

Subjectivism as an ethical theory essay



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While ethical relativism comes in many shapes, its most individualistic expression is ethical subjectivism. It argues that the criteria for what is considered morally right or wrong is ‘ the individual’s perceptions, opinions, experiences, inclinations, and desires. ’ Ethical subjectivism denies the existence of universal moral codes. It views ethics as being private, individual, and subjective in nature. The subjectivist treats morality like taste or aesthetic judgements and would typically say ‘ morality, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder’ but its most descriptive statement might be ‘ whatever a person thinks is right is right’

Ernest Hemmingway wrote ‘ so far, about morals, I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after and judged by these moral standards, which I do not defend, the bullfight is very moral to me because I feel very fine while it is going on and have a feeling of life and death and immortality, and after it is over I feel very sad but very fine’ Basically, Hemmingway argued that if you accept that an action which has good consequences for you as good, then even if the action is deemed wrong by others, it is still a right action because you personally think it is good for you.

Effectively, Hemmingway is arguing that morality depends on the feeling of the individual. However, this does not allow any room for judgement or criticism from others and so moral subjectivism is said to have the sorry consequence that it make morality a useless concept, for, on its premises, little interpersonal criticism or judgement is logically possible. Subjectivism allows no argument at all on whether an action is right or wrong. Suppose

John torturing a child repulses you. You cannot say that it is wrong for John to torture people according to subjectivism, because John personally likes it.

The only basis for judging him wrong is if he was a hypocrite who told others it was wrong to torture people. However, suppose it was his principle that hypocrisy is morally permissible (he feels very fine about it), so that it would be impossible for him to do wrong. Subjectivism may even argue that Adolph Hitler and Ted Bundy (serial killer) are as moral as Gandhi, if each lived to his own moral standards, whatever those might be. Ted Bundy once justified his murder when talking to one of his victims, just before he raped and murdered her. ‘...

In any case, let me assure you, my dear young lady, that there is absolutely no comparison between the pleasure I might take in eating ham and the pleasure I anticipate in raping and murdering you’ Bundy thinks that there are no moral rules except to do what makes Bundy feel good and in this instance he feels it good to rape and kill a young lady but also states that he does not feel a great urge to do it but simply because he wants to have a ‘ nice feeling’ the same ‘ feeling’ he would get from eating ham. When using subjectivism as a form of morality, all notions of morality cease to have any inter-personal evaluative meaning.

A contradiction seems to exist between subjectivism and morality, for morality has to do with a proper resolution of inter-personal conflict and the amelioration of the human predicament. Many people would argue that morality has a minimal aim of preventing a Hobbesian state of nature where life is ‘ solitary, nasty, poor, brutish and short’ but if so, then subjectivism

seems no help at all, for it does not rest upon social agreement of principle or an objectively independent set of norms that binds all people for the common good.

Subjectivity implicitly assumes something of this solipsism, an atomism in which isolated individuals make up separate universes. Subjectivism treats people as billiard balls on a societal pool table where they meet only in radical collisions, each aimed at his or her own goal and striving to do the others before they do him or her in. However, this is belied by the fact humans create societies and families where they support each other and help one another; where we share a common language, common institutions and similar rituals and habits.

As John Donne once wrote ‘ No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent’ Subjectivism has some strength in that firstly, it reflects the close relationship between morality and people’s feelings and opinions. Indeed, it can cope with the contradictory moral values we find ourselves fighting with. Also, subjectivism may enable people disagreeing over the rightness or wrongness of some issue to see that the real dispute is not about objective truth but about their own preferences.

While many people find subjectivism appealing, it simply cannot withstand the rigorous logical analysis that any formal ethical theory should. The illogic of ethical subjectivism is simply insurmountable. Firstly, subjectivism assumes that no-one can be wrong about their moral views as Ed Miller points out ‘ if the individual is the basis of moral truth, then could ever be mistaken in our moral opinions, for whatever we believe must be true. ‘

However, if right is whatever we think is right, then how can anything be wrong? is slavery both a noble act and a reprehensible one? as martin luther king and the Ku Klux Klan both right about civil rights? If some people are just plain wrong in their ethical reasoning, then subjectivism must be false. subjectivism leaves no room for moral reform. If right is what people think is right then no one ever need to change their moral opinions. Yet this is counter-intuitive to our ethical deliberations that frequently necessitate the need for moral reform. It also reduces morality and moral deliberation to personal tastes, thus eliminating any possibility of rational argument in support of a moral judgement.

Pojman explains'... if morality is synonymous with our feelings, our likes, or our dislikes, then rational consideration have no proper application. Ethical subjectivism offers no place for logical analysis and argument. ' Subjectivism fails to distinguish between virtue and vice. according to subjectivism, Hitler and Mother Theresa were both as moral as each other, if they lived by their personal standards. The specific individual actions of these two persons are an irrelevant considerations for the subjectivist.