

Mike and others,

To spin a thread from our old topics of Kant and constructivism...

Kant might look at first glance like a relativist but he isn't a relativist at all. He is famous for subjectifying everything at the end of a century which sought, through empiricism, to objectify everything. What is the most basic thing about the world as we know it? Space and time. Kant convincingly argues that space and time are not "out there," not things in the world but ways of organizing the world. They are the primary subjective categories through which we organize and make knowable the otherwise inaccessible flux. But crucial is the idea that they are subjective categories and not objective facts. And if space and time are subjective categories, then it follows that everything we know about the world is subjectively constructed. Or, in Kantian terms, the world we know is the phenomenal world. It turns out that our knowledge presupposes a noumenal world anterior to the phenomenal world, but we have no access to such a world – it exists for us merely as an abstract, logical prerequisite.

This radical subjectification of the human experience would seem to throw us into a dizzying relativism, but not so in Kant. Indeed, Kant tells us in his early notebooks (before the Big Three critiques – of pure reason, of practical reason, of judgment) that his whole goal is to find universals in a world that seems to have spun off into relativism. Kant's epiphany came when he saw that if we were to have universals, we would have to locate them subjectively, not objectively. The objective world cannot give us universals because it is, insofar as we have access to it, always already shaped by subjective categories of understanding.

So how does Kant find a universal ground for ethics? I'm not sure because the Critique of Practical Reason is the one I'm least familiar with. But I can say how he does it in regard to aesthetics (the subject of the Critique of Judgment).

A true (valid) aesthetic judgment is (1) disinterested, (2) subjective, and (3) universal. Disinterested: "The satisfaction which we combine with the representation of the existence of the object is called 'interest.'" I.e., if the satisfaction involves a vested interest in the existence of the object, it is an interested judgment. "You're beautiful because our sex is great" is NOT a disinterested judgment: "A judgment about beauty in which the least interest mingles, is very partial and not a pure judgment of taste." To be freed from such interest, a judgment must be subjective: "When the question is if a thing is beautiful, we do not ... depend on the existence of the thing ... but ... judge it by mere observation ... We wish only to know if this mere representation of the object is accompanied in me with satisfaction, however indifferent I may be as regards the existence of the object of this representation." Only a subjective judgment is truly disinterested, and thus only a subjective judgment can be universal: "For the fact of which everyone is conscious, that the satisfaction is for him quite disinterested implies in his judgment a ground of satisfaction in all men."

So to achieve an unbiased view, you must strip away all vested interest in the existence of objects at hand. Only then can your judgment be disinterested and therefore universally valid (and by definition, then, you are viewing it subjectively, as mere "representation" without regard to its objective existence).

I assume the analogy holds for ethics. An ethical judgment, to be valid, must be universal, and it can only be universal if disinterested, and only disinterested if subjective (stripped of all interest in the objective reality of the representation at hand).

Based on our earlier discussions, what Mike wants, Kant would say, is not an objective ground of ethics; he wants a universal ground of ethics. And he would do best to find it subjectively, not objectively.