

CHAPTER 3

Subjectivism in Ethics

Take any [vicious] action. . . . Willful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. . . . You can never find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of [disapproval], which arises in you, toward this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not reason.

DAVID HUME, *A TREATISE OF HUMAN NATURE* (1739–1740)

3.1. The Basic Idea of Ethical Subjectivism

In 2001 there was a mayoral election in New York, and when it came time for the city's Gay Pride Day parade, every single Democratic and Republican candidate showed up to march. Matt Foreman, the director of a gay rights organization, described all the candidates as "good on our issues." He said, "In other parts of the country, the positions taken here would be extremely unpopular, if not deadly, at the polls." The national Republican Party apparently agrees; for decades, it has opposed the gay rights movement.

What do people around the country actually think? Since 2001, the Gallup Poll has been asking Americans their personal opinions about gay and lesbian relations. In 2001, 53% of Americans considered gay relations to be "morally wrong," with only 40% considering them "morally acceptable." By 2014, these numbers had changed dramatically: 58% called gay relations "morally acceptable," and only 38% deemed them "morally wrong."

People on both sides have strong feelings. Michele Bachmann, a four-term Republican congresswoman from Minnesota, once told a conservative audience, "If you're involved in the gay and lesbian lifestyle, it's bondage. It is *personal* bondage, *personal* despair, and *personal* enslavement." In saying this, she probably meant that gays are "slaves" to their desires; they are living in the bonds of sin. Bachmann and her husband offer troubled gays a way to break free from their alleged chains: their Christian Counseling Center in Minnesota offers "Reparative Therapy" as a "cure" for homosexuality. Bachmann is an evangelical Lutheran. The Catholic view may be more nuanced, but it agrees that gay sex is wrong. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, gays "do not choose their homosexual condition" and "must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided." Nonetheless, "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered" and "under no circumstances can they be approved." Therefore, if gays want to be virtuous, then they must resist their desires.

What attitude should we take? We might think that gay relations are immoral, or we might find them acceptable. But there is a third alternative. We might believe:

People have different opinions, but where morality is concerned, there are no "facts," and no one is "right." People just feel differently about things, and that's all there is to it.

This is the basic idea behind Ethical Subjectivism. Ethical Subjectivism is the theory that our moral opinions are based on our feelings and nothing more. As David Hume put it, morality is a matter of "sentiment" rather than "reason." According to this theory, there is no such thing as right or wrong. It is a fact that some people are gay and that some people are straight; but it is not a fact that being gay is morally better or morally worse than being straight.

Of course, Ethical Subjectivism is not merely an idea about same-sex relations. It applies to all moral matters. To take a different example, it is a fact that over half a million abortions are performed in the United States each year.

However, according to Ethical Subjectivism, it is not a fact that this is morally acceptable or morally wrong. When pro-life activists call abortion "murder," they are merely expressing their outrage. And when pro-choice activists say that a woman should have the right to choose, they are merely letting us know how they feel.

3.2. The Linguistic Turn

What's startling about Ethical Subjectivism is its view of moral value. If ethics has no objective basis, then morality is all just opinion, and our sense that some things are "really" right or "really" wrong is just an illusion. However, most of the moral philosophers who developed this theory did not focus on its implications for value. Toward the end of the 19th century, professional philosophy took a "linguistic turn," as philosophers began to work almost exclusively on questions of language and meaning. This trend lasted until around 1970. Ethical Subjectivism was developed in that time-period by philosophers who asked questions such as these: What do people mean when they use words like "good" and "bad"? What are moral debates about, if not about whose opinion is (really) correct? And what is the purpose of moral language? With questions like those in mind, philosophers proposed various versions of the theory.

Simple Subjectivism. The simplest version is this: When a person says that something is morally good or bad, this means that he or she approves of that thing, or disapproves of it, and nothing more. In other words:

"X is morally acceptable"	} all mean: "I (the speaker) approve of X"
"X is right"	
"X is good"	
"X ought to be done"	

And similarly:

"X is morally unacceptable"	} all mean: "I (the speaker) disapprove of X"
"X is wrong"	
"X is bad"	
"X ought not to be done"	

Let's call this version of the theory *Simple Subjectivism*. It expresses the basic idea of Ethical Subjectivism in a plain, uncomplicated form. However, it is open to a serious objection.

The objection is that Simple Subjectivism cannot account for moral disagreement. Let's consider our previous example. Gay rights advocate Matt Foreman believes that being gay is morally acceptable. Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, however, believes that it is not. So, Foreman and Bachmann disagree. But consider what Simple Subjectivism implies about this situation. When Foreman says that being gay is morally acceptable, the theory says that he is merely saying something about his attitudes—he is saying, "I, Matt Foreman, do not disapprove of being gay." Would Bachmann disagree with that? No, she would agree that Foreman does not disapprove of being gay. At the same time, when Bachmann says that being gay is immoral, she is only saying, "I, Michele Bachmann, disapprove of being gay." And how could anyone doubt that? Thus, according to Simple Subjectivism, there is no disagreement between them; each should acknowledge the truth of what the other is saying. Surely, though, this is incorrect, because Bachmann and Foreman *do* disagree about homosexuality.

There is a kind of eternal frustration implied by Simple Subjectivism: Bachmann and Foreman have deeply opposing points of view, yet they cannot state their beliefs in a way that manifests their disagreement. Foreman may try to deny what Bachmann says, but, according to Simple Subjectivism, he succeeds only in talking about himself.

The argument may be summarized like this: When one person says, "X is morally acceptable," and someone else says, "X is morally unacceptable," they are obviously disagreeing. However, if Simple Subjectivism were correct, then they would not be. Therefore, Simple Subjectivism cannot be correct. This argument seems to show that Simple Subjectivism is flawed.

Emotivism. The next version of Ethical Subjectivism came to be known as *Emotivism*. Emotivism was popular during the mid-20th century, largely due to the work of the American philosopher Charles L. Stevenson (1908–1979).

Language, Stevenson observed, is used in many ways. Sometimes it is used to make statements—that is, to state facts. Thus we may say:

"Gas prices are rising."

"Quarterback Peyton Manning underwent multiple neck surgeries, was sidelined for a year, and then broke the record for most touchdown passes in a season."

"Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*."

In each case, we are saying something that is either true or false, and the purpose of our utterance is, typically, to convey information to our audience.

However, language is also used for other purposes. Suppose I say, "Close the door!" This utterance is neither true nor false. It is not a statement, intended to convey information; it is a command. Its purpose is to get someone to do something. Or consider utterances such as these, which are neither statements nor commands:

"Aaargh!"

"Way to go, Peyton!"

"Alas, poor Yorick!"

We understand these sentences easily enough. But none of them can be true or false. (It makes no sense to say, "It is true that 'way to go, Peyton'" or "It is false that 'aaargh.'") These sentences are not used to state facts or to influence behavior. Their purpose is to express the speaker's attitudes—about gas prices, about Peyton Manning, or about Yorick.

Now think about moral language. According to Simple Subjectivism, moral language is about stating facts—ethical judgments report the speaker's attitudes. According to that theory, when Bachmann says, "Being gay is immoral," her utterance means "I (Bachmann) disapprove of being gay"—a statement of fact about Bachmann's attitudes. However, according to Emotivism, moral language is not fact-stating; it is not used to convey information. It is used, first, as a means of influencing people's behavior. If someone says, "You shouldn't do that," he is trying to *persuade you not to do it*; his utterance is more like a command than a statement of fact. "You shouldn't

do that" is a gentler way of saying "Don't do that!" Also, moral language is used to express attitudes. Calling Peyton Manning "a morally good man" is like saying, "Way to go, Peyton!" And so, when Bachmann says, "Being gay is immoral," emotivists interpret her utterance as meaning something like "Homosexuality—gross!" or "Don't be gay!"

Earlier we saw that Simple Subjectivism cannot account for moral disagreement. Can Emotivism? Emotivists emphasize that disagreement comes in different forms. Compare these two ways in which people can clash:

- I believe that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in killing President John F. Kennedy, and you believe that Oswald was part of a conspiracy. This is a factual disagreement—I believe something to be true which you believe to be false.
- I am rooting for the Atlanta Braves to win, and you are rooting for them to lose. Our beliefs are not in conflict, but our desires are—I want something to happen which you want not to happen.

In the first case, we believe different things, both of which cannot be true. Stevenson calls this *disagreement in belief*. In the second case, we want different outcomes, both of which cannot occur. Stevenson calls this *disagreement in attitude*. Our attitudes may be different even when our beliefs aren't. For example, you and I may have all the same beliefs regarding the Atlanta Braves baseball team: we both believe that Braves players are overpaid; we both believe that I am rooting for the Braves just because I am from the South; and we both believe that Atlanta is not a great baseball town. Yet despite all this common ground—despite all this agreement *in belief*—we may still disagree *in attitude*. I may still root for the Braves, and you may still root against them.

According to Stevenson, moral disagreement is disagreement in attitude. Matt Foreman and Michele Bachmann may (or may not) have clashing beliefs about the facts regarding homosexuality. Yet it is clear that they disagree in attitude. For example, Foreman wants same-sex marriage to be legally recognized, whereas Bachmann does not. For Emotivism, then, moral conflict is real.

Emotivism has the virtue of recognizing some of the main ways in which we use moral language. Certainly, we sometimes use moral language to persuade and sometimes to express attitudes. However, in denying that moral language is fact-stating, Emotivism seems to be denying a plain fact. For example, when I say, "Long-term solitary confinement is a cruel punishment," it is true that I disapprove of such punishment, and it may also be true that I am trying to persuade someone else to oppose it. However, I am also trying to say something true; I am making a statement that I believe to be correct. Like most people, I do not see my own moral convictions as "mere opinions" that are no more justified than the beliefs of bigots and bullies. The fact that I see things in this way, whether rightly or wrongly, is relevant to interpreting what I mean when I use moral language.

The Error Theory. The last version of Ethical Subjectivism acknowledges that people are at least *trying* to say something true when they talk about ethics. This is the *Error Theory* of John L. Mackie (1917–1981). Mackie was a subjectivist; he believed that there are no "facts" in ethics, and that no one is "right" or "wrong." However, he also acknowledged that people *believe* they are right, and so we should interpret them as trying to state objective truths. Thus, instead of saying that Bachmann and Foreman are merely reporting their own attitudes (Simple Subjectivism) or expressing their feelings (Emotivism), the Error Theory holds that Bachmann and Foreman are putting forward a positive claim about value: the claim that *the moral truth is on their side*. Because there is no such truth, Mackie thought, moral discourse is teeming with error.

3.3. The Denial of Value

Moral theories are primarily about value, not language. Our discussion of Ethical Subjectivism might therefore seem to have gone off track. At the heart of Ethical Subjectivism is a theory of value called *Nihilism*. Nihilists believe that values are not real. People might have various moral beliefs, but, really, nothing is good or bad, or right or wrong. Earlier we applied Nihilism to the issues of abortion and same-sex relations.

According to a nihilist, neither side is right in those debates, because there is no "right."

So long as we consider only difficult or controversial moral issues, Nihilism might seem plausible. After all, we may ourselves be unsure what to think about such issues; perhaps we're unsure because there's no right answer? Yet Nihilism and Ethical Subjectivism seem much less plausible when applied to simpler matters. To take a new example: it is a fact that the Nazis killed millions of people based on their racial backgrounds; but, according to Nihilism, it is not a fact that the Nazis acted badly. Instead, the nihilist would say, different people have different opinions, and no one is right. You may believe one thing, but Adolph Hitler believes something else, and Hitler's opinion is just as good as yours.

Viewed in this light, Nihilism seems absurd. Indeed, it is hard to believe that anyone has ever believed Nihilism, or at least believed it consistently. After all, every human being has moral beliefs in addition to having "subjective feelings." Even racists believe that it would be wrong to kill *them* or to exterminate *their* *rac*, yet those judgments also conflict with Subjectivism.

Nihilism might be compared to another theory, which has nothing to do with ethics. According to this theory, the universe is only five minutes old. Such a theory denies the existence of the past—or at least, the existence of a past that goes back more than five minutes. Though ridiculous, this theory is hard to refute. If you try to refute it by describing events that happened yesterday, the reply will be that your "memories" of those events were put in your brain five minutes ago, when the universe came into being. Or, if you point to a book with a copyright date of 1740, the reply will be that the book came into existence (along with its misleading copy-right page) exactly five minutes ago.

Such a position is hard to refute, but none of us are tempted to believe it. Much the same can be said about Nihilism and Ethical Subjectivism. These theories deny the existence of right and wrong. So, for example, they deny that it is wrong to intentionally cause severe pain to a human baby for no reason. The nihilist would simply say that the baby-torturer has *his* beliefs on the matter, and you and I have ours. Such a position may be hard to refute, but perhaps a refutation isn't necessary.