

# Ethical subjectivism essay sample



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## Introduction

While morality is generally accepted to pertain to the distinction between good and evil or what is right or wrong, the varying and even conflicting bases for moral judgments and ethical philosophies lead the authors of “ The Elements of Moral Philosophy”, to conclude a minimal notion of morality which highlights its association with rationality or reasoning and the independent consideration of all parties involved in an ethical dilemma. And indeed, an analytical investigation of the moral theories discussed in the book reveals both the sound reasoning and critical flaws forwarded by each theory as well as how they dealt with the parties involved. Because reasoning is the common ground of moral theories, it reflects that morality therefore does not necessarily result to an absolute or black and white distinction of good and evil. Instead, it principally depends on how sound reasoning perfectly fits the unique circumstances of a given dilemma as well as the contextual background and inclination of the audience involved in its discussion.

## Ethical Subjectivism

Many people including myself are inclined in adhering to utilitarianism in dealing with ethics especially because our modern society often operates in a utilitarian framework by virtue of our democratic system. In dealing with irreconcilable problems, the most common and acceptable way organizations resolve issues is by consulting members and putting the matter into a vote. And the decision which generates the greater majority agreement of the members is adopted. The fundamental law or constitution also follows a

utilitarian framework as reflected in the phrase “ promote the general Welfare” in the preamble, which can be interpreted that political institutions and policies are to be valued according to their predisposition to promote overall happiness or welfare (e. g. social utility).

While the democratic system reflect general nuances of utilitarianism, it does not necessarily follow that all the actions and laws of society or its members should embrace utilitarianism to be right. Within the same democratic society, the adherence to other moral theories is also adopted. For instance, the inclusion of the bill of rights which warrants equal rights and respect for individual citizens is based on the Kantian principle that people are independent individuals. Incidentally in the bill of rights, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion assumes the recognition of morality based on religion. Thus, religious practices are often recognized and tolerated by law.

In the history of men, society also conventionally bequeaths admiration and respect to heroes, martyrs and even philanthropists who often acted out of their own moral values in consideration of what kind of person should they want to be and thus reflect ethical egoism. Ethical egoism also plays an important role in the social contract theory of Hobbes, who believed that man is inherently selfish and naturally pursues things for himself, which entailed the need for the social contract to regulate people and prevent the natural state of war among men. Thus the idea of the social contract which Rachel considers as a primary channel for facilitating moral order emanates from another moral theory. This demonstrates instances when the varying moral theories actually help support and reinforce each other.

The correctness and incorrectness of the different moral theories in different situations and among different people is a demonstration of ethical subjectivism. There is no categorical set of virtues which is rationally and comprehensively captured by a single philosophical thought. Issues of morality do not involve facts that are permanent but involve issues that are differentiated or reconciled by our interpretative reasoning. Moral issues are therefore ultimately justified by our emotions and feelings which provide some sort of relative or subjective objectivity. Ethical subjectivism considers the opinion of everyone. And these opinions are mere interpretations or thoughts rather than facts. Thus, no moral philosophy can claim that one is universally right or the other universally wrong. What is right or wrong at the moment depends on the situation and based on one's interpretation of the situation, which are both subjective or subject to change. Because of this, ethical subjectivism serves to capture or integrate all of the moral theories. It depends primarily on reasonable interpretation and thus remains embedded in rationality. Consequently, the application of all moral theories would ultimately be acceptable. Ethical subjectivism does not provide an absolute delineation of what is right or wrong or what is evil or good. It relies primarily on interpretative reasoning and feelings.

One of the biggest critiques of ethical subjectivism is the fact that it does not actually resolve in finality if one is absolutely wrong or absolutely right for that matter. Every moral decision is merely an opinion or based on thoughts and feelings. Thus, no one is right and no one is wrong. In the same manner, everyone is right and everyone is wrong. Such position does not fit well to the fact that there is evil and good and there exists conflicts in ethical

issues. A person who kills another person because he simply hates the victim is beyond reasonable doubt an evil person and his act of murder is absolutely wrong. However, such logical and absolute conclusion is not necessarily a fact but an opinion in ethical subjectivism. Because everything is simply moral opinion, this raises the problem whether moral facts do exist as rejected by advocates of ethical subjectivism. If moral facts do not exist, then ethical decisions cannot be empirically verified.

The book treated this problem in its discussion in the role of reason in ethics which help address the flaw of ethical subjectivism. Reason provides for the objectivity of ethics. Issues on ethics are indeed beyond the human capacity for empirical perception. Reason by virtue of the interpretation of the circumstances and existence of facts used to support them help provide objective justification to ethical decisions. Therefore, ethical subjectivism does not simply rely solely on feelings or emotions. It does not suggest that what is right is simply what one feels what is right. Instead, what is right is further supported by opinions and interpretations which in turn are supported by solid and empirically verifiable facts. Feelings and facts are inseparable. Feelings or emotions, while subjective in nature are induced by empirically verifiable stimulus in the environment. One does not simply feel empathy, pity, or love for that matter to someone he does not see or know in the other side of the world. Feelings are internally recognized consciousness by the individual that are substantiated by facts. Thus, it must be understood that ethical subjectivism does not base its moral judgments purely on a vacuum or from a fully independent or self contained feeling that

sprouts from nowhere. These feelings are corroborated and authenticated by verifiable facts or past experience which provides for its objectivity.

Relating ethical subjectivism in on the issue of homosexuality, the specific ethical dilemma presented in the book, homosexuality is therefore both wrong and right depending on the feeling or experience of the people involved in the discussion. For people who have had knowledge or experience of how homosexuality ruined the sanctity of marriage/ family or promoted promiscuity, pedophilia and sexual harassment, it is therefore wrong. However for people who have had positive experience of homosexuality which liberated the feelings of other people or successfully promote alternative types of families (e. g. two gay men adopting a baby), homosexuality is therefore right. The decision of whether homosexuality is right or wrong is based on feelings that are substantiated by empirically verifiable experience which helps shape objective opinions and not merely on feelings or intuitions that springs out from nothing.

## Conclusion

Right action is an intersection between what is reflexive and responsive to the context of each ethical event and the reasoning or objective interpretation of the people involved. Morality is therefore situational and subjective. By being situational, ethical subjectivism accommodates and incorporates all moral theories. It allows the use of utilitarian, Kantian, egoism or other theories in dealing with an ethical issue. Instead of proposing a single philosophical thought or theory that attempts to provide a framework on how ethical issues must be decided, ethical subjectivism

recognizes all these ethical principles as mere opinions. In the end, it puts high premium on the rationality or reason of individual persons in handling ethical issues making it the most encompassing and comprehensive ethical philosophy.

#### Works Cited

Rachels, James and Rachels, Stuart. *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*. 6th Edition. McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2009