

# “Ethics Are Relative” by Edward Westermarck

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*Edward Westermarck (adapted from The Edward Westermarck Memorial Lectures)*

### **About the author...**

Edward Westermarck (1862-1939) taught sociology and moral philosophy at the University of Helsinki; later, he taught sociology at the University of London. He initially sought graduate work in moral philosophy but quickly concluded that normative ethics must be based on empirical behavior and so turned to field work. As a pioneer in anthropological field work, he championed a comparative methodological approach which was later superseded by the functional methodology of Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski who viewed society holistically rather than in terms of specific customs. In our reading, Westermarck argues that the moral norms of a society emerge from the struggle for survival of that society and evolved from the general and disinterested moral emotions of the individuals making up the society.

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So his use of the term “moral emotion” is not necessarily related to personal feelings of approval and disapproval of specific forms of behavior. Westermarck’s theory, here, is not so different from Durkheim’s theory of collective consciousness: Westermarck’s moral emotions are indeed the same sort of notion as Durkheim’s collective conscience. Westermarck’s work on moral philosophy in *Ethical Relativity*, from which our reading is taken, is the culmination of fifty years of research into human social behavior.

**About the work...**

In his *Ethical Relativity*,<sup>1</sup> Edward Westermarck argues for both psychological and ethical relativism<sup>2</sup> and attempts to base ethics on the biological basis of emotion. Westermarck holds that impartial moral emotions or moral sentiments are the basis for customary moral judgments. Consequently, Westermarck concludes moral values cannot be objective since they originate in emotion. Even so, impartial or dispassionate moral emotion is not entirely subjective since it is a customary human reaction to a particular moral experience. In the book from which our reading selection is taken, Westermarck argues forcefully for ethical relativism by emphasizing that there is no empirical basis for objective standards in ethical theory. Nevertheless, even though ethical judgments are based on feelings, he does not believe ethical relativism leads to ethical subjectivism.

**From the reading...**

“I am not aware of any moral principle that could be said to be truly self-evident.”

1. Edward Westermarck, *Ethical Relativity* (New York: Littlefield, Adams & Company, 1932).
2. In brief, psychological (or sociological) relativism is the empirical observation that moral behavior and the consequent morals differ among cultures, societies, and groups—both in the present and in the past. On this view, moral standards are descriptive—not prescriptive—and so this view is generally noncontroversial. Ethical relativism is the denial there is one objective moral standard for all groups at all times; more precisely, ethical relativism is the doctrine that differences in moral standards *ought* to exist among different cultures.

## Ideas of Interest from *Ethical Relativity*

1. Explain how a normative science of ethics is defined.
2. According to Westermarck, what is the basis for the belief in the objectivity of moral values?
3. Why does Westermarck object to the notion of a conscience as the basis of the objectivity of moral judgments?
4. Explain why, in Westermarck’s view, “[T]o say that something is right because it is in accordance with the will of a Supreme Being is to reason in a circle.”
5. What reasons does Westermarck give for supposing ethical relativism is an advantage to morality?
6. How does Westermarck answer the charge of “ethical subjectivism” against his view of ethical relativism?
7. Clarify Westermarck’s argument that moral judgments cannot be objective even though they are not arbitrary.<sup>3</sup>

## The Reading Selection from *Ethical Relativity*

### [Ethics Is Not Normative]

Ethics is generally looked upon as a “normative” science, the object of which is to find and formulate moral principles and rules possessing objective validity. The supposed objectivity of moral values, as understood in this treatise, implies that they have a real existence apart from any reference to a human mind, that what is said to be good or bad, right or wrong, cannot be reduced merely to what people think to be good or bad, right or wrong. It makes morality a matter of truth and falsity, and to say that a judgment is true obviously means something different from the statement that it is thought to be true. The objectivity of moral judgments does not presuppose the infallibility of the individual who pronounces such a judgment, nor even the accuracy of

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3. Try to be more informative than Garner and Rosen’s assessment, “He seems to believe that moral judgments are not objectively true, though he admits that, in a sense they are objectively true.” Richard T. Garner and Bernard Rosen, *Moral Philosophy: A Systematic Introduction to Normative Ethics and Meta-ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 246.

a general consensus of opinion; but if a certain course of conduct is objectively right, it must be thought to be right by all rational beings who judge truly of the matter and cannot, without error, be judged to be wrong.

In spite of the fervour with which the objectivity of moral judgments has been advocated by the exponents of normative ethics there is much diversity of opinion with regard to the principles underlying the various systems. This discord is as old as ethics itself. But while the evolution of other sciences has shown a tendency to increasing agreements on points of fundamental importance, the same can hardly be said to have been the case in the history of ethics, where the spirit of controversy has been much more conspicuous than the endeavour to add new truths to results already reached. Of course, if moral values are objective, only one of the conflicting theories can possibly be true. Each founder of a new theory hopes that it is he who has discovered the unique jewel of moral truth, and is naturally anxious to show that other theories are only false stones. But he must also by positive reasons make good his claim to the precious find.

These reasons are of great importance in a discussion of the question whether moral judgments really are objective or merely are supposed to be so; for if any one of the theories of normative ethics has been actually proved to be true, the objectivity of those judgments has *eo ipso* been established as an indisputable fact. . . .

**From the reading. . .**

“[A]ll ethical theories are as a matter of fact based on the morality of common sense. . .”

## **[Moral Principles Are Not Self-Evident]**

There are no doubt moral propositions which really are certain and self-evident, for the simple reason that they are tautological, that the predicate is but a repetition of the subject; and moral philosophy contains a great number of such tautologies, from the days of Plato and Aristotle to the present times. But apart from such cases, which of course tell us nothing, I am not aware of any moral principle that could be said to be truly self-evident. The presumed self-evidence is only a matter of opinion; and in some cases one might even be inclined to quote Mr. Bertrand Russell’s statement that “if self-evidence is alleged as a ground of belief, that implies that doubt has crept in, and that our self-evident proposition has not wholly resisted the assaults of scepticism.” None of the various theories of normative science can be said to have proved its case; none of them has proved that moral judgments possess objective

validity, that there is anything good or bad, right or wrong, that moral principles express anything more than the opinions of those who believe in them. But what, then, has made moralists believe that moral judgments possess an objective validity which none of them has been able to prove? What has allured them to invent a science the subject-matter of which—the objectively good or right—is not even known to exist? The answer is not difficult to find. It has often been remarked that there is much greater agreement among moralists on the question of moral practice than on the question of theory. When they are trying to define the ultimate end of right conduct or to find the essence of right and wrong, they give us the most contradictory definitions or explanations—as Leslie Stephen said, we find ourselves in a “region of perpetual antinomies, where controversy is everlasting, and opposite theories seem to be equally self-evident to different minds.” But when they pass to a discussion of what is right and wrong in concrete cases, in the various circumstances of life, the disagreement is reduced to a surprising extent. They all tell us that we should be kind to our neighbour, that we should respect his life and property, that we should speak the truth, that we should live in monogamy and be faithful husbands or wives, that we should be sober and temperate, and so forth. This is what makes books on ethics, when they come to the particular rules of life, so exceedingly monotonous and dull; for even the most controversial and pugnacious theories becomes then quite tame and commonplace. And the reason for this is that all ethical theories are as a matter of fact based on the morality of common sense . . . So also normative ethics has adopted the common sense idea that there is something right and wrong independently of what is thought to be right or wrong. People are not willing to admit that their moral convictions are a mere matter of opinion, and took upon convictions differing from their own as errors. If asked why there is so much diversity of opinion on moral questions, and consequently so many errors, they would probably argue that there would be unanimity as regards the rightness or wrongness of a given course of conduct if everybody possessed a sufficient knowledge of the case and all the attendant circumstances and if, at the same time, everybody had a sufficiently developed moral consciousness—which practically would mean a moral consciousness as enlightened and developed as their own. This characteristic of the moral judgments of common sense is shared by the judgments of philosophers, and is at the bottom of their reasoned arguments in favour of the objectivity of moral values.

The common sense idea that moral judgments possess objective validity is itself regarded as a proof of their really possessing such validity. It is argued that the moral judgment “claims objectivity,” that it asserts a value which is found in that on which it is pronounced. “This is the meaning of the judgment,” says Professor Sorley. “It is not about a feeling or attitude of, or any relation to the subject who makes the judgment.” . . . The whole argument is really reduced to the assumption that an idea—in this case the idea of the validity of moral judgments—which is generally held, or held by more or

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less advanced minds, must be true; people claim objective validity for the moral judgments, therefore it must possess such validity. The only thing that may be said in favour of such an argument is, that if the definition of a moral proposition implies the claim to objectivity, a judgment that does not express this quality cannot be a moral judgment; but this by no means proves that moral propositions so defined are true—the predicated objectivity may be a sheer illusion. . . .



*Views of Morocco, Westermarck field-work location (Library of Congress)*

The authority assigned to conscience is really only an echo of the social or religious sanctions of conduct: it belongs to the “public” or the religious conscience, *vox populi* or *vox dei*. In theory it may be admitted that every man ought to act in accordance with his conscience. But this phrase is easily forgotten when, in any matter of importance, the individual’s conscience comes into conflict with the common sense of his community; or doubt may be thrown upon the sincerity of his professed convictions, or he may be blamed for having such a conscience as he has. There are philosophers, like Hobbes and Hegel, who have denied the citizen the right of having a private conscience. The other external source from which authority has been instilled into the moral law is the alliance between morality and religion . . . It has been pointed out by Schopenhauer and others that Kant’s categorical imperative, with its mysteriousness and awfulness, is really an echo of the old religious formula “Thou shalt,” though it is heard, not as the command of an external legislator, but as a voice coming from within. Schiller wrote to Goethe, “There still remains something in Kant, as in Luther, that makes one think of a monk who has left his monastery, but been unable to efface all traces of it.”

## **[Whether God Is the Source of Right]**

The theological argument in favour of the objective validity of moral judgments, which is based on belief in an all-good God who has revealed his will to mankind, contains, of course, an assumption that cannot be scientifi-

cally proved. But even if it could be proved, would that justify the conclusion drawn from it? Those who maintain that they in such a revelation possess an absolute moral standard and that, consequently, any mode of conduct which is in accordance with it must be objectively right, may be asked what they mean by an all-good God. If God were not supposed to be all-good, we might certainly be induced by prudence to obey his decrees, but they could not lay claim to moral validity; suppose the devil were to take over the government of the world, what influence would that have on the moral values—would it make the right wrong and the wrong right? It is only the all-goodness of God than can give his commandments absolute moral validity. But to say that something is good because it is in accordance with the will of an all-good God is to reason in a circle; if goodness means anything, it must have a meaning which is independent of his will. God is called good or righteous because he is supposed to possess certain qualities that we are used to call so: he is benevolent, he rewards virtue and punishes vice, and so forth. For such reasons we add the attributes goodness and righteousness to his other attributes, which express qualities of an objective character, and by calling him all-good we attribute to him perfect goodness. As a matter of fact, there are also many theologians who consider moral distinctions to be antecedent to the divine commands. Thomas Aquinas and his school maintain that the right is not right because God wills it, but that God wills it because it is right. . . .

## **[Moral Subjectivism Is Not Arbitrary]**

Another question is whether the ethical subjectivism I am here advocating really is a danger to morality. It cannot be depreciated by the same inference as was drawn from the teaching of the ancient Sophists, namely, that if that which appears to each man as right or good stands for that which is right or good, then everybody has the natural right to follow his caprice and inclinations and to hinder him doing so is an infringement on his rights. My moral judgments spring from my own moral consciousness; they judge of the conduct of other men not from their point of view but from mine, not in accordance with their feelings and opinions about right and wrong but according to my own. And these are not arbitrary. We approve and disapprove because we cannot do otherwise; our moral consciousness belongs to our mental constitution, which we cannot change as we please. Can we help feeling pain when the fire burns us? Can we help sympathizing with our friends? Are these facts less necessary or less powerful in their consequences, because they fall within the subjective sphere of our experience? So also, why should the moral law command less obedience because it forms a part of ourselves?

I think that ethical writers are often inclined to overrate the influence of moral theory upon moral practice, but if there is any such influence at all, it seems to me that ethical subjectivism, instead of being a danger, is more likely to be

an advantage to morality. Could it be brought home to people that there is no absolute standard in morality, they would perhaps be on the one hand more tolerant and on the other hand more critical in their judgments. Emotions depend on cognitions and are apt to vary according as the cognitions vary; hence a theory which leads to an examination of the psychological and historical origin of people’s moral opinions should be more useful than a theory which postulates moral truths enunciated by self-evident intuitions that are unchangeable. In every society the traditional notions as to what is good or bad, obligatory or indifferent, are commonly accepted by the majority of people without further reflection. By tracing them to their source it will be found that not a few of these notions have their origin in ignorance and superstition or in sentimental likes or dislikes, to which a scrutinizing judge can attach little importance; and, on the other hand, he must condemn many an act or omission which public opinion, out of thoughtlessness, treats with indifference. It will, moreover, appear that moral estimates often survive the causes from which they sprang. And what unprejudiced person can help changing his views if he be persuaded that they have no foundation in existing facts?

**From the reading...**

“If there are no moral truths it cannot be the object of a science of ethics to lay down rules for human conduct, since the aim of all science is the discovery of some truth.”

## **[Moral Judgments Are Not Objective]**

I have thus arrived at the conclusion that neither the attempts of moral philosophers or theologians to prove the objective validity of moral judgments, nor the common sense assumption to the same effect, give us any right at all to accept such a validity as a fact. So far, however, I have only tried to show that it has not been proved; now I am prepared to take a step further and assert that it cannot exist. The reason for this is that in my opinion the predicates of all moral judgments, all moral concepts, are ultimately based on emotions, and that, as is very commonly admitted, no objectivity can come from an emotion. It is of course true or not that we in a given moment have a certain emotion; but in no other sense can the antithesis of true and false be applied to it. The belief that gives rise to an emotion, the cognitive basis of it, is either true or false; in the latter case the emotion may be said to be felt “by mistake”—as when a person is frightened by some object in the dark which he takes for a ghost, or is indignant with a person to whom he imputes a wrong that has been committed by somebody



else; but this does not alter the nature of the emotion itself. We may call the emotion of another individual “unjustified,” if we feel that we ourselves should not have experienced the same emotion had we been in his place, or, as in the case of moral approval or disapproval, if we cannot share his emotion. But to speak, as Brentano does, of “right” and “wrong” emotions, springing from self-evident intuitions and having the same validity as truth and error, is only another futile attempt to objectivize our moral judgments.

...

**From the reading...**

“None of them has proved ... that moral principles express anything more than the opinions of those who believe in them.”

If there are no moral truths it cannot be the object of a science of ethics to lay down rules for human conduct, since the aim of all science is the discovery of some truth. Professor Höffdung argues that the subjectivity of our moral valuations does not prevent ethics from being a science any more than the subjectivity of our sensations renders a science of physics impossible, because both are concerned with finding the external facts that correspond to the subjective processes. It may, of course, be a subject for scientific inquiry to investigate the means which are conducive to human happiness or welfare, and the results of such a study may also be usefully applied by moralists, but it forms no more a part of ethics than physics is a part of psychology. If the word “ethics” is to be used as the name for a science, the object of that science can only be to study the moral consciousness as a fact.



*The Quay, Helsinki, Finland, where Westermarck taught at the University of Helsinki, 1890-1906 (Library of Congress)*

## Related Ideas

Chris Gowens, “Moral Relativism”<sup>4</sup> is an entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* discussing the historical background and main arguments with extensive bibliography.

S.K. Sanderson, “Edward Westermarck: The Invisible Master”<sup>5</sup> is a paper on the site *All Academic Research* presented before the American Sociological Association discussing the career and major contributions of Westermarck.

Chris Swoyer, “Relativism”<sup>6</sup> is a short discussion from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defining the difference between descriptive ethical relativism and normative ethical relativism.

Petri Liukkonen, “Edvard (Alexander) Westermarck”<sup>7</sup> essays the life and thought of Westermarck with a bibliography of Westermarck’s writings on the *Books and Writers Website*.

### From the reading . . .

“[I]n my opinion the predicates of all moral judgments, all moral concepts, are ultimately based on emotions, and that, as is very commonly admitted, no objectivity can come from an emotion. ”

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. Clarify, as best you can, the nature of the purported real existence of objective moral values as presupposed by a normative science of ethics. If moral facts exist, are there any other viable ways of knowing them than intuition or some sort of process similar to that described by Plato in Books VI and VII in the *Republic*?
2. Analyze the analogical reasoning that ethics as a science is similar to the physical sciences. Just as there is no exactly completed universally valid theory of everything<sup>8</sup> so likewise the exact formulation of a universally

4. “*Moral Relativism*” (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-relativism/>)

5. “Edward Westermarck” ([http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/1/18/3/4/7/p183479\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/18/3/4/7/p183479_index.html))

6. *Section on “Ethics”* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/relativism/#2.5>)

7. “*Edvard (Alexander) Westermarck*” (<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/ewester.htm>)

8. The term “theory of everything” is used for any theory that unifies and explains all fundamental interactions of nature. *Eds.*

valid ethical code has not been completed either. Westermarck writes, “But what, then, has made moralists believe that moral judgments possess an objective validity which none of them has been able to prove?” Why cannot we also ask what has made scientists believe a final scientific theory can be completed and possess an objective validity none of them has been able to prove? Are the *ad ignorantiam* arguments<sup>9</sup> of the two disciplines similar? Is the word “science” being used in two different senses? If so, clarify what the two senses of the word are being used.

3. Compare and contrast Westermarck’s views on conscience in this reading selection with Alexander Bain’s view expressed here:

It may be proved, by such evidence as the case admits of, that the peculiarity of the Moral Sentiment, or Conscience, is identified with our education under government, or Authority. Conscience is described by such terms as moral approbation and disapprobation; and involves, when highly developed, a peculiar and unmistakable revulsion of mind at what is wrong, and a strong resentment towards the wrong-doer, which become Remorse, in the case of self. It is capable of being proved, that there is nothing natural or primitive in these feelings, except in so far as the case happens to concur with the dictates of Self-interest, or Sympathy, aided by the Emotions formerly specified.<sup>10</sup>

Does Westermarck distinguish in practice between conscience and moral emotion or moral sentiment? Do moral emotions just coincide with moral right and wrong for Westermarck or are they causally linked to the judgments of right and wrong?

4. Westermarck writes in defense of his view that intuition in ethics is not reliable: “[A] theory which leads to an examination of the psychological and historical origin of people’s moral opinions should be more useful than a theory which postulates moral truths enunciated by self-evident intuitions that are unchangeable.” Discuss whether his observation commits the genetic fallacy. Is it an oversimplification to assume that either ethical ideas are intuited *a priori* or they are an outcome of social and historical development? What are other possible origins of ethical concepts?
5. In his plea for a fair hearing, Westermarck writes, “And what unprejudiced person can help changing his views if he be persuaded that they have no foundation in existing facts?” Explain whether this remark is actually a tautology and, if not, whether the remark helps his case.

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9. An *ad ignorantiam* argument is a claim that a proposition is true simply on the basis that it has not been proved false or that it is false simply because it has not been proved true. Many instances of this kind of reasoning are fallacious. *Eds.*

10. Alexander Bain, *Moral Science: A Compendium of Ethics* (New York: D. Appleton, 1869), 42.

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6. The anthropologist Ruth Benedict explains her reasons for ethical relativism as follows:

Most of those organizations of personality that seem to us most incontrovertibly abnormal have been used by different civilizations in the very foundations of their institutional life. Conversely the most valued traits of our normal individuals have been looked on in differently organized cultures as aberrant. Normality, in short, within a very wide range, is culturally defined. . . . We recognize that morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits. Mankind has always preferred to say, “It is a morally good,” rather than “It is habitual,” and the fact of this preference is matter enough for a critical science of ethics. But historically the two phrases are synonymous. The concept of the normal is properly a variant of the concept of the good.<sup>11</sup>

How does Benedict’s account here of the morally good differ from Westermarck’s account? How does that difference relate to the plausibility of ethical relativism?

7. After arguing that objective moral truth does not exist, Westermarck concludes that the only subject left for the science of ethics to study is the fact of moral consciousness. Yet it would seem that the only area left for inquiry would be an empirical psychological study of human thinking and behavior. Consequently, on Westermarck’s view, without existent moral truth, would not it follow that any science of ethics would be impossible because there is no subject matter for any such study other than an empirical analysis of the process of socialization? After all, as Westermarck states, “[T]he aim of all science is the discovery of some truth.” Would it then follow that if there’s no moral truth, there can be no science of ethics?
8. Discuss how you would think Westermarck would react to Solomon Asch’s argument that the reduction of ethical judgments to desire and aversion or to reward and punishment cannot be made:

When we admire an act of courage or when we are shaken by deceit and treachery, when we are determined to tell the truth even if it is painful . . . we are granting recognition to certain properties of action that are not described in the current categories of habit and desire. The reductionist interpretations fail us at the start; they cannot tell us by what alchemy the phenomena of which they speak give rise to the generic fact of value.<sup>12</sup>

Asch is emphasizing social interactions do not, in themselves, determine values. A child, for example, seems to know when she is being unjustly

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11. Ruth Fulton Benedict, “Anthropology and the Abnormal,” *Journal of General Psychology* 10, no. 1 (1934): 72-73.

12. Solomon E. Asch, *Social Psychology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1952) 357.

punished. How is Asch’s criticism related to G. E. Moore’s naturalistic fallacy?<sup>13</sup>

9. On the basis of his study of the Pirahã, an Amazonian people speaking a language with a non-recursive grammar, Daniel Everett concludes that Noam Chomsky’s supposition of an innate universal grammar or biological language faculty is probably mistaken. He believes Occam’s razor should lead us to conclude not that there is a special biological tendency for a constrained grammar but that, instead, there is a plasticity to the human mind such that no special innate faculty need be hypostatized.

If recursion is not found in the grammar of all languages, but it is found in the thought processes of all humans, then it is part of general human intelligence and not part of a “language instinct” or “universal grammar,” as Noam Chomsky has claimed.<sup>14</sup>

Given Westermarck’s conclusion that “the objective validity of moral judgments . . . cannot exist,” explain why Westermarck does not similarly conclude by the principle of simplicity that there is no special human faculty of moral consciousness, and consequently, no special object of study for ethics.

10. G. E. Moore criticizes a claim about moral emotion<sup>15</sup> Westermarck expressed in his earlier work *The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas* as follows:

[Prof. Westermarck] holds that what I am judging when I judge an action to be wrong, is merely that it is of a sort which *tends* to excite in me a peculiar kind of feeling—the feeling of moral indignation or disapproval. . . . But there is one very serious objection to such a view, which I think that those who take it are apt not fully to realise. If this view be true, then when I judge an action to be wrong, I am merely making a judgment about my own feelings toward it; and when you judge it to be wrong, you are merely making a judgment about yours. And hence the word “wrong” in my mouth stands for an entirely different person from what it does in yours . . . if this view be true, then there is absolutely no such thing as a difference of opinion in moral questions.<sup>16</sup>

Explain in some detail whether or not the account Westermarck gives in our reading answers G. E. Moore’s objection that the notions of right

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13. George Edward Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 10.

14. Daniel L. Everett, *Don’t Sleep, There are Snakes: Life and Language in the Amazonian Jungle* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 94.

15. For example, Westermarck writes, “‘Ought’ and ‘duty’ express only the tendency of an omission to call forth disapproval, and say nothing about the consequences of the act’s performance.” Edward Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, (London: MacMillan & Co., Ltd., 1906), I: 136.

16. G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Studies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1922), 332-335.

and wrong cannot be based on psychological reaction.<sup>17</sup>

11. Garner and Rosen argue that Westermarck probably was an ethical naturalist.<sup>18</sup> Ethical naturalism assumes there is no distinction between facts and values, and scientific knowledge and ethical knowledge are achieved by the same methodology. Hence, ethical terms are reducible to empirical terms. Westermarck states, “The theory of the emotional origin of moral judgments that I am here advocating does not imply that such a judgment affirms the existence of a moral emotion in the mind of the person who utters it.” Given this thesis, how do you think Westermarck can account for a particular action being right or wrong even though no one has the requisite tendency to express approval or disapproval of the action?
12. An essential part of Westermarck’s theory is that “Emotions depend on cognitions and are apt to vary according as the cognitions vary.” But, as there is no necessary connection between cognition as the faculty of thinking and feeling as the faculty of emotion, would not ethical subjectivism result? Would not “the facts of moral consciousness” simply differ from person to person? How, then, does Westermarck arrive at a notion of a societal ethics?

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### **Revision History**

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17. Ronald Firth describes Westermarck’s view as a dispositional analysis: “Westermarck believes ... that the meaning of statements of the form ‘x is wrong,’ can be expressed by other statements of the form ‘The speaker tends to feel toward x (i.e., *would* feel in the absence of specifiable inhibiting factors), an emotion of disinterested moral disapproval which would be experienced by him as a quality or dynamic tendency in x.’” Roderick Firth, “Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12, no. 3 (March, 1952): 320.

18. Garner and Rosen, 246-247.

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