

Handout 3: Ethical Subjectivisms

1. What is Ethical Subjectivism?

People tend to have two beliefs about ethics:

Belief #1: There are some objective moral facts.

Belief #2: Moral language refers to these moral facts, “x is wrong” is true if and only if it is a fact that x is wrong.

Ethical subjectivism denies both of these beliefs by claiming that (i) there are no objective moral facts and (ii) language that appears to refer to moral facts is deceptive. In what follows, we will consider two different versions of ethical subjectivism. The first is **simple ethical subjectivism (SS)** and the second is **emotivism**.

2. Two Points about Language

One key claim by both forms of ethical subjectivism is that we are deceived by our use of language involving moral terms. To get a clear idea of this claim, we will examine two key points about language.

First, notice that not all language is descriptive or fact-stating. Consider the following sentences:

1. The salt is on the table.
2. Pass me the salt.
3. Would you pass me the salt?
4. Hurray for salt!

Notice that #2 is a *command* and so is not something that can be true or false, #3 is a *question* and is not something that can be true or false, and #4 is an *exclamation* and is not something that can be true or false.

Second, some sentences have the *appearance* of being descriptive (fact-stating) but do not really state facts. Consider the following:

1. I bet five dollars (said as a poker player throws some chips toward the middle of the table)
2. There is the door (said in the context of a heated argument between two people)

In the case of #1, saying that you *bet* five dollars is not describing some state of affairs but is using language to *do* something. In saying “I bet five dollars”, you are *betting five dollars* rather than describing some fact in the world. In the case of #2, in saying “there is the door”, you are not simply stating some fact about where the door is, but you are *telling someone to leave*. The second point then is that language is often *superficially descriptive* and so the literal interpretation of language can fail to express the “real meaning” of sentence. (1) and (2) are declarative sentences that share a similar syntax (grammar) as fact-stating sentences, but they are *not describing anything*, they are not referring to some fact.

3. Simple Ethical Subjectivism

Simple ethical subjectivism (SES) is a kind of ethical subjectivism that says the following:

Ethical Nihilism: There are no objective moral facts.

Deceptive Language Claim: Language that appears to refer to moral facts is deceptive. All sentences that involve moral terms simply express our approval or disapproval about some action.

Recalling our two points from above, the deceptive language claim is the claim that our everyday use of language involving moral terms is *superficially descriptive of moral facts* but really describes some other fact. When we say “x is wrong”, what this sentences really means is “I [the speaker] disapprove of x

Example #1: John says that “Killing is wrong” expresses *John disapproves of killing*.

Example #2: John says that “Giving is good” expresses *John approves of giving*.

Notice how moral terms like “wrong” and “good” are replaced with language about the mental attitude (subjective mindset) of the individual speaking.

4. Emotivism

Emotivism is a kind of ethical subjectivism but differs from SES in how it explains the deceptiveness of language.

Ethical Nihilism: There are no objective moral facts.

Deceptive Language Claim: Language that appears to refer to moral facts is deceptive. Moral language does not *describe some fact* (either about reality or about our subjective psychological states) but instead functions to (i) persuade others of some action or (ii) express some attitude we have.

Let’s look at two applications of the emotivism.

1. Homosexuality is wrong.
2. Homosexuality is morally permissible.

According to emotivism, what #1 and #2 really say is something like this:

- 1a. Don’t be homosexual! (#1 is really a command that aims to change your mind)
- 1b. Homosexuality, gross! (#1 is really an exclamation that expresses an attitude)
- 2a. Be homosexual, if you want! (#1 is really a command)
- 2b. Homosexuality, whatever! (#1 is really an exclamation that expresses an attitude)

In contrast to SES which transforms sentences involving moral terms into descriptive statements about one’s opinions, emotivism transforms sentences involving moral terms into *exclamations* or *commands* that aim to express someone’s attitude or tell you to do something.

5. There are No Moral Facts

While we have examined the ethical subjectivist's claim about the *deceptiveness of language*, we might also consider the claim that *there are no moral facts*. Most people tend *not* to be ethical subjectivists. As noted, people tend to believe that there are objective moral facts and that descriptive moral language is fact stating. But, quite a few people will, when asked to justify their ethical beliefs, *talk as though they are ethical subjectivists*. While this is confusing from a psychological perspective, one question we might ask is this:

Why, when questioned, do people sometimes think that there are no moral facts?

Reason #1: People have a limited conception of how to prove something and so they don't think they can prove moral propositions.

The implicit argument is something like this:

P1: All proof is scientific proof.

P2: All scientific proof involves some kind of direct, empirical verification that can be quantified. (if the claim is *there is 35,304 trees in State College*, we prove this by counting all of the trees in State College)

P3: Proof for moral propositions does not have direct, empirical verification that can be quantified.

C: Therefore, there can be no proof of a moral proposition.

One way to reject this argument is to deny **P1**. We say that a proposition **P** has been proven or is true when (i) there are good arguments that support **P** and (ii) when there are no compelling objections to **P** AND/OR when there are good reasons for dismissing those objections.

Reason #2: If you prove something, it follows that the conclusion is absolutely certain.

The implicit argument is something like this:

P1: Propositions in science are proven to such a degree that we can say they are known with certainty (or at least a high degree of certainty).

P2: Propositions in ethics are not proven with the same level of certainty.

C: Therefore, there can be no proof of a moral proposition.

First, it is possible to reject **P1**. In science, various hypotheses get tested and become theories when no one has any legitimate doubt about them. But just because something is established in the sciences does not mean it is *certain*. Many established scientific theories have turned out to be false and it is likely that the theories we current hold are not false. Thus, it is not the case that our scientific beliefs are certain.

Second, it is possible to reject the validity of the argument. Even if we accept P1 and P2, it does not follow that because there is *less certainty* in ethics that *no certainty at all can be had*.

Reason #3: When people think of proving something in ethics, they think of "hard cases"

Some scientific statements/theories are well-established. There may be some people who doubt global warming, but these individuals tend to be ignored by the community of scientists. However, there are a bunch of “hard cases” in the sciences about which there exists genuine debate. String theory and loop quantum gravity are two opposing theories that try to unite quantum mechanics with general relativity. Both are proven in the sense that a lot of information supports these theories but neither is “proven” in the sense that they lack rivals.

The same is true in ethics. Some ethical views are well-established. There is little controversy and debate about the claim that *it is wrong to kill people for no good reason*. This proposition is accepted as though it were certain. However, there are a bunch of “hard cases” in ethics (e.g. abortion) about which there is a lot of controversy.

However, our focus in ethics tends to be on the hard cases and this tends to make us think that there are no moral facts (no true moral propositions).

Reason #4: When people think of proving something in ethics, they tend to conflate proof with persuasiveness.

Suppose I give you an argument for evolution that establishes its truth as a theory, but you do not believe it. We would say that *you should believe it*. The same is true in ethics. If I give you an argument that *killing people for no reason is morally wrong* and you decide not to believe it, we think *you should believe it*.

6. Objections

Objection #1: There are objective moral facts (see above)

CDQ #1: Convicted serial killer Craig Price, when asked if he thought he had done anything wrong, replied that he hadn’t because “morality is a private choice.” How would you respond to Price? ¹

Objection #2: Ethical Subjectivism is disastrous for the weak and defenseless

Ethical subjectivism is **disastrous** for the weak and defenseless and *no theory of morals should allow this*. If moral right and wrong is simply a matter of personal opinion or simply the expression of our feelings, then there is *nothing that makes genocide objectively wrong*. For example, if John is a wealthy billionaire, wants a small country depopulated, knows they won’t go willingly, and has no problem with killing everyone in that country, there is nothing that makes this objectively wrong. We might say that “genocide for no good reason is wrong” but the ethical subjectivist contends that this statement is just the expression of our attitude toward what John is doing, it is not a description of some moral fact that applies to everyone.

CDQ#1: How might the ethical subjectivist respond to this objection?

Objection #3: SES Cannot Explain Genuine Disagreement

¹ Partially taken from Judith A. Boss’s *Ethics for Life: A Text with Readings*. 3rd ed. p.98.

P1: People have genuine disagreements about morals.

P2: If A says “p is morally wrong” and B says “p is *not* morally wrong” then they are disagreeing about morals.

P3: If SS is true, there is no way to explain disagreement about morals.

C: Therefore, SS is not true.

Let’s take a closer look at **P3**. Suppose a good friend betrays your trust and you are arguing about whether such betrayal is morally right or wrong. According to SES, this is what is happening:

John: You betrayed my trust. What you did was morally wrong!

Vic: Yes, I did. But, I disagree with you because betraying someone’s trust is not morally wrong!

What John Says According to SES: You betrayed my trust. *I don’t approve of what you did.*

How Vic Should Reply: Yes, I betrayed your trust. ***I agree with that you don’t approve of what I did.***

Notice that if SS is true, Vic and John don’t really disagree since Vic does not disagree that John is upset about what he [Vic] did. And so, if this point generalizes, then all genuine disagreement about moral issues rests on a failure to understand what is *really* being said. But, as P1 indicates, people find this result counter-intuitive.

This objection (sort of) does not apply to emotivism. With respect to the objection #1, let’s return to the following example:

John: You betrayed my trust. What you did was morally wrong!

Vic: Yes, I did betray your trust. But, you are wrong, betraying someone’s trust is not morally wrong!

Here is how the emotivist sees this situation:

John: You betrayed my trust. Don’t betray my trust! Ugh!

Vic: Yes, I did betray your trust. But, betray your trust, not betray your trust, whatever!

John and Vic ***disagree in the attitude*** they have toward betraying someone’s trust.

Objection #4: SES Implies that We Are Never Wrong

P1: When we change our mind about some moral issue, we intuitively understand ourselves our previous opinion to have been *incorrect*.

P2: If SS is true, then when John says “x is wrong”, what he means is “I [John] disapprove of x”

P3: Provided John believes that “x is wrong” he cannot be wrong, even if he changes his mind later. Since if he says “x is wrong in 2012” then “x is *not* wrong in 2013” then all he has said is “I approve of x in 2012” and “I disapprove of x in 2013”

C: SS is false.

The basic idea in the above argument is that we (i) can be mistaken about whether our moral beliefs are true but (ii) cannot (unless we are deceiving ourselves) be mistaken about what we approve/disapprove of. But, if SS makes our moral beliefs just that we approve/disapprove of something, then we cannot be

mistaken about whether our moral beliefs are true. This is counterintuitive and so SS is false or this counterintuitive fact needs to be explained in some way.

With respect to the objection #2, emotivism does not imply that we are *always right* since sentences that involve moral terms are not true or false at all. When we change our minds about some moral action, we are simply expressing a different attitude about that action.

Objection #5: Emotivism is Counter-Intuitive as it implies that we cannot be criticized

If John heroically saves my life and Vic says “John shouldn’t have done that”, according to emotivism, Vic is simply *expressing himself*. If I say to Vic “you are wrong. He saved my life! What he did was a good thing”, according to the emotivism, I simply am expressing myself.

Some find this outcome paradoxical because it means that I am *not* saying Vic is wrong (I am not criticizing his view on the matter), what I am doing is *expressing my disapproval* about what someone says. But, I might take myself to be saying “NO! Vic is wrong. Saving someone’s life is a good thing”, but the emotivist again translates what I’m saying as *Boo Vic! Hurray for saving lives!*

Objection #6: Emotivism Has a False View on the Nature of Reasons

When people say that “x is wrong” and we disagree, we ask them to justify their claims by giving reasons. Typically, we have certain criteria for what counts as a good or bad reason. One criterion is *relevance*. If John says “giving money to charity is wrong” and his reason is “because I like ice cream”, we say that his reason is **irrelevant**: its truth or falsity does not influence the truth or falsity of the conclusion. We would thus say that

P1: I like ice cream

C: Therefore, giving money to charity is wrong.

is a bad argument.

But if “x is wrong” gets translated as the command “don’t do x”, then what counts as a good or bad reason is *anything that will influence someone not to do x*. But, there are many things that achieve this purpose and some of them are *irrelevant*. Consider the following argument:

P1: I knew a guy who worked at a charity and he was a murderer.

C: Don’t give your money to charity.

We might say that P1 is a good reason for the conclusion provided it persuades the individual to whom it is directed to do C. But this is counter-intuitive!

READING QUESTIONS

1. What is ethical subjectivism?
2. What is simple subjectivism?
3. What is one objection to simple subjectivism?
4. What is emotivism?
5. What is one objection to emotivism?
6. What is one reason that people find ethical subjectivism so persuasive?
7. True or false: emotivists believe that sentences that involve moral terms are true or false.