

THE PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW

VOLUNTARISM AND OBJECTIVITY IN ETHICS

ETHICAL Voluntarism is a convenient name for certain related theories concerning the nature of right and wrong. These theories find the source of the moral judgment in emotion, or desire (wish), or "liking". Opponents have always asserted that the logical consequence of this view is Subjectivism, and proponents have usually admitted it. The thesis of this paper is that Voluntarism, when carefully thought through, leads as a matter of fact to the opposite position, namely Objectivism.¹

Ethical objectivity is usually taken to mean the assertion that moral judgments arise through the activity of an intuitive faculty called reason, which reveals preexisting moral distinctions without reference to any feeling or desire one may have about them. This conception of objectivity is of course absolutely incompatible with Ethical Voluntarism. But a different conception is possible. It was suggested by Professor Henry Sidgwick in his *Methods of Ethics* (seventh edition, p. 27). According to this view, the assertion that such and such conduct is right implies the conviction that "the conduct in question cannot without error be regarded as wrong by any other mind". I do not agree with Sidgwick's assumption that this conception necessarily involves a Rationalistic theory of ethical knowledge. But I shall attempt to show that the Voluntaristic conception correctly worked out involves an objective theory of rightness in this second sense of the term. Formulated in my own words this will read: *Moral judgments may properly*

¹ I tried to justify this conclusion some years ago in a book called *Ethics*. In the present paper I deal with the subject along lines which are in some respects different from those followed in the earlier presentation, and consider certain aspects of the subject which there found no place. A brief statement of some of the contentions which follow appeared in the January issue of this *Review* at p. 60.