

3.4. Ethics and Science

If Ethical Subjectivism is so implausible, then why are so many people attracted to it? Perhaps some people haven't considered its implications very carefully. Yet there are deeper reasons for its appeal. Many thoughtful people feel they must be skeptical about values, if they are to maintain a proper respect for science.

According to one line of thought, a belief in "objective values" in the 21st century is like a belief in ghosts or witches or mystics. If there are such things, then why hasn't science discovered them? Even back in the 18th century, David Hume argued that if we examine wicked actions—"willful murder, for instance"—we will find no "real existence" corresponding to the wickedness. The universe contains no such thing as wickedness; our belief in it comes merely from our subjective responses. As Mackie put it, values are not part of "the fabric of the world."

What should we make of this? Admittedly, value is not a tangible thing like a planet or a spoon. Scientists will never "discover" wickedness, as they might discover a new type of electron. However, this does not mean that ethics has no objective basis. A common mistake is to assume that there are just two possibilities:

1. There are moral values, in the same way that there are planets and spoons.
2. Our values are nothing more than the expression of our subjective feelings.

This overlooks a third possibility. People have not only feelings but reason, and that makes a big difference. It may be that

3. Moral truths are matters of reason; a moral judgment is true if it is backed by better reasons than the alternatives.

On this view, moral truths are objective in the sense that they are true independently of what we might want or believe. If there are good reasons against inflicting pain on babies, and no good reasons on the other side, then it is objectively true—and not "mere opinion"—that causing such pain is wrong.

Another line of thought takes science as our model of objectivity. And then, when we compare ethics to science, ethics seems lacking. For example, there are proofs in science, but there are no proofs in ethics. We can prove that the earth is round, that dinosaurs lived before humans, and that bodies are made up of atoms. But we can't prove whether abortion is acceptable or unacceptable.

The idea that moral judgments can't be proved seems appealing. However, as we noted earlier, the subjectivist's case seems strongest when we consider difficult issues like abortion. When we think about such matters, it is easy to believe that "proof" is impossible. Yet there are also complicated matters in science that scientists argue about. If we focused entirely on those issues, we might conclude that there are no proofs in physics or chemistry or biology.

Suppose we consider a simpler moral matter. A student says that a test was unfair. This is clearly a moral judgment; fairness is a moral idea. Can this judgment be proved? The student might point out that the test covered a lot of trivial material while ignoring what the teacher had stressed. The test also covered material that was neither in the readings nor in class discussions. Moreover, the test was so long that nobody could finish it.

Suppose all this is true. Further suppose that the teacher has no defense to offer. In fact, the teacher, who is new to teaching, seems generally confused. Hasn't the student *proved* that the test was unfair? It is easy to think of other examples that make the same point:

- *Jones is a bad man:* Jones is a habitual liar; he enjoys ridiculing people; he cheats at cards; he once killed a man in a dispute over 27 cents; and so on.
- *Dr. Smith is irresponsible:* She bases her diagnoses on superficial considerations; she doesn't listen to other doctors' advice; she drinks cheap American beer before performing delicate surgery; and so on.
- *Joe the used-car dealer is immoral:* He conceals defects in his cars; he tries to pressure people into paying too much; he runs misleading ads on the Web; and so on.

The process of giving reasons can be taken further. If we criticize Jones for being a habitual liar, we can go on to

explain why lying is bad. Lying is bad, first, because it harms people. If I give you false information, and you rely on it, things may go wrong for you in all sorts of ways. Second, lying is a violation of trust. Trusting another person means leaving yourself vulnerable and unprotected. When I trust you, I simply believe what you say, without taking precautions; and when you lie, you take advantage of my trust. Finally, the rule requiring truthfulness is necessary for society to exist. If we could not trust what other people said, then communication would be impossible. If communication were impossible, then society would fall apart.

So we can support our judgments with good reasons, and we can explain why those reasons matter. If we can do all this and, for an encore, show that no comparable case can be made on the other side, what more in the way of "proof" could anyone want? Perhaps people want ethical theories to be proved experimentally, the way scientific theories are. However, in ethics, proving a hypothesis involves giving reasons, analyzing arguments, setting out and justifying principles, and so on. The fact that ethical reasoning differs from scientific reasoning does not mean that ethics is deficient.

Despite all this, anyone who has ever argued about something like abortion knows how frustrating it can be to try to "prove" one's opinion. Yet we must not run together two things that are really very different:

1. Proving an opinion to be correct
2. Persuading someone to accept your proof

Constructing sound proofs is part of philosophy. However, philosophers leave persuasion to the psychologists, politicians, and product advertisers. From a philosophical perspective, an argument may be a good proof even if it fails as persuasion. After all, an argument may be unpersuasive merely because those who hear it are stubborn or biased or not really listening.

3.5. The Question of Same-Sex Relations

Let's return to the dispute about gays and lesbians. If we consider the relevant reasons, what do we find? The most pertinent fact is that gays are pursuing the only kind of life that