Scheffler's Third Way: A Useful Grounding for Moral Education

Victor L. Worsfold

The University of Texas at Dallas

By way of responding to Katariina Holma's essay, I want to tackle what I take to be her main claim, namely, that the objectivity of an ethical statement is constituted by its correspondence with moral reality. If this is true, she argues, then moral education about whose basis she is primarily concerned has a better grounding than mere intersubjective agreement can provide. She writes,'"Intersubjective agreement cannot guarantee the truth of [such a] statement" because "we do not have any reason not to believe that every human being could not be similarly mistaken." Holma is correct, I believe, to argue that moral conduct can be subject to wrong beliefs about, say, the nature and social role of women because of the perceived need to maintain the cultural or social system of marriage. But the question remains whether the kind of strict objectivity of ethics for which she argues, with its bulwark against human error, is the necessary antidote to the kind of functional intersubjectivity of ethical grounding which she abhors.

Holma has arrived at her claim about objectivity in ethics as a result of her correct understanding that "some kind of objectivity is necessary for preserving the [Israel] Schefflerian type of rationality in ethics." She notes correctly that Scheffler defends ethical naturalism, a naturalism that allows Scheffler to tie ethics to science where logical argument based on reasoning derived from observation obtains. Thus Scheffler argues for a correspondence of inquiry method between ethics and science but leaves open the question of the nature of scientific and so-called ethical values, a point again noted correctly by Holma. But Holma then wants to push Scheffler — and us — towards objectivity so that ethics at least would be crucially dependent upon our acknowledgment of the existence of ethical truth that is independent of us. Thus, on this view, the nature of ethics would allow morality an objective status, possessing some "invariant property beyond [our] agreement." Presumably, then, moral educators could teach children to learn this objective morality as the basis of their conduct.

Now Holma realizes that Scheffler originally argued for a view of ethics contrary to her kind of objectivist view with its implied dimension of certainty of outcome. In fact, in his *Inquiries: Philosophical Studies of Language, Science and Learning*, Scheffler's collection of essays with which Holma's footnotes reveal she is familiar, Scheffler says explicitly, in the collection's opening page, that ethics is "no haven for certainty.…No act or belief is an island…each can survive only within a changing community of surrounding acts or beliefs" which require "continuing systematization."[1] And, in the introduction to the third part of his collection, the part which falls within philosophy of education, Scheffler, in characterizing the nature of his efforts in this field, says of them that they are efforts "to avoid both untrammeled coherence and blind certainty" (*IN*, 279). And we realize the full implications of this thinking in his essay in this part entitled "Moral Education and

the Democratic Ideal," where Scheffler spells out his view of objectivity when talking about the role of reasons in moral judgment.

In the course of explaining what he takes the scope of moral judgment to be, Scheffler explicates his idea of objectivity which he links with impartiality as "taking all relevant facts and interests into account and judging the matter as fairly as possible" (*IN*, 333). Thus objectivity at this point meant for Scheffler surveying morally conflicted situations as he says, "comprehensively [that is] with impartial and sympathetic consideration of the interests at stake, and with respect for the persons involved in the case" (*IN*, 334). For Scheffler such an account of objectivity meant that those attempting to achieve objectivity must be "reasonable in matters of [their moral] practice" (*IN*, 335). Reasonable judgment in matters moral, then, requires recourse to reasons, just as scientific judgment does. And the reasons we give for arriving at our moral conclusions objectively asserted can be inspected, tested, and accepted, if found reasonable by our fellow moral investigators. But this conception of Scheffler's objective reasonableness lends itself by its very nature to revision when fellow investigators persuade us revision is necessary. This objectivity, unlike the kind for which Holma longs, does not provide moral agents with certainty of conclusion. Moral education on Scheffler's view becomes a matter of lessons in rational criticism which invites the process of the free exchange of moral investigators' reasons in the attempt to reach fair and comprehensive, but always revisable, moral judgments.

If Holma wants to find a more robust conception of objectivity in Scheffler's thinking than the one lately noted, however, she might find solace in Scheffler's most recent thinking of which, once more, her footnotes announce her awareness. This thinking is to be found in Scheffler's Presidential Address to the Charles S. Peirce Society, "A Plea for Plurealism," and in his not unamusing piece, "My Quarrels with Nelson Goodman," in which the argument of the latter draws on the argument of the former.[2] In "Quarrels," Scheffler enunciates what he calls "a third way" of conceiving the world of objects we know. "This third way," to summarize the complexities of Scheffler's argument in his own words, "agreeing with Peirce, upholds the existence of objects independent of our making and accessible to inquiry, but, agreeing with Goodman, denies that inquiry into such objects converges towards a unique world-version."[3] Such thought leads Scheffler to what he calls "a pluralistic realism" [plurealism] so that there is not one world but many worlds, and these worlds are independent of whatever true versions of the world we may take ourselves to have made. Concluding his new theory, Scheffler writes, "We have, in other words, to reckon with a variety of unreduced domains of entities for each of which we have versions, *short of certainty*, each commanding a greater or lesser degree of credibility. This is the view I now hold."[4]

Now, in perhaps pinning her hopes for a more robust conception of objectivity in these latter pieces, Holma needs to note several features of Scheffler's latest thought, I would say. First, Scheffler is dealing with the world of objects like the stars so beloved of Scheffler and Goodman in their star-making debate. Holma's concern is for a robust conception of objectivity in ethics and the moral judgments ethics

governs. This is a world not of objects but ideas. And, moral ideas, intuitively, appear to be more of a subjective rather than an objective nature. Ideas, like Aristotle's mean, seem to me to be "'relative to us.'"[5] To be sure, we may find moral notions "out there" as we find externalities out there in the void. But the moral notions, because they are ultimately human-made are always relativistic in character. As such, they are always, as Scheffler so correctly realizes, subject to revision and so uncertain. And, Holma must note, secondly, that even in dealing with the world of objects, Scheffler wants to insist that the versions of the worlds we make are similarly short of certainty. For the kind of objective certainty of moral outcome she seeks, then, Holma must give up looking to Scheffler for help, I believe.

I cannot, however, conclude these remarks without raising a question about Holma's quest for certainty in the moral realm. I believe the quest to be chimerical. Certainty of moral conclusion in our endless moral debates on such issues as abortion, race, and homosexuality, not to mention what might be thought to be the most pressing moral problem of the day, namely, how should we bring up our children, would be soothing of so many wounds. But, I fear, I do not believe it would be either theoretically or practically correct. Ethics, at least as I conceive it, is a social institution and as such not subject to inspection by wholly impartial spectators who simply read off its conclusions for moral practice. Rather, to return to Scheffler's earlier thinking once more, albeit thinking about the nature of the democratic ideal, but thinking which he signals is analogous to both moral and scientific thought: "there is no antecedent social blueprint which is itself to be taken as a dogma immune to critical evaluation in the public forum" (*IN*, 335, 331). Ethics and thus the dynamic morality it engenders "are not designed to arrest change but to order and channel it by exposing it to public scrutiny and resting it ultimately upon the choices of its [participants]" (*IN*, 331).

---

1. Israel Scheffler, *Inquiries: Philosophical Studies of Language, Science and Learning* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986) xi–xii. For all subsequent references this text will be cited as *IN*.

2. Israel Scheffler, "A Plea for Plurealism," *Erkenntnis* 52 (2000): 161-73 and "My Quarrels with Nelson Goodman," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62, no. 3 (May 2001): 665-77.

3. Scheffler, "Quarrels," 673.

4. Ibid., 678, my emphasis.

5. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985), 44 [1107a].