognise that it is an objective truth that MSvists are individuals who claim that all moral propositions are subjective. The real crux is whether, from the standpoint of subjectivism, moral judgments are objective or subjective. After all, Park admits that a MSvist is a subjectivist about morality – and that is the problem. Since both MS and GS claim that moral judgments are subjective, they face the same objections of self-refutation, vacuity and uselessness. In addition, subjectivism faces the true-for-me problem.

## THE TRUE-FOR-ME-PROBLEM

The correct definition of subjectivism as a cognitivist theory entails that moral statements can be true or false relative to the subject. The problem is to explain what it means to say that moral statements are true or false the subject. For example, suppose that the subjectivist Jon claims that abortion is moral. Jon has a specific opinion about abortion and believes that abortion is truly moral. Jon must say, for example, that whenever he states, 'Abortion is moral', he means that his statement is true for him. Now suppose that Jane tells Jon that abortion is immoral. Jon would respond that Jane is wrong.

When Jon claims, 'Abortion is moral', and since he believes that Jane is wrong about the morality of abortion, Jon must believe that it is true that abortion is moral. Presumably, Jon would have to say, 'It is not true for everyone (objectively); but it is true for me.' But what does

<sup>2</sup> This, of course, is not intended as a thorough critique of Hale's theory. For a critique see Shogenji, T. 1997. 'The Consistency of Global Relativism', *Mind* 106(424): 745–747. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2254673>; Kölbel, M. 1999. 'Saving Relativism from Its Saviour', *Crítica: Revista Hispanoamericana de Filosofía* 31(91): 91–103. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40104487>; McLeod-Harrison, M. 2008. 'Hale's Argument for Philosophical Relativism', Faculty Publications – George Fox School of Theology. 142. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs/142>.

‘true for me’ mean if not, ‘It is *objectively* true for me’? When I say that the Empire State Building is in NYC and you say it is not, I assert that it is true that the Empire State Building is in NYC, but you assert that it is not true that it is. This means that, in my opinion, it is absolutely and objectively true that the Empire State Building is in NYC, while in your opinion it is absolutely and objectively false. However, this is a problem because subjectivism denies moral objectivity.

Thus, either Park accepts the correct definition of subjectivism as a cognitivist theory and faces the true-for-me and the self-refutation problems; or he endorses a non-cognitivist theory and faces the moral-disagreement objection: If moral claims are neither true nor false, there would be no genuine moral disagreement among people. Discussing morality would be equivalent to debating over whether pistachio or vanilla is the best ice cream flavour (or any other discussion regarding personal taste). In fact, if moral statements were nothing more than expressions of emotions, people would neither discuss nor debate moral questions. Rather, they would be emoting. But in that case there would be no genuine moral discussion or disagreement. There would be emotional disagreement – but who is to say whose emotions are correct? Moral disagreement, therefore, assumes that people have certain moral views that they believe to be absolutely true or false for them.

## CONSTRUCTING MORAL ARGUMENTS

If Park endorses a non-cognitivist theory, then he faces another problem, i.e. the embedding problem. The embedding problem shows that even if the non-cognitivist can make a case that a moral statement can be regarded as an expression of emotions, an explanation is still required for the meaning and function of moral statements that are in embedded contexts. For example, consider the conditional statement ‘If abortion is wrong, then it is wrong to kill a fetus’. Making such a statement is not equivalent to the assertion that abortion is wrong, and thus it is not plausible to argue that it expresses the same negative emotion or attitude about abortion expressed by the statement ‘Abortion is wrong’.

If moral judgments, as Park observes, are merely expressions of emotions, constructing moral arguments would be problematic. In a reply to Park, I argue that it is possible to construct valid and cogent arguments precisely because moral statements can be true or false. I offer the following example:

- P1. Murder is the unlawful and malicious act of killing a human being.
- P2. Unlawful and malicious acts of killing a human being are morally wrong.
- P3. It follows that murder is morally wrong.
- P4. Hitler committed murder.
- C1. Therefore, Hitler is morally wrong (Alvaro 2020: 26).

Park’s reply to my argument is the following:

Moral subjectivists can grant that the argument about Hitler above is deductively valid, but they would deny that it is sound. In order to be sound, its premises and conclusion must be true. However, the second premise, the third premise, and the conclusion are neither true nor false because they do not describe the world, but rather express emotions (2022: 273).

The problem is that Park misses the point concerning the construction of moral arguments. This is a problem for non-cognitivists who argue that moral statements express emotions, not truths. Before I address the above argument about Hitler, consider the following argument:

P1. If abortion is wrong, then it is wrong to kill a fetus.

A1: P2. Abortion is wrong.

C1. Therefore, it is wrong to kill a fetus.

Argument A1 is valid, which means that, given the conjunction of P1 and P2, the conclusion necessarily follows from P1 +P2. Notice that P1 does not express an emotion, while, according to Park, P2 does. However, if the phrase 'Abortion is wrong' had different meanings in P1 and P2, then the argument would certainly commit the fallacy of equivocation. The conclusion, C1, necessarily follows from the premises if and only if 'Abortion is wrong' has the same meaning in both P1 and P2.

The embedded phrase 'Abortion is wrong' in P1 is not an expression of emotion. If it were true that moral statements are expressions of emotions, the argument would have to be restated as follows:

P1. If abortion is wrong, then it is wrong to kill a fetus.

A2: P2. Boo abortion! (an expression of a negative emotion toward abortion).

C1. It is wrong to kill a fetus.

It is evident that argument A2 above is invalid but argument A1 is valid. Therefore, as it is possible to construct a valid argument like Argument A1, it follows that moral statements are not expressions of emotions. Therefore, if Park redefines subjectivism as a non-cognitivist theory, he needs to explain why moral arguments can be valid in light of the embedding problem.

Furthermore, there is yet another problem. Consider the argument about Hitler:

P1. Murder is the unlawful and malicious act of killing a human being.

P2. Unlawful and malicious acts of killing a human being are morally wrong.

P3. It follows that murder is morally wrong.

P4. Hitler committed murder.

C. Therefore, Hitler is morally wrong.

Park concedes that this argument is valid but unsound because, he writes, 'the second premise, the third premise, and the conclusion are neither true nor false because they do not describe the world, but rather express emotions' (Park 2022: 273). Park accepts the truth of P1 and P4 but denies that P2, P3, and C have any truth value; again, he writes, 'because they do not describe the world, but rather express emotions' (2022: 273). However, if P2 and P3 are neither true nor false as they express emotions, how can Park agree that the argument is valid?

There are only two possibilities. A valid argument can be sound when all the premises are true and lead to a necessary conclusion. Or a valid argument can be unsound when one or more premises are false but, if they were true, they would lead to a necessary conclusion. So, an argument can be valid even if all its premises are false so long as the combination of the premises logically necessitates the conclusion. But if P2 and P3 are neither true nor false as they express emotions, then Park cannot claim that the argument is valid.

Consider the same argument rewritten so that the premises express emotions:

P1. Murder is the unlawful and malicious act of killing a human being.

P2. Boo unlawful and malicious acts of killing a human being!

- P3. It follows boo murder!  
P4. Hitler committed murder.  
C. Therefore, boo Hitler!

The conclusion C cannot necessarily follow from expressions of emotions. Moreover, according to the canons of logic, an argument is a series of premises, one of which is claimed to follow from the others. Premises are sentences capable of being true or false. But if moral statements are neither true nor false, then they cannot be the premises in a logical argument. Consequently, Park may endorse a non-cognitivist subjectivism, in which case he must deal with two problems, the embedding problem and the problem of validity. Perhaps, Park proposes fictionalism as a solution, but this strategy is problematic, as well. I will have more to say about it later in Section 6.

Furthermore, Park writes, 'Moral subjectivists would argue that [moral] arguments have some persuasive force, and that such arguments play an important role in our moral lives' (274). But if the statement 'Abortion is wrong' is equivalent to 'Boo abortion!', 'Aaargh abortion!' or 'Ugh abortion!', then in what sense can people's boos, aaarghs and ughs have a persuasive force? Consider the logically invalid argument about Hitler outlined above. In what respect does an invalid argument have persuasive force upon us? Only deductively sound and inductively cogent arguments should have a persuasive force. No rational individual ought to be persuaded by an invalid or an uncogent argument. If objective moral value and duties do not exist, as subjectivists argue, then how can the non-existence of moral value and duties play an important role to our moral lives?

## WHO REALLY WANTS IT BOTH WAYS

Park claims that objectivists want it both ways. He writes the following:

Moral objectivists cannot have it both ways. On the one hand, they claim that moral statements are true or false in exactly the way factual statements are true or false... On the other hand, they do not attempt to establish their hypotheses about moral properties in the way scientists attempt to establish their hypotheses about descriptive properties (275).

First, Plato, Kant, Ross, Moore, and others argue that moral statements are true or false but deny that they are true or false in exactly the same way as factual statements. Second, the suggestion that one must use science to establish the existence of moral properties is completely misguided. If moral properties are not physical entities, it does not follow that moral truths and matters of fact are exactly the same or that their truths can be known in exactly the same way. Science is concerned about collecting the verifiable evidence of the natural world.

Park tacitly endorses scientism by assuming that only what can be confirmed by the empirical sciences is worth regarding as 'evidence'. But claiming that reality is limited only to what scientists can detect through empirical evidence begs the question. Such a view is not itself scientific but philosophical. It is an ideological pre-commitment about the nature of reality. As M. Rea (2002: 170) observes, naturalism is a view that has no rational foundation. According to scientism, science is the only discipline that can produce knowledge and truth. The trouble for this sort of principle is that it begs the question: it assumes that science is the only method for learning what is true or real because science says so – but this is not a scientific claim. It is not possible to empirically verify its truth.

There is excellent evidence that supports the objectivity of morality. I would like to suggest an argument to support such a claim. There are two aspects of my argument. One concerns doxastic involuntarism. If anti-realists are sure, based on sound arguments and lack of positive evidence, that moral properties do not exist, they should be willing and able to abandon their moral beliefs. Second, if morality is just based on emotions, it would have to be in principle possible to discipline one's emotions and embrace opposite moral values and duties, but I argue that it is not possible.

Regarding the 'belief problem', Suikkanen writes, 'Every answer to the now what question is inconsistent with our most appealing theories of belief' (Suikkanen 2013: 168). Note that this problem stems from the 'now what' question and, in the literature, it is used as a criticism to moral error theory (Lutz 2014: 351). Park does not seem to endorse specifically an error theory as classical error theory is cognitivist; it is apparent that Park endorses a non-cognitivist view. Nevertheless, the belief problem can undermine both cognitivist and non-cognitivist subjectivism as both of these views are anti-objectivist and anti-realist, i.e. they deny that moral properties, value and duties objectively exist.

The 'now what' problem is the question of how an ethical anti-realist or anti-objectivist should carry on in life upon acknowledging that morality is a sham. Specifically, it would seem that one who has compelling evidence that morality is illusory must be so consistent as to let go of moral belief altogether. R. Garner, for example, argues that consistent error theorists should cease to utter moral judgments altogether (2007). Park, perhaps, might respond that anti-realists can retain their beliefs in morality notwithstanding their affirming anti-realism – which is an affirmation of doxastic voluntarism, i.e. the notion that we have willful control over our beliefs.

However, we cannot believe the contrary of what is proved by valid arguments and evidence as the evidence, so to speak, 'forces our hands.' This is what is known as doxastic involuntarism, the notion that we lack the willful control of our beliefs. As W. F. Kalf writes, 'If an agent becomes aware of sufficient evidence against a certain belief B, then this agent cannot possibly continue to accept belief B' (Kalf 2019: 12).

Also, Kalf (2019) writes, 'Doxastic Involuntarism is inconsistent with the ... commitment that you can continue to accept your moral beliefs if you accept that there is sufficient evidence for the falsehood of our basic moral beliefs' (6, 12). The implication of doxastic involuntarism applies to Park's non-cognitivist theory, as well. In order to be consistent, Park must give up his first-order moral beliefs for the reason that if one believes that there is a considerable evidence against moral properties, one cannot continue to accept them. If one is certain that morality is invented, one must be able and willing to stop believing in morality and acting morally. However, subjectivists want to retain their moral beliefs and act morally and at the same time claim that moral properties do not exist.

Park may take Mackie's (1977) advice that we carry on with morality as a useful fiction as without morality all hell would likely break loose. But why are anti-realists so concerned about the value of social unity, which seems to be an objective normative claim? Why do they think that a cohesive society is better than a non-cohesive one? If morality is a fiction, then why care about social harmony or unity at all?

Consider those circumstances in which an agent has the opportunity to act in ways that might be described as immoral or unvirtuous without thereby undermining social unity. For example, when I make disparaging or derogatory comments about others to myself, my thinking of such comments is neither beneficial nor detrimental to social cohesion. Thus, I



should have no compunction about entertaining such thoughts and comments. The subjectivist can respond that such feelings have beneficial outcomes upon the psychological characters of individuals. But it is not possible for the subjectivist to know that certain thoughts are, in fact, psychologically or socially beneficial.

### MORALITY IS NO FICTION

Park may endorse moral fictionalism, which claims that moral beliefs are akin to our beliefs about the fictional goings-on in stories and movies.<sup>3</sup> Fictionalism has been defended both by cognitivists and non-cognitivists. Park argues that moral judgments are expressions of emotions. Thus, he would endorse non-cognitivist moral fictionalism. The problem is that non-cognitivist fictionalism, much like emotivist theories, faces the Frege–Geach problem. Consider the argument:

- P1. If tormenting the cat is bad, then getting your little brother to do it is bad.
- P2. Tormenting the cat is bad.
- C. Therefore getting your little brother to torment the cat is bad.

If moral statements are expressions of emotions, whether true or fictional, the fact remains that P1 and P2 have different meanings and the modus ponens above would be invalid and commit the fallacy of equivocation. But the argument is valid and does not equivocate; hence, the same problem applies to non-cognitivist fictionalism.

Park could adopt a version of cognitivist moral fictionalism. However, consider the following argument:

- P1. If Darth Vader is Luke's father, then Luke wants to kill his dad.
- P2. Darth Vader is Luke's father.
- C. Luke wants to kill his dad.

A cognitivist fictionalist may observe that the above argument is valid; embedded fictional beliefs have the same content as unembedded fictional beliefs. Believing, e.g. that abortion is wrong, is akin to having a belief in a fictional state of affairs (the content of that belief is still that abortion is wrong, just as the content of the belief that Darth Vader is Luke's father is that Darth Vader is Luke's father). This version of fictionalism avoids the embedding problem. However, there are other problems. For example, how is it possible to construct valid moral arguments if one or more premises are true according to the fiction of morality? Let me illustrate:

- P1. Murdering people is an immoral act.
- P2. Hitler murdered many people.
- C. Therefore, Hitler committed immoral acts.

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<sup>3</sup> There are different types of fictionalisms; two popular views are hermeneutic and revolutionary. Revolutionary view argues that we ought to adopt the fictionalist attitudes with respect to morality. For example, Mackie suggests that we continue to use moral discourse as a useful fiction. Hermeneutic fictionalism, by contrast, argues that we already adopt a fictionalism attitude with respect to morality. However, such a distinction is not relevant to my discussion.

The above argument is clearly valid. But if P1 actually means ‘According to the fiction of morality, murdering people is an immoral act,’ then the argument is no longer valid. And if I add the same prefix to P2 and C, then P2 and C become false. Fictionalists may have different solutions to this problem. However, the problems remain that (a) we do not know what the fiction of morality is supposed to be, and (b) it is not clear how fictional statements logically relate and interact with reality. This leads to something analogous to the embedding problem.

The fiction of *Star Wars* might be well-defined by George Lucas. But who writes the fiction of morality? Park might answer that the subject does, presumably, according to the subject’s feelings or attitudes. Thus, each individual would write his or her own fiction of morality, which leads right back to the problems of vacuity and uselessness. Since I do not know whether Park would endorse either a cognitivist or a non-cognitivist ethical fictionalism, I am not pressing the issue further. Either way, however, if Park wishes to avail himself of such an option, he will have to do a lot of explaining.

## CONCLUSIONS

I believe that even if arguments for subjectivism were successful, we still ought to reject subjectivism as it is useless as a guide to action. Subjectivism says that right or wrong, good or evil, are subjective and, therefore, child abuse and the Holocaust are neither right nor wrong. Subjectivism can only say that I have to act in accordance with what I feel or believe to be true. And if, in a state of puzzlement, I ask a subjectivist whether it is true that it is right to always act in accordance with my feelings and beliefs, the subjectivist shall respond that such a statement is neither true nor false. I, therefore, must conclude that ethical subjectivism is not only incoherent, but also a useless and a pernicious ethical view.

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CARLO ALVARO

## Etinis subjektyvizmas: prarasta priežastis

### *Santrauka*

Individualus reliatyvizmas, taip pat žinomas kaip etinis subjektyvizmas, yra patraukli moralės teorija. Teigiama, kad moralė yra su individu susijęs dalykas, panašus į asmeninį skonį. Pavyzdžiui, subjektyvistai mano, kad etinis sprendimas „Vogti yra blogai“ lygintinas su skonio sprendiniu „Aš nemėgstu Briuselio kopūstų“. Tačiau subjektyvizmas nėra nihilizmas. Nors nihilizmas neigia moralinės vertės, pareigų, principų ir tiesų egzistavimą, subjektyvizmas teigia, kad jie egzistuoja, tačiau yra subjektyvūs nelyginant skonį. Šiame darbe teigiu, kad etinis subjektyvizmas turėtų būti atmestas, nes tai – nuosekli, negintina ir žalinga pozicija.

**Raktažodžiai:** moralinis objektyvizmas, moralinis subjektyvizmas, doksastinis involiuntarizmas, Okhamo skustuvas