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## Proposed Standards of Right Conduct Ethical Subjectivism

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IMAGINE TWO PEOPLE DEBATING the morality of giving to famine relief. Smith thinks that we are bound to give a great deal more than people typi-

cally do. Jones denies this. Suppose that these two, after talking a good while longer, have found themselves in agreement about all of the relevant facts,

and have also sharpened their own positions so that the views they emerge with are each internally consistent. But suppose that the fundamental disagreement between them remains. Can this disagreement be rationally resolved?

Not likely, according to ethical subjectivists. Subjectivism claims that there is no ideal or uniquely correct resolution to ethical disagreements, because there are no ethical standards that are objectively correct, no standards that all rational or fully informed people must agree to. There is no overarching, universal yardstick that can be applied to determine the truth of one's ultimate moral principles. Once we have identified our deepest moral commitments, we can go no further. It makes no sense, according to subjectivism, to suppose that such commitments could be false or irrational.

To better understand ethical subjectivism, we need to appreciate the key notions of subjectivity and objectivity. A proposition or judgment is *objectively* true just in case it is true independently of anyone's thinking it is. So, for instance, the claim that the earth orbits around the sun is an objective truth, because the claim is true regardless of whether anyone believes it. A judgment is *subjectively* true just in case its truth depends on whether someone endorses it. To insist that chocolate is tastier than vanilla, or that beer is better than wine, is to make a subjective claim, because in this case truth is in the eye of the beholder.

## TWO KINDS OF SUBJECTIVISM

Philosophers standardly distinguish between two kinds of ethical theory. The first sort—**normative theory**—attempts to specify conditions under which an action is morally right or wrong. John Stuart Mill, for instance, held that an act is right insofar as it tends to produce happiness. Immanuel Kant thought that one acts rightly only if one is willing to see everyone act in accordance with one's own principles. Thomas Hobbes claimed that an act is right if it is permitted by rules that would be agreed to by self-interested parties seeking to band together to escape from anarchy.

Viewed as a normative theory, ethical subjectivism claims that an act is morally right if, and only if,

the person judging the action approves of it. Similarly, personal disapproval is both necessary and sufficient for an action to qualify as wrong.

Normative subjectivism allows that moral judgments can be true or false. There is truth in ethics, but no objective truth. A moral judgment is true, according to normative subjectivism, just in case it accurately reports the sentiments of the speaker. Thus sincerity is the mark of ethical truth. If normative subjectivism is true, then one's sincere moral judgments cannot be mistaken.

The debate between Mill, Kant, Hobbes, and normative subjectivists is an intramural one. Each theory asserts its superiority as an answer to the question: under what conditions are actions morally right? This is a very important debate within ethics. But we can step back from this debate and ask instead about the status of these competing theories. Specifically, we can ask of all of these theories how they might be justified, whether they are or can be true, and how, if at all, we might know that one or another is true. These are **meta-ethical** questions. Here we are not asking what makes actions right. Instead, we are focusing on whether normative theories can be justified or true in the first place.

Meta-ethical subjectivism is the particular claim that normative ethical theories, and moral judgments quite generally, cannot be true. Contrast this with normative subjectivism, which claims that moral judgments can be true, provided they accurately report the speaker's feelings. Because of their different views about the possibility of ethical truth, meta-ethical subjectivism implies the falsity of normative subjectivism, and vice versa.

Let us consider the motivations and the plausibility of normative subjectivism first.

## MOTIVATIONS FOR NORMATIVE SUBJECTIVISM

### *A. The Argument from Democracy*

One of normative subjectivism's appeals is that it is so democratic. Subjectivism is a leveling doctrine—everyone issues true moral judgments, so long as they sincerely give voice to their feelings. Everyone's views are on a par with everyone else's. This

democratic element is a genuine feature of subjectivism. But many take this democratic element a step further, expressing their allegiance to normative subjectivism by means of the following argument:

1. If everyone has an equal right to have and voice moral opinions, then everyone's moral opinions are equally plausible.
2. Everyone does have an equal right to have and voice moral opinions.
3. Therefore everyone's moral opinions are equally plausible.

This argument is valid—its premises entail its conclusion. If one were to accept premises (1) and (2), then logic requires one to accept the conclusion (3) as well. But should we accept these premises? The second premise seems generally plausible. But the first premise is false. Having a right to an opinion does not entail the plausibility of that opinion. Though everyone has an equal right to express views about mathematics or quantum physics, no one supposes that everyone's opinions here are equally plausible. I have lots of opinions about botany, about the content of the tax code, about the location of various buildings and landmarks. Further, I have a right to each of these opinions. But many of them (I'm not sure which) are mistaken. I misidentify plants, misconstrue tax law, and my sense of direction is awful. These humdrum examples show that the plausibility of an opinion really has nothing to do with one's right to hold it: having a right to an opinion is one thing, the truth of that opinion quite another. This directly undermines the first premise of the argument. Because we must reject one of its crucial premises, the argument from democracy is unsound. It does not supply a good basis for endorsing normative subjectivism.

### *B. The Argument from Disagreement*

One thing that impresses many people about work in the sciences is the degree of consensus about which propositions are true, and about which methods are appropriate for discovering new truths. Things in ethics seem to be much different; there seems to be a great deal of disagreement about fundamental issues, and a lack of consensus

about appropriate methods for resolving moral questions. The diversity of ethical opinion has struck many as an important indicator of morality's fundamentally subjective character.

Here is a representative sketch of an argument for subjectivism that takes the breadth of ethical disagreement as its focus:

1. If there is persistent disagreement among informed, good-willed, open-minded people about some subject matter, then that subject matter does not admit of objective truth.
2. There is persistent disagreement about ethical issues among informed, good-willed, open-minded people.
3. Therefore there are no objective ethical truths.

We can know that an argument's conclusion is true if we know that the argument is logically valid and that all of its premises are true. This argument is valid. The second premise seems to be true, though the breadth of moral *agreement* is often underappreciated. The divisive moral issues tend to get the most press, but this publicity can mask the significant degree of moral consensus that must form the core of any society. Further, though there clearly is disagreement about ethical issues, it is sensible to suppose that much of this is owing to mistaken beliefs, and that more information would lead to greater ethical agreement. Public debates about welfare reform in the United States, or about the morality of capital punishment, are chock full of misinformation. Getting the facts straight would get us a good distance toward resolving issues on these (and other) topics.

Still, we may suppose that even after gathering the facts, people of good will may disagree in their ethical views. So let us grant premise (2). Premise (1), however, is not plausible. There is persistent disagreement among informed, good-willed, open-minded physicists and mathematicians. We, and they, assume that their efforts are nevertheless aimed at discovering objective truths. We do not believe that taste is the arbiter of truth in math or physics. Indeed, we can make this quite general point about investigations of all sorts. When historians debate the causes of the Civil War, they are not

*merely* entering their personal views, with nothing other than parochial preference to back them up. Historians are trying to discover what *really* caused the Civil War. They continue to disagree about this. But this is not evidence that their discipline is subjective, that the truths they arrive at are mere expressions of taste. It isn't the case that historical (or physical or mathematical) judgments are true just because someone believes in them. What this shows is that a discipline may deal in objective truths even if its open-minded, informed practitioners deeply disagree with one another. Since that is so, the argument from disagreement fails to provide adequate support for normative subjectivism.

### C. *The Argument from Tolerance*

Many people find subjectivism attractive because of the support it seems to provide for tolerance. We nowadays reject the once-prevalent feelings of superiority that were used to justify the oppression of Asians, Africans, and indigenous Americans during the past three centuries. We would encourage a respectful, tolerant attitude toward different cultures, rather than a dismissive outlook that brands other cultures as "primitive." This dismissive attitude always begins with an (implicit) endorsement of ethical objectivism—there is an objectively correct way to do things. And we all know how things go from here: "We have it right, they don't, thus we have to show them the true path. If this means exploiting them (for their own good), and possibly destroying their way of life, no great loss, since we will supply them with a far better one."

If you are like most people, you'll have bristled at the arrogance expressed in these last lines. This may lead you to endorse the following argument from tolerance:

1. If normative subjectivism is true, then no one's deepest opinions are more plausible than anyone else's.
2. If no one's deepest opinions are more plausible than anyone else's, then we have to respect and tolerate the opinions of all others.
3. Thus if normative subjectivism is true, then we have to respect and tolerate the opinions of all others.

There are two important points to note about this argument. The first is that even if it is sound—even if it is logically valid (it is), and all of its premises (and thus its conclusion) are true—this does not entail that ethical objectivists need to embrace an arrogant or disrespectful attitude toward different cultures. Objectivists believe that there are ethical truths that exist independently of whether anyone thinks so. An objectivist need not believe that *he himself* is in possession of such truth. Indeed, objectivists who are appropriately humble will recognize their own fallibility and the limits to their understanding, in much the same way as physicists or chemists might appreciate the depth of their own ignorance against the backdrop of objective truth. Arrogance and intolerance are poor character traits. They are not mandated by the intellectual position of ethical objectivism.

Let us return to the argument. Its first premise is true. But the second premise is not. Suppose that normative subjectivism is true. This means that an action is morally right just in case one approves of it. If one approves of tolerant behavior, then such behavior is morally correct. The problem, however, is that *if* one approves of intolerance, then intolerant behavior is morally appropriate. Subjectivism morally sanctions the intolerance of prejudiced and bigoted individuals, so long as such intolerance is sincerely felt. Regrettably, it often is. Those who think that even (and especially) racists and bigots are morally required to display respect for others will find no ground for their view in ethical subjectivism. To think that even a deeply prejudiced person should be tolerant is to embrace the universal or objective value of toleration. A concern for tolerance thus sits very uncomfortably with normative subjectivism.

### D. *The Argument from Atheism*

A common thought that moves many to normative subjectivism is that objectivity in ethics can be purchased only through divine commands. If ethics is objective, then it must be god who validates the moral rules. The problem, according to subjectivists, is that god does not exist.

Here is the argument in somewhat tighter form:

1. If ethics is objective, then god must exist.
2. God does not exist.
3. Therefore ethics is not objective.

We could undermine the argument from atheism if we could show that god exists. We can't, at least not here (and perhaps not anywhere; this is one philosophical issue that may never be settled). But even if we could resolve this matter, and do so in favor of the atheist, this would not be enough to prove subjectivism. We can see that from the argument itself. The argument requires a further claim (premise 1), namely, that ethics is objective only if god exists.

There is an intuitive, widely shared view that underlies the first premise. The thought is that laws require lawgivers. There are laws against assault, forgery, and perjury only because lawmakers have enacted them. No legislators, no laws. By analogy, if there are moral laws, these require some lawmaker to validate them. If moral laws are objective, this lawmaker cannot be any one of us. (Remember: objective moral rules are those whose truth does not depend on human endorsement.) If not one of us, then who? Enter god.

There are two reasons to doubt premise (1). This premise seems to derive its strongest support from the common thought mentioned earlier (*viz.*, that rules require rule-givers). But this principle is suspect. Many think that the rules of logic and the axioms of mathematics are true quite independently of whether anyone has ordained them. *If* that is so (an issue too complex to tackle here), then moral rules too might be true or justified even in the absence of a moral lawgiver.

Further, there is reason to think that even if god exists, god cannot be the ultimate source of ethical principles, and so cannot be the missing link that supplies objectivity in ethics.

Suppose god exists. Suppose god issues commands to us. And further suppose that our moral law comprises these commands. Ethics is objective because the law comes from god, not from us. If it didn't come from god, it couldn't be objective.

This familiar line of thought, often used to support premise (1), is beset by a troubling dilemma: god either does or does not have reasons to support

his (or her or its) commands. If god lacks justifying reasons, then god's commands are arbitrary, and so supply no authoritative basis for ethics. Alternatively, if god's commands *are* backed up by reasons, then divine commands are no longer arbitrary. They may be authoritative. We can envision a god who is omniscient, and so knows all facts, including moral facts. This god may also be omnibenevolent, and in his goodness may want to impart the moral facts (or rules) to us, in the form of divine commands. This traditional picture preserves the goodness and omniscience of god, precisely by envisioning divine commands as being well-supported by reasons.

The problem, however, is that these reasons, whatever they are, are what really justify the divine commands. If god commands us not to kill, extort, or perjure, he does so *because such actions are wrong*; they are not wrong because god forbids them. But this means that even theists, if they are to retain a picture of an all-good and all-knowing god, must acknowledge a source of ethical truth that exists independently of god's commands. This means that the objectivity of ethics does not hinge on god's commands. And that directly challenges premise (1).

A final complication emerges when we consider the argument's conclusion—the claim that ethics is not objective. Even if premises (1) and (2) are true, the conclusion does not show that normative subjectivism is true. Put simply, (3) may be true *even if normative subjectivism is false*. There are at least two theories, in addition to normative subjectivism, that are compatible with the claim that ethics is not objective. One of these theories is meta-ethical subjectivism. The other is ethical relativism, the view that an action is morally right if, and only if, it is permitted by the ultimate mores of the society in which it is performed. Ethical relativism allows for moral truth: moral judgments are true just in case they accurately report a certain kind of social consensus. Because moral truth is a function of what people believe it to be, ethical relativism is a non-objective theory. Thus relativists, as well as normative and meta-ethical subjectivists, will embrace conclusion (3). This shows that the argument from atheism, if it is to support normative subjectivism, must be

supplemented by additional arguments that rule out its two anti-objectivist competitors. Though we will examine the merits of meta-ethical subjectivism later, we can't possibly review those arguments that have been offered for and against relativism.

For our purposes, then, we must suspend judgment on the argument from atheism. The argument is sound only if both of its premises are true. They may be. But we could know this only after a very great deal of further philosophical investigation. And we would have an argument for normative subjectivism only if we also had in hand a battery of arguments that undermined both meta-ethical subjectivism and ethical relativism. All the more reason to wait and see before pronouncing a judgment on the argument from atheism.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF NORMATIVE SUBJECTIVISM

As we have seen, many of the arguments that are advanced for ethical subjectivism are not very compelling. This is not a fatal flaw. Most philosophical positions are supported by a large battery of arguments, many of which, after serious attention, turn out to be unsound. Thus ethical subjectivism may be true even if the preceding arguments turn out to be less than convincing. But to gain plausibility, its supporters need to discharge two debts. First, they must advance a positive argument that survives scrutiny. Second, they must show that the essential implications of subjectivism are implications we can live with. Let us see whether this is so.

First, as we have seen, subjectivism is a doctrine of **moral equivalence**: everyone's ultimate moral views are as plausible as everyone else's. This is a handy weapon when dealing with arrogant or haughty individuals. But moral equivalence is a double-edged sword. If all moral views are on a par with one another, then we lose our basis for issuing substantive moral criticism of unsavory characters such as Nazis and terrorists. If subjectivism is true, then those who approve of antisemitism and terrorism are correct in calling such behavior morally right. The moral views of a Hitler or an IRA gunman are *true*, so long as these views are sincerely held.

Of course, subjectivism does not render us mute at this stage—we can criticize the views of Nazis and terrorists, but only from our own perspective. Importantly, our perspective is not superior to theirs. Moral equivalence entails that conflicting moral views are just different; neither one is better or worse than another. This may appeal when comparing the prayer or dietary rituals of Belgians and Polynesians. But it is likely to leave us cold in the face of serious evil.

Normative subjectivism also comes very close to rendering each person **morally infallible**. An infallible person is one who cannot make mistakes. Thus such a person has no false beliefs and all true ones. If subjectivism is true, then it is possible that all, or almost all, of our moral beliefs are correct. We can be morally mistaken in only one of two ways. We might base our moral views on false beliefs (e.g., a racist whose antipathy to blacks is based on a false belief about their intelligence). Or we might possess moral beliefs that conflict with other, deeper moral beliefs we already hold. We might, for instance, approve of the death penalty for a specially awful murderer, even though in a cooler moment we reject the principles that could justify the execution.

According to subjectivism, moral views that are free of either sort of error cannot be mistaken. Apart from exceptions of these two kinds, subjectivism entails that our moral feelings are self-certifying. Moral outlooks that seem to us vicious, ruthless, callous, selfish, or even maniacal cannot be wrong, so long as the views imply no factual errors and are consistent with other views a person holds. Literature and history offer a good supply of well-informed, consistent fanatics. Subjectivism implies that their views are true.

If we are ordinarily morally infallible, and if we disagree with others in our ethical views, then it follows that subjectivism **generates contradictions**. A contradiction occurs when a proposition is alleged to be both true and false. Theories that generate contradictions cannot be true. We would rightly dismiss a mathematical theory that entailed that two and two did, and at the same time did not, equal four. Suppose ethical subjectivism is correct. If Smith thinks that giving famine aid is mandatory, and Jones disagrees, then giving to famine relief is

and is not morally required. It is both true and false that giving to famine relief is obligatory. That is a contradiction.

We can resolve this worrying implication in a fairly straightforward way. Rather than saying that Smith's approval of an action makes it morally right, period, we say that her approval makes it right *for her*. Thus, in the previous example, giving famine aid is not right and wrong in the same respect—it is right for Smith, and wrong for Jones. This is the strategy of relativizing moral judgments to their speakers.

This move really can solve the problem of contradiction. But the strategy has its costs. It renders subjectivism incapable of explaining the point or existence of moral disagreement. Think again of the debate about famine relief. If all Smith is saying is that she herself approves of it, and if all Jones is saying is that he doesn't, then Smith and Jones don't really disagree with one another. Further, we lose incentive to continue moral conversation, if moral truth just consists in reports of personal feelings.

It may appear that Smith and Jones, in their debate about famine relief, are trying to get at the truth, trying to discover what is *really* right. But if we relativize judgments to their speakers, this appearance is misleading. There can be no genuine disagreement about where truth lies, since it lies in the eyes of the beholder. If subjectivism is right, everyone's views are true, so long as they are sincerely expressed. Thus ethical disagreement could focus only on whether the interlocutors actually believe what they say they do. Disagreement cannot focus on whether (say) famine relief is *really* right—right in a non-relative, objective sense—because (according to subjectivism) famine relief *cannot be* really right (or wrong). Subjectivism leaves us with an entirely unrecognizable picture of moral disagreement.

A final concern. If subjectivism is true, then our moral views are arbitrary. There is no better reason to adopt one ethical view over another. Subjectivism claims that moral views are true because one believes them; one does not believe them because they are true. If moral views are justified to the extent that they are believed, then any basis whatever

(other than false belief) will confer plausibility. This allows us to see two ways in which subjectivism entails the arbitrariness of ethical views. First, one's moral outlook may be justified even if one has no reason at all that supports it: the fact that one believes it is sufficient to make it true. In a second kind of case, one does possess reasons that support one's moral views. But the reasons that support a moral belief may fail entirely to move other informed, rational, good-willed people. In this sense, one's views are arbitrary, since they are supported by reasons that could, with complete propriety, be rejected by any and all other rational people.