



Ethics // Spring 2026

Handout 14

Robust realism: Enoch

PRELIMS. Enoch defends ‘Robust Realism’, the view that there exist irreducibly normative truths, mind-independent and response-independent. His two main positive arguments are (i) the argument from the moral implications of objectivity, and (ii) the argument from the deliberative indispensability of irreducibly normative truths. Let’s see if they work.

THE ARGUMENT FROM MORAL IMPLICATIONS. Enoch introduces a first-order moral principle he calls IMPARTIALITY: in interpersonal conflicts grounded in mere preferences, we should step back and endorse an impartial solution. Standing one’s ground is morally wrong there. First let: 19

(14-1) Caricaturized Subjectivism: Moral judgments report simple preferences on a par with preferring tennis to cinema. 25

Conjoining Caricaturized Subjectivism with IMPARTIALITY yields a *reductio*: 25

- (14-2)
- (i) Caricaturized Subjectivism (for *reductio*).
 - (ii) If Caricaturized Subjectivism, then moral conflicts are just preference conflicts.
 - (iii) So moral conflicts are just preference conflicts.
 - (iv) IMPARTIALITY: in preference conflicts, an impartial solution is called for.
 - (v) So in moral conflicts, an impartial solution is called for.
 - (vi) But in moral conflicts it is often permissible, even required, to stand one’s ground.
 - (vii) Contradiction: Caricaturized Subjectivism is false.

HOW MUCH DOES THE REDUCTIO SHOW? Enoch concedes nobody holds Caricaturized Subjectivism. So the argument’s force depends on whether it generalises to serious non-objectivist positions. And therefore, Enoch argues that *any* view making moral facts depend on attitudes will collapse the distinction between moral conflict and mere preference conflict. But a sophisticated response-dependence theorist (to go beyond our scope here) can insist that moral attitudes are *not* on a par with preferences for tennis, precisely because they are shaped by and answerable to features of their objects. So the *reductio* does not demonstrate that every non-objectivist view fails to mark a principled distinction between preference and moral conviction.

Question 1. How could Railton respond to the *reductio*?

IS ‘IMPARTIALITY’ THE RIGHT PRINCIPLE? The principle must have these features: it must be plausible enough to serve as a premiss, and it must be sensitive to the nature of the conflict to generate a contradiction with Caricaturized Subjectivism. But in many preference conflicts (e.g., where one party’s preference is vastly more intense, or where the stakes are asymmetric) it is not obvious that an impartial solution is required. Enoch indeed concedes that IMPARTIALITY does not hold in full generality, but then insists that it holds for a ‘significant, roughly recognizable class’ of cases. If the principle has built-in exceptions, then the subjectivist can try to locate moral conflicts within those exceptions. 20

QUESTION-BEGGING? Premiss (vi), that in moral conflicts standing one’s ground is permissible, is itself a moral claim whose interpretation depends on one’s metaethics. Enoch replies that the *reductio* takes (vi) as a premiss and shows Caricaturized Subjectivism inconsistent with it: the Caricaturized Subjectivist must accept (vi) (\Rightarrow face the *reductio*) or deny it (\Rightarrow face implausibility). But this is weaker than advertised: it shows Caricaturized Subjectivism is in tension with a (plausible?) first-order normative claim, not that non-objectivism as such is refuted. A determined anti-realist may revise substantive normative commitments in light of metaethical theory.

THE ARGUMENT FROM DELIBERATIVE INDISPENSABILITY. This is modelled on Quine–Putnam indispensability arguments for mathematical platonism:

- (14-3)
- (i) Irreducibly normative truths are indispensable for deliberation.
 - (ii) Deliberation is rationally non-optional.
 - (iii) Deliberative indispensability is just as respectable as explanatory indispensability.
 - (iv) So we are justified in believing in irreducibly normative truths.

THE ANALOGY IS TENUOUS? In science, electrons are indispensable because our best theories quantify over them and cannot be reformulated attractively without them. What is the analogue for deliberation? Enoch says deliberation involves ‘committing yourself to there being normative reasons’. But this is weaker than quantificational indispensability. Deliberation may *phenomenologically* feel like a search for mind-independent truths, but this is compatible with a projectivist account of what one is doing. The expressivist can agree that deliberation ‘feels like’ discovering truths without conceding that this phenomenology tracks an ontological commitment.

WHAT IS INTRINSIC INDISPENSABILITY? Enoch needs deliberative indispensability to be of the right *kind* to ground ontological commitment. He contrasts intrinsic indispensability to instrumental and enabling ones:

(14-4) A project is intrinsically indispensable iff it is rationally non-optional. 70

But what is that ‘rational non-optimality’? Furthermore, even granting that rational non-optimality, the inference:

(14-5) [*p* is indispensable for a rationally non-optional project] \Rightarrow [we are justified in believing *p*]

works for science partly because of the track record of scientific theories in delivering predictive success. Deliberation has no comparable track record for delivering predictions, explanations etc.

Essentially the same worry crops up in another way. A persistent objection is that deliberation makes indispensable not *normative truths* but *belief in* normative truths. Perhaps weaker still: a practical presupposition of normative truths. Enoch replies that in science too, what is directly indispensable is belief in electrons, and that the belief is justified because the project requires things to be *as the belief says they are*. But the parallel may, again, be overstated. Scientific success (predictive accuracy, technological application) independently confirms that the beliefs track reality. What is the analogous success condition for deliberation? If it is simply that we continue to find deliberation phenomenologically compelling, the argument looks circular. 78