

The Conditions of Schefflerian Rationality in the Realm of Moral Education¹

Katariina Holma
University of Helsinki

Israel Scheffler is one of the most important figures in Anglo-American philosophy of education. I find it quite surprising, however, that the contributions of this great philosopher, a professor at Harvard University, are seldom discussed in contemporary philosophy of education. The particular importance of his philosophy is his wide-ranging understanding of the field of education. The current themes of general philosophy, the challenges of the changing pluralist society, as well as the practical and theoretical dimensions of education are all included in his contributions. Central to his contribution is his ideal of rationality. He defends it as the ultimate educational ideal, one which should determine the goals, methods, and practices of education. Without rationality, we cannot understand or conceptualize changing situations or evaluate our decisions in light of evidence and good reasons.

In this essay, I will focus on Scheffler's ideal of rationality in one particular context; moral education, and consider whether his position is defensible. Scheffler considers the fundamental question of moral education: What is the role of rationality, critical thinking, and argumentation in morality and moral education? It seems to me that this question arises inevitably in any late-modern Western society. In the earlier history of Western societies, the realm of morality and moral education was strongly connected to religious authority and the role of reason was restricted. The legacy of the Enlightenment, among other things, is that Westerners now find it important to be at liberty to use their own reason in examining moral questions. Another important aspect, which has affected today's conceptions of moral education, is the increasing awareness of the wide variety of moral codes and practices in different cultures and societies. In the pluralist society, where we have no dogmatic moral code to follow, we still need an ability to make considered moral choices. The task of conveying conceptual tools that could enable this ability belongs to the field of education. Scheffler endeavors, from the pluralist perspective, to defend the possibility of reasoning about morality.

The following essay has four main sections. In the first section, I describe Scheffler's ideas concerning the role of rationality in moral education. The crucial point is that Scheffler proposes the strong analogy between science education and moral education. Second, I examine Scheffler's interpretations of rationality and objectivity. The interrelations of these two concepts make his position of special interest, especially with respect to ethics. Therefore, although my topic is the concept of rationality, my discussion will be largely focused on the concept of objectivity. For Scheffler, the notion of objectivity in science seems to refer to (at least some weak version of) the correspondence theory of truth. However, there are some structural differences between factual truths and ethical "truths." Therefore, a different interpretation of objectivity may be needed for explaining the objectivity of ethics.

In the third section I consider two alternative interpretations of ethical objectivity, epistemological and ontological, and compare their strengths and weaknesses. In terms of Scheffler's philosophy, the necessity (or lack) of ontological references appears to be crucial. Finally, I consider Scheffler's ethical positions. Scheffler defends ethical naturalism at least in the sense that ethics is, in principle, accessible by the same methods of inquiry (including, for example, logical judgment, reasoning and observation) as the other realms of study. This position naturally presupposes something about the nature of entities to which it refers, even though Scheffler does not make any explicit ontological commitments. With reference to the previous section, I will discuss the possibility of epistemological and ontological interpretations of objectivity in terms of Schefflerian ethics.

My aim is to examine whether Scheffler's ethical naturalism really preserves the possibility of rationality and objectivity in ethics. My conclusion is that with some reservations, it does. The epistemological interpretation appears, in principle, to preserve it compatibly with Scheffler's philosophy. The weakness of this interpretation is that it seems to confront problems in distinguishing between an objective belief and an agreed upon or functional belief. The ontological interpretation, in contrast, is able to avoid these pitfalls, but has the danger of slipping into supernaturalism (which is contrary to the views of Scheffler). Nevertheless, the naturalist outlook and objectivity of ethics can be preserved, if we begin with the presuppositions that objective values exist and that they are of natural origin, and then admit that today's naturalist worldview is partly mistaken, due to its inability to elucidate these obviously existing entities. For an epistemological fallibilist, this seems to be a good candidate for a noncontradictory solution.

SCHEFFLERIAN MORAL EDUCATION

Moral education is one of the most important dimensions of Scheffler's educational vision. In his recent essay "Some Contributions of Philosophy to Education," Scheffler states: "A critical self-consciousness respecting one's values is a primary aim of education."² In this project, the possibility for critical discussion is fundamental: "To attain this educational aim it is essential to be able to discourse about values, to navigate fearlessly in the conceptual areas where factual and value considerations intermingle."³

For Scheffler, the role of rationality in moral education is analogical to its role in science education. The inescapable facts of human fallibility and the evolving nature of science should be taken into account in the practice of science education. In other words, scientific content should be taught, not as the ultimate truth, but as the best we have for the present. It is important to organize science education in a way that leaves room for the processes of improving human knowledge in a rational spirit.⁴ The same principles are, according to Scheffler, applicable to moral education. Moral education should also leave room for the processes of evaluation and elaboration in a rational spirit. However, evaluation and elaboration are possible only if we *have* some moral principles, and if we state them explicitly to our students. Therefore, we have to teach moral content (that is, our own moral principles and commitments) to our students, not as the ultimate truth, but as the best we have for the present.⁵

That is to say, it is essential to bring out both *the method* and *the content* of the realm in question. We should not teach the content without the method:

I do think that such teaching is possible, that science can be interpreted and presented in such a way as progressively to bring the method of science to awareness. And I also think that traditions of moral practice can be presented analogously so as progressively to bring out the reciprocity and objectivity involved in their rules, locutions and practices.⁶

And we should not teach the method without the content:

As in science and the arts, so in morality, acquisition of the inherited corpus is a base for further sophistication. Neither science nor art nor morality springs full-blown from the human mind. Without preliminary immersion in a tradition of practice — an appreciation of the force of its rules, obligations, rights, and demands — the concept of choice of actions and rules for oneself can hardly be achieved.⁷

To apply rationality analogically to moral education in such a manner requires the position that, as in some scientific assertions that are more strongly supported by good reasons and evidence than are some others, so too some moral principles are more strongly supported than others on the basis of good reasons. Thus, we have a possibility for choosing the more strongly supported moral principle while ignoring the one less strongly supported. This process is what ultimately relates the concept of rationality to the concept of objectivity.

SCHEFFLER ON RATIONALITY AND OBJECTIVITY

It is to be noted that Scheffler's conception of rationality is clearly normative by nature; in other words, he describes rationality as a mode of thinking and acting which we ought to strive for.⁸ For comparison, if he understood it as descriptive, he would have considered rationality as it manifests itself in our everyday lives. On the one hand, rationality can be interpreted purely instrumentally, as an ability to achieve whatever ends in the most effective way. According to such an interpretation, the ends of our actions do not belong to the realm of reason; only the instrumental means belong. On the other hand, rationality may be interpreted more widely, including also the ends and the values embedded within our actions. Scheffler appears, in any case, to have accepted the latter position.⁹

Rationality is often divided into the separate domains of theoretical and practical rationality. Theoretical rationality concerns beliefs, whereas practical rationality is more focused upon actions. Scheffler's conception of rationality, however, includes both aspects; each of the theoretical and practical dimensions is interpreted within his framework as two sides of the same rationality.¹⁰

Furthermore, Scheffler's conception of rationality is connected to the notion of objectivity. Alven Neiman and Harvey Siegel have illustrated this connection specifically in the Schefflerian context I am pursuing here:

If my belief that *p* is rational, then that belief is based upon relevant evidence which is impartially and objectively weighed and assessed. Objectivity, in the sense specified, is thus a necessary condition for science and for rational deliberation and belief more generally. But rationality is equally required for objective judgment, since such judgment requires that claims and assertions be evaluated independently, on the basis of relevant evidence, and that the judgment reached be determined by the strength of that evidence.¹¹

It is essential to note, however, that Scheffler's notion of objectivity is best understood as an *objection* to the position in which all our beliefs are ultimately

subjective. He rejects the view that we cannot examine our belief system and select one more strongly supported system over another, based upon evidence and good reasons for doing so. According to Scheffler, insofar as we have this possibility for deliberation, to this degree we manifest the possibility for (some type of) objectivity.¹²

Scheffler's interpretation of objectivity is thus not based on the requirement of certainty; Scheffler is strongly committed to the fallibilist epistemological position.¹³ It seems to me, however, that he cannot make the commitment to the possibility of rationality and objectivity without an ultimate reference to an independently existing reality. This reality determines (at least partly) what assertions can reasonably be accepted. Even though — due to our inescapable fallibility — we cannot assert any straightforward correspondence of our beliefs with the facts, some weak version of the correspondence theory of truth is necessary for Scheffler's positions of rationality and objectivity. Actually, in his discussions with Nelson Goodman, Scheffler explicitly states the following commitment: "Surely we made the words by which we describe stars; that these words are discourse dependent is trivially [true...It] doesn't imply that *stars* are *themselves* discourse dependent" (IN, 84).

In science, the commitment to ontological realism does not contradict Scheffler's philosophical outlook on the whole. In ethics, however, the analogical position appears to be more problematic. Therefore, it makes sense to ask, whether the analogical ontological reference is needed for preserving the objectivity of ethics. Namely, there appears to be fundamental structural differences between ethical and factual truths. (To understand the difference, one need only compare the possibility of violating a physical truth with the possibility of violating an ethical truth in one's everyday life!) Robert Nozick illustrates the point by asking: "Should you follow the truth property that underlies the success in action of people in general or, if these diverge, should you follow the property that underlies your *own* success in action?"¹⁴ A problem of this sort does not similarly arise in the case of factual truths.

Therefore, in the history of moral philosophy, there have always existed quandaries about the possibility of ethical objectivity. One solution would be to refute the very possibility of objectivity in ethics. Thus morality would be purely a matter of taste, and there could be no differences in the justifiability of diverging moral statements. Nevertheless, Scheffler cannot support such relativist positions, due to his commitment to the role of rationality in ethics. To understand Scheffler's position, we must look for an interpretation which would preserve the objectivity of ethics, despite the structural differences between ethical and factual truths.

TWO INTERPRETATIONS OF (ETHICAL) OBJECTIVITY¹⁵

The concept of objectivity can be interpreted as either an epistemological or as an ontological concept. I will now examine these two alternatives and consider their strengths and weaknesses, especially with respect to ethics. In addition, I will compare these interpretations with Scheffler's philosophical outlook. The first alternative is to define objectivity merely epistemologically. An advocate of the epistemological interpretation does not necessarily deny the possible existence of

independent reality, but purports to define a minimal concept of objectivity, which will be neutral in terms of ontological commitments. This position is defensible, if it enables us to define objectivity adequately. Furthermore, if the epistemological interpretation appears to be sufficient, the ontological interpretation should be refuted as an unnecessary philosophical construction.

The epistemological interpretation construes objectivity as a property of cognitive content, insofar as objectivity may be defined, for example, as a notion that exploits “presumptive universality”; the content of an objective judgment, in this sense, may be presupposed to be valid for everyone.¹⁶ Robert Nozick has examined this possibility in his new book *Invariances*. Nozick seems to suppose that in a situation where one has all the relevant knowledge and is not personally involved, the choices of different persons would appear to be relatively invariant. Moreover, “in virtue of those invariance features” those principles are “effective in achieving the goals of ethics.”¹⁷

Victor L. Worsfold has interpreted Schefflerian ethical objectivity as being of this type. According to Worsfold, Scheffler’s conception of ethical justification “presupposes that justified believers are capable of deliberation and judgment about their conduct based on impartiality with respect to themselves.”¹⁸ And he continues: “[The] features of impartiality, fairness, consistency and coherence lend Scheffler’s view a kind of objectivity which challenges the subjectivity to which much of contemporary ethical thinking is condemned.”¹⁹

The epistemological interpretation of ethical objectivity seems indeed to be consistent with Scheffler’s own writings on the subject. In what follows, I will nevertheless argue, that the strict conception of objectivity seems to refer to some invariant property beyond agreement and may therefore call for a reference to ontological concepts. More specifically, to define objectivity merely epistemologically seems to lead to too weak a conception of objectivity. Even though intersubjective agreement is, as Nozick has emphasized, epistemologically prior also in the case of factual truths, *the agreement*, as Nozick continues, *is not enough*: “Such agreement and equilibrium may be our route to coming to know that something is an objective truth, but only when, and because, this agreement is explained by other objectiveness properties.”²⁰

We must ask, therefore, what kind of property could explain the intersubjective ethical agreement. As Nozick puts it: “If there is no such property, and if certain principles simply *are* agreed to, then the parallel to factual truth would seem to break down, and so would the normative weight of intersubjective agreement.”²¹ Intersubjective agreement cannot guarantee the truth of the statement. In consequence of an incessant human fallibility, we do not have any reason to believe that every human being could not be similarly mistaken. The collective error may be even more probable in ethics, where social power relations, and the efforts to maintain the stability of some cultural or social system, may easily lead to agreement, which has nothing to do with objectivity. It is this type of situation, therefore, that confronts epistemological interpretation in distinguishing between a true belief and, for instance, an agreed upon or functional belief. This is problematic in terms of the

possibility of objectivity, in which case we must also deliberate the ontological interpretation of objectivity.

According to this interpretation, the objectivity of a belief is to be explained by its relation to the independent existence of the entities it concerns. One version of the ontological interpretation refers to an independently existing moral reality as differing from that of material reality. The objectiveness property of an ethical statement is, according to this view, its correspondence with moral reality. To invoke this kind of extra-reality is, nevertheless, quite an extravagant way of thinking and, moreover, it poses a danger for slipping into supernaturalism, as mentioned earlier.

With respect to Scheffler's philosophical outlook on the whole, reference to any kind of supernaturalism appears to be impossible. Therefore, for preserving the possibility of objectivity compatible with Scheffler's philosophy, such an explanation is excluded. The next section thus concentrates on seeking the interpretive position that most adequately accounts for Scheffler's philosophy.

SCHEFFLER ON ETHICS: IS THE POSSIBILITY FOR OBJECTIVITY PRESERVED?

The point of primary importance in terms of Scheffler's ethical position is that the realm of ethics is indeed accessible by the processes of rationality. His main emphasis in this regard is on the continuity of ethics with other domains of investigation (*IN*, 289). In his "Anti-Naturalist Restrictions in Ethics," Scheffler elegantly shows how the arguments that require the "wholesale restriction" of ethics actually fail to make the intended distinction between ethics and other realms of inquiry (*IN*, 283-92).

Scheffler considers arguments based upon the supposition that ethical terms are not "descriptive" while scientific terms are, and shows that this argument fails to separate ethical language from non-ethical language (*IN*, 283-86). He also examines the argument based on the supposition that ethical terms (like "is good") are "simple" and therefore undefinable, in the sense that they are parallel to "perceptual units." Scheffler underscores the idea that "there is no metaphysical necessity which attaches to one particular way of dividing up the experiential field, and there are no absolute criteria of perceptual simplicity" (*IN*, 286).

Furthermore, Scheffler discusses the alleged irreducibility of ethical inquiry to a scientific one, by emphasizing the fact that just because ethics is irreducible to any given language system of science at any given time, it does not follow that ethics is unscientific. (Naturally it does not follow that it is scientific either.) He points out that there must be ambiguities in the notions of "irreducibility" and "being scientific," for the reason that the same problem "does not arise in questions of the reduction of one limited scientific domain to another." Biological terms, for instance, are not reducible to the terms of physics, but this fact has not provoked questions about the scientific nature of biology (*IN*, 287-88).

G.E. Moore's argument about the naturalist fallacy does not necessarily break down Scheffler's ethical naturalism. First, it is important to make a distinction between the possibility of a naturalist analysis in principle, and that of the actual incorrectness of any given naturalist analysis. Secondly, from a Schefflerian point

of view, it seems to be possible to accept the semantic irreducibility of ethics, although, as I earlier stated, the ontological irreducibility would be problematic.

In the preceding section I stated that the strict conception of objectivity seems to require some sort of ontological reference. Even though Scheffler does not make explicit ontological commitments, it would be interesting to consider, whether such a step would be consistent with his philosophical outlook.

Even in this case Scheffler's position seems, in principle, to be able to compatibly preserve the possibilities of rationality and objectivity in ethics. It does not necessarily slip either into relativism or into dogmatism. An advocate of this position must, nevertheless, admit that the naturalist worldview of today's science is quite far from an adequate conception of the surrounding reality, because there seems not to be room for objective values in the present naturalist outlook.

Scheffler's ethical naturalism is not, by any means, a straightforward attitude of reducing ethics to the some natural properties already known by science or by common sense. Rather, Scheffler would appear to be committed to the idea that in our endeavor to pursue the truth about human morality, we must rely on our powers of reason and observation. Additionally, a Schefflerian position does not deny the possibility of there being emotive or prescriptive elements of moral statements. In Scheffler's philosophical outlook, the non-cognitive dimensions of our beliefs do not exclude their accessibility by reason.

CONCLUSIONS

Some kind of objectivity is necessary for preserving the Schefflerian type of rationality in ethics. The main function of rational processes, ultimately, is to assess, weigh, and evaluate our beliefs and actions in the light of good reasons and evidence. This process has to be objective, at least in the sense that it is impartial²² and not misled by biasing factors.²³

The objectivity of ethics cannot be preserved without some reference to an objectiveness property of ethical truth, the property that goes beyond mere agreement or the functionality of ethical assertion. The most obvious suggestion is its reference to facts that exist independently of our knowing.

Once again, it should be noted that Scheffler is committed to a naturalist approach to ethics. It is important to note, however, that his emphasis is in the naturalist approach to ethics in terms of the methods of inquiry; he does not make explicit ontological commitments on the nature of ethical values. Due to the previously described weaknesses of an epistemological interpretation of objectivity, it makes sense to ask whether objectivity is preserved, if it is combined with the naturalist ontology.

Indeed, the possibility of objectivity in ethics cannot be preserved by a simple reduction to today's naturalist worldview of science. The problem in combining ethical naturalism with a commitment to the objectivity of ethics is that if we construe the nature of ethics as a mode of behaving that has evolved in the processes of evolution, the only possibility is to see ethics as a socially construed practice. From this point of view, all variations from culture to culture and from person to

person must be allowed. Therefore, the possibility of objectivity collapses in the face of the relativity of values. Ethical naturalism and objectivism, however, can be compatibly held together. It is possible to accept the positions that objective values both exist and that they have a natural origin, if we also admit that we do not yet have an adequate conception of them. The crucial point is to see the solution to the problem, in principle, as a matter of empirical study and reasoning, rather than as a matter of intuition or introspection.²⁴

I am deeply conscious that I may be criticized for having asked the wrong question. Ontological questions, especially with respect to ethics, are often defined as unnecessary and even useless. My reason for asking the question, however, is, as I hope to have shown, the alleged (and quite obvious-seeming) possibility of rationality in ethics, and an interest in considering the conditions under which the rationality — and thereby the objectivity — of ethics is not merely a human error.

It seems to be clear (also according to Scheffler) that morality also includes dimensions which do not belong to the realm of reason (or at least we cannot, on the basis of the knowledge we have, manage in morality and moral education solely by observing and reasoning). Problems of this sort are quite typical in education; we should reason and argue, and we should try to seek the best possible solutions in the field, which consist of different and incommensurable aspects and dimensions, including, for example, the cognitive, the ethical, and the emotional. This characteristic of education is something Scheffler himself has illustrated.²⁵ The difficulties in approaching a wide-ranging realm of this nature, should not, however, lead us to abandon with our striving for the best possible solutions. Since reason seems to be by far the best tool we have, it would be better to use it than accept the “laissez-faire” position.

Finally, I would like to mention one interesting direction that might be addressed in future studies: In some of his latest contributions, Scheffler advocates what he calls a “plurealist” ontological position. Scheffler’s idea is to reject both C. S. Peirce’s “realist monism” and Nelson Goodman’s pluralist “irrealism.” Instead of these, Scheffler proposes that “there are many different and unreduced domains, that is, worlds, discrete from and not made by the versions describing them.”²⁶

In reference to questions of ethical knowledge, it would be interesting to consider whether ethics could be interpreted as one independent and unreduced domain of Scheffler’s plurealist world(s).

1. I am grateful for the English-language revision of this essay provided by Lisa Muszynski, who has shown an interest in my work and has closely followed the development of my ideas.

2. Israel Scheffler, “Some Contributions of Philosophy to Education,” in *Philosophy of Education, The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy*, vol. 3, ed. David M. Steiner (Bowling Green, Ohio: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1999), 197.

3. Ibid.

4. See, for example, Scheffler, *Reason and Teaching* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 58–148.

5. Ibid.

6. Scheffler, "Replies," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 16, no. 1-2 (1997): 267.
7. Scheffler, *In Praise of the Cognitive Emotions and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 99.
8. See, for example, Scheffler, *Reason and Teaching*, 18-30.
9. *Ibid.*, 136-45.
10. See, for example, Israel Scheffler, *Inquiries: Philosophical Studies of Language, Science and Learning* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986), 293-302. For all subsequent references this text will be cited as *IN*.
11. Alven Neiman and Harvey Siegel, "Objectivity and Rationality in Epistemology and Education: Scheffler's Middle Road," *Synthese* 94, no. 1 (January 1993): 61.
12. See Scheffler, *Science and Subjectivity*, 2d ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982).
13. *Ibid.*, 91-124.
14. Robert Nozick, *Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 294.
15. The notion of truth is naturally related to the notion of objectivity. Truth also can be interpreted epistemologically and ontologically; see, for example, William P. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996). Sometimes the distinction is made by defining objectivity as an epistemological concept, whereas defining truth as an ontological concept.
16. This position has its roots in Immanuel Kant's "categories of understanding."
17. Nozick, *Invariances*, 290. Furthermore, the goal of ethics for Nozick is, at least initially, "the protecting, fostering, or maintaining of cooperative activities for mutual benefit."
18. Victor L. Worsfold, "Israel Scheffler's Ethics: Theory and Practice," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 16, nos. 1-2 (1997): 190.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, 291.
21. *Ibid.*, 287.
22. See, for example, Neiman and Siegel, "Objectivity and Rationality," 61.
23. See Nozick, *Invariances*, 94-99.
24. See, for example, Markus Lammenranta, "Voiko luonnossa olla arvoja?" *Ajatus* 49 (1992): 107-8; or see Charles R. Pigden, "Naturalism," in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), 426-27.
25. See, for example, Scheffler, *Of Human Potential* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985); or *The Language of Education* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1960).
26. Scheffler, "A Plea for Pluralism," *Erkenntnis* 52 (2000): 168-69; see also "My Quarrels with Nelson Goodman," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62, no. 3 (May 2001): 675.