



## Moral Education and the Fact/Opinion Dichotomy

Jaron Daniël Schoone<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*Many teachers consider moral education, teaching students how to be good persons, as an important part of their work. Unfortunately, teachers often lack the proper tools to implement moral education in their day-to-day lessons. Even worse, teachers appear to be inadvertently teaching students that morality is purely subjective. Moral subjectivism, especially the kind of moral subjectivism where every person can define “right” and “wrong” whichever way they please, is detrimental to both one’s own moral life as well as society as a whole. Therefore, one of the goals of moral education should be to combat this form of moral subjectivism. As a secondary school teacher in philosophy and PhD student at the University of Amsterdam I am currently researching moral subjectivism in secondary education. In this paper I will argue that one specific tool that is used internationally in both primary and secondary education, the fact or opinion worksheet, can be seen as an example of how teachers unintentionally teach students that morality is subjective. I will then show that, with limited modification, the same worksheet can be used to engage students in a critical discussion about the status of moral statements as either objective facts or subjective opinions. The modified fact or opinion worksheet and its subsequent discussion can be seen as an interesting starting point to introduce moral education into one’s lessons and can be used in any course with limited foreknowledge.*

**Keywords:** *moral education, ethics, fact/opinion dichotomy, moral subjectivism;*

### 1. Introduction

Would you be surprised to learn that high school students think that it is an *opinion* that genocide is wrong? Or that it is *not true* that one ought not to torture an innocent child for fun? Or that it’s not *really* wrong to cheat on an exam? Justin McBrayer, professor of philosophy at Fort Lewis College in Colorado, claimed in an article in the New York Times that children in the USA are being *taught* that there are no such things as moral facts [1]. According to McBrayer a specific school assignment, known as the “fact or opinion worksheet”, causes students to categorize moral statements as subjective opinions instead of objective facts. He draws this conclusion based on a conversation with his son who had to fill out the worksheet as part of his homework, which peaked McBrayer’s interest in the fact and opinion dichotomy. It is important to note that the fact and opinion worksheet is not just an American teaching tool but is used almost universally. In the Netherlands for example the worksheet is used in several subjects throughout secondary education, such as history, social science and Dutch language.

As a secondary school philosophy teacher, I have the opportunity to discuss moral issues with my students as part of my curriculum. However, according to recent studies many secondary school teachers, teaching a host of different subjects, agree that moral education is an important part of the task of teachers in secondary education. Unfortunately, teachers seem to lack both the knowledge and the tools to include moral education in their day-to-day lessons [2]. In this paper I will defend two claims. First: I will argue that the fact/opinion dichotomy as it is currently taught by using the fact or opinion worksheet is not only epistemologically unsound but also stimulates students to become radical moral subjectivists. Second: I will argue that in an adequate setting the fact or opinion worksheet can actually be used as the basis of one or more lessons where students can be taught about the dangers of radical moral subjectivism.

### 2. The fact/opinion dichotomy and radical moral subjectivism

The fact or opinion worksheet consists of two parts. The first part contains two boxes with the definitions of “fact” and “opinion”. In most cases, the definition of a fact is “a statement that can be proven to be true or false” and an opinion is usually defined as “a personal belief or judgment”. Sometimes, signal words are included in the boxes. These signal words include “numbers” and “statistics” in relation to facts, and “good/bad”, “believe” and “think” in relation to opinions. The second part of the worksheet consists of a list of statements that students have to categorize as either a fact or an opinion. whether the statements are facts or opinions. Example statements would be: “Harry S. Truman was a president of the United States” and “Truman was one of the best presidents the United

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<sup>1</sup> University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands



States has had". The first of these statements would be categorized as a fact and the second statement as an opinion.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Fact or Opinion

A **fact** is something that is true or can be proven.

An **opinion** is your feelings or how someone else feels about a particular topic.

**Directions: Read each sentence. Determine if it is a fact or opinion and write it on the line.**

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Green is my favorite color.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ George Washington was the first president.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ I really enjoyed the football game last weekend.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Thanksgiving is celebrated in November in America.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Billy's favorite food is pizza.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ The Presidential Election is held in November.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ Brazil is located in the continent of South America.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Atlanta is the capital of Georgia.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ Country is my favorite type of music.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ I enjoy reading books by Judy Blume.
11. \_\_\_\_\_ Earth only has one moon.
12. \_\_\_\_\_ There are 60 seconds in a minute.
13. \_\_\_\_\_ Christmas is the best part of the year.
14. \_\_\_\_\_ Rhode Island is the smallest state in the US.



There are several problems with this worksheet, and with the fact/opinion dichotomy in general. First: the given definitions for fact and opinion are both philosophically controversial. For instance, defining a fact as provable or verifiable is one of the hallmarks of logical-positivism, a popular philosophical movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, contemporary philosophers have largely rejected positivism, especially the kind of logical positivism that we find with Ayer and other members of the *Wiener Kreis* [3]. One of the reasons is that the criterion of verification is too strict. There would be no place for metaphysical, ethical, theological and many kinds of other non-verifiable facts. This leads to a self-refutation since the criterion of verification is itself not verifiable and therefore on its own terms not epistemically acceptable. Later positivists tried to overcome this critique by changing the definition of “verification”, making it less strict [4]. This did not resolve some of the other difficulties with verificationism, such as Quine’s critique on the dogmas of empiricism [5]. A second problem is caused by the definition of an opinion as a personal belief or judgment. This definition implies that a statement can be a fact and an opinion simultaneously since the two definitions are not contradictory. For instance, it is a fact that the earth is a globe, but since I personally believe that the earth is a globe this statement also represents my opinion about the earth. Thus, the fact/opinion dichotomy is not a true dichotomy at all.

A third and for the purposes of this paper more relevant problem with the fact/opinion dichotomy is that it turns out that moral statements will almost always end up being opinions rather than facts when using the definitions above, especially when the signal words “good/bad” are correlated to the category of opinions. The result is that students are being taught that moral statements are opinions rather than facts. In other words: moral statements are personal beliefs. This is the definition of what I will call radical moral subjectivism. It is my view that radical moral subjectivism is a highly problematic meta-ethical position. First: most philosophers tend to be moral objectivists [6]. Moral objectivism, also known as moral realism, is the position that there are moral facts and therefore moral statements can be true or false and are not a matter of personal opinions [7]. A minority of philosophers are moral subjectivists, but many of them are not radical moral subjectivists. For instance, Joyce would acknowledge that there are moral facts, but that these facts are not objective but subjective, constituted by mental activity [8]. A radical moral subjectivist is someone who truly believes that morality is not factual but purely based on one’s own personal preferences or opinions. This type of moral subjectivism is “disastrous for society”, according to Marianne Talbot [9]. It would entail that one cannot discuss moral issues in a rational way, for moral statements would be pure opinions and one cannot truly argue about opinions. That would be like arguing about whether bananas taste better than oranges. I have argued elsewhere that radical moral subjectivism is detrimental to moral progress and to moral behaviour in general [10]. It seems to me that therefore, moral education should focus first and foremost on debunking radical moral subjectivism. Interestingly enough the fact or opinion worksheet itself can be used as a tool to do just that.

### 3. Using the fact or opinion worksheet as a tool for moral education

With some minor adjustments, the fact or opinion worksheet can actually be used as a handy tool that can be used to educate students on the difference between moral objectivism and moral subjectivism. One can use any of the existing fact or opinion worksheets as a template or use the worksheet that I generally use, which can be accessed at [www.moraleducation.eu](http://www.moraleducation.eu). The only changes that have to be made to the worksheet is the inclusion of one or several moral sentences, such as “genocide is wrong” or “I ought to tell the truth”. Let students fill out the worksheet and when everyone is done, simply ask the students how they categorized the moral statements. Most students will categorize the statements as opinions. This will give the teacher an opportunity to discuss with the class what it means to categorize a moral statement as an opinion. Does this entail that morality is purely subjective? Does it mean that every individual can pick and choose their own moral preferences? What would a society look like where everyone can set their own moral standards and their own moral rules?

One can also use the following thought-experiments to engage students to think about moral objectivism and moral subjectivism. Thought-experiment I: Suppose that Nazi-Germany would have won the second World War and would have succeeded to either exterminate or brainwash everyone who held the belief that the Holocaust was morally wrong. One would be left with a world of people who believe that the Holocaust was morally right. Now consider the following question: In that world, would it be right to say that the Holocaust was morally right? Or would you conclude that in that world, the Holocaust was morally wrong and therefore the people living in that world are simply mistaken in the view that they hold? Moral subjectivism would be incompatible with the latter answer. It is my experience that many people would affirm intuitively that the Holocaust would still be wrong in the scenario above. That would preclude one from being a radical moral subjectivist. Or consider thought-

experiment II: Suppose there exists a pill and if people take the pill they suddenly believe that rape is morally good. Suppose now that everyone in the world would simultaneously use this pill, causing everyone to believe that rape is good. In that world, would rape be morally good? Again, if one would answer in the negative, then it seems to me that morality cannot be subjective for everyone would hold the same personal belief.

#### 4. Conclusion

The fact or opinion worksheet appears to be based on an epistemologically and ethically unsound dichotomy. However, since the tool is so widespread, instead of dismissing it one can use it as a stepping stone to discuss the difference between moral subjectivism and moral objectivism. In a class conversation, students will be stimulated to reject radical moral subjectivism when they critically examine the consequences of this view. This in turn is an important aspect of moral education.

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