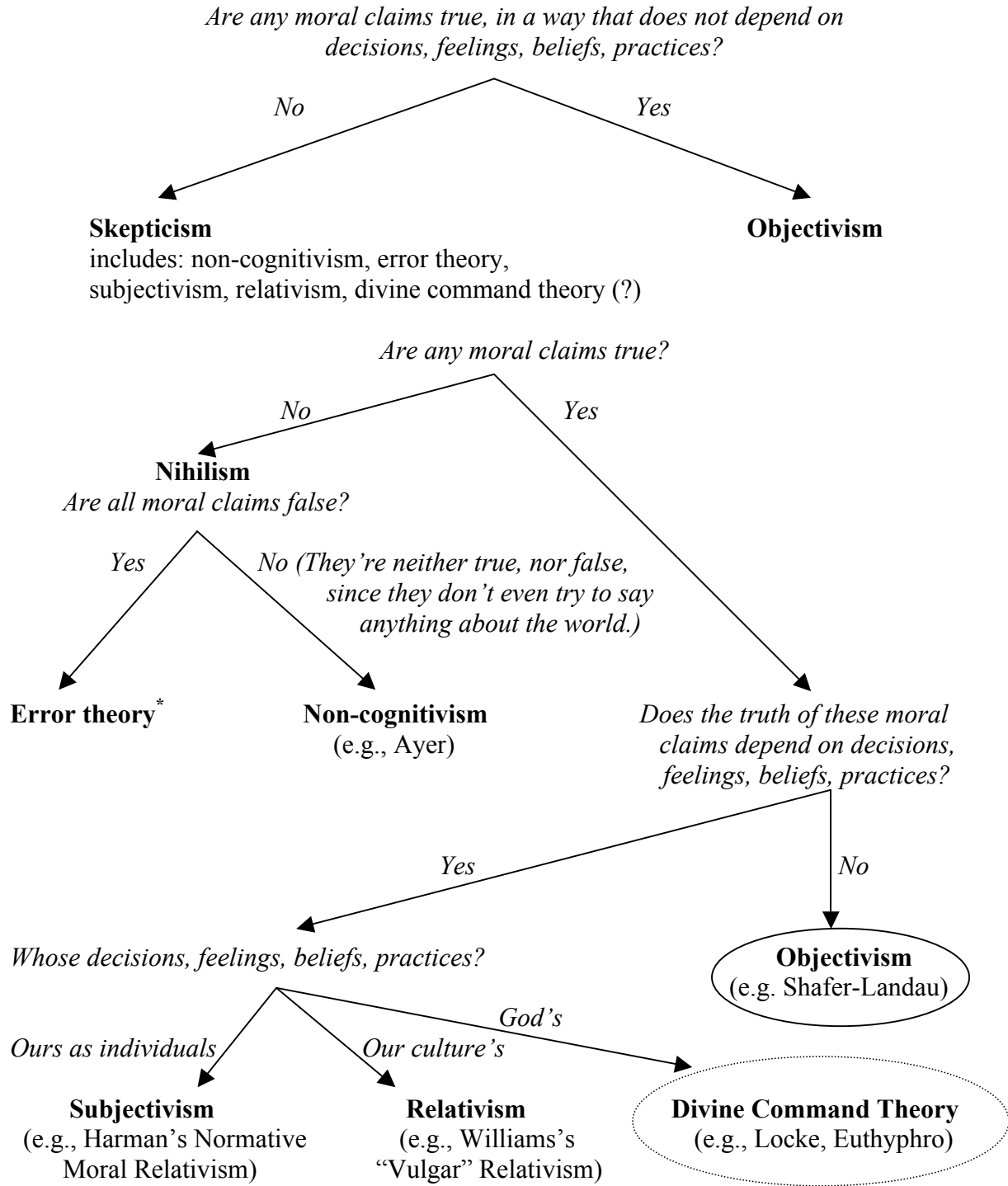


Phil 2, March 8, 2010

Shafer-Landau's Taxonomies



* There aren't any examples of error theory in our readings. The principal proponent, for the record, is J. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*.

Some worries about skepticism

Without objectivism, we cannot make sense of *moral error* (unless we accept nihilism, in which case *no* moral claims are correct), or of *progress* in moral beliefs.

- We can give *internal* critiques. We can criticize part of our, or our culture's, moral outlook by using another part of it. But we cannot give *external* critiques.
- We can judge "progress" by reference to our present moral outlook. But then every change will count as progress. Regress is impossible.

Subjectivism and relativism make moral views *arbitrary*. If our, or our culture's, tastes had simply been different, then morality would have been different too. (Review: Does divine command theory help?)

Either: Subjectivism and relativism are *internally contradictory*. "Abortion should not be outlawed" and "Abortion should be outlawed" are both true, because a pro-choicer says the first and a pro-lifer says the second, or because the first accords with American society as a whole, but not with certain sub-societies within it.

Or: Subjectivism and relativism make *disagreement impossible*. If we interpret the statements as "According to pro-choicers, abortion should not be outlawed" and "According to pro-lifers, abortion should be outlawed," then the pro-choicer and pro-lifer are not disagreeing. (Review: Also a problem for the "moral judgment" relativist? For Ayer?)

Some arguments against objectivism that backfire

Must we reject objectivism because it leads to arrogance, dogmatism, smugness, etc.?

- (1) There are moral truths, independent of us.
 - (2) I know these moral truths.
 - (3) I ought to be smug, arrogant, dogmatic, etc. about my moral beliefs.
- An objectivist asserts (1). But she isn't necessarily committed to (2), because she might not be confident that she knows what the moral truth is. And she isn't necessarily committed to (3), because she might think that one of the moral truths is that people shouldn't be smug, etc. People who claim to be objectivists often *are* smug, etc. But it does not necessarily follow from the position.
 - Nihilists will deny (2) and (3), because they believe that no moral belief is true. However, by the same token, they cannot say that there is anything *wrong* with being smug, etc.
 - It is harder for subjectivists and relativists to deny (2), because they believe that knowing the moral truth is simply knowing what you, or your culture, thinks. Whether they can deny (3) depends on whether you, or your culture, disapproves of smugness, etc.

Must we reject objectivism in order to endorse toleration?

"If you are an objectivist, then you do not endorse toleration."

- (1) There are moral truths, independent of us.
 - (2) Other people have false moral beliefs.
 - (3) It is false that I ought to tolerate them.
- (1) does not entail (2) or (3).

"If you are not an objectivist, then you do endorse toleration."

- Not if you are a nihilist, since toleration is a moral claim, and no moral claims are true.
- If you are a subjectivist, then it depends on whether your outlook endorses toleration.
- If you are a relativist, then it depends on whether your culture's outlook endorses toleration. (Review: Compare Williams on "vulgar relativism.")

Argument from freedom of conscience and expression:

- (A) Everyone has an equal right to have and express his moral opinions.
 - (B) If everyone has an equal right to have and express his moral opinions, then everyone's moral opinions are equally correct.
 - (C) Therefore, everyone's moral opinions are equally correct.
- Why accept (B)? True, that everyone's opinions are equally correct is a possible explanation of why everyone has an equal right to have and express his opinions. But there seem to be other possible explanations (as we will see when we read Mill's *On Liberty*).
 - In any event, doesn't (A) have to be assumed as a moral truth?