

# **Subjectivism, Objectivism and Cultural Relativism**

# Subjective and Objective

- Subjective means “**personal**; resulting from feelings; existing only in the **mind**.”
  - An opinion reflects a **belief** or judgment. Opinions can be supported by facts, but they can't be **proven**.
- Objective means “**real**; factual; without bias.”
  - A **fact** is something that happened or is true. Facts can be proven.
    - ‘The Sun rises in the east’– objective statement
    - ‘Some human kill other humans’- objective statement

# Subjectivism and Objectivism

- Any theory which claims that ethical judgments such as whether stealing is wrong, are neither true or false, is subjectivist
- Any theory which claims that ethical judgments neither true or false but they are always about the psychology of the person who utters them
- Any non-subjectivist theory will be objectivist

# Questions of Ethics/Judgement

- Should moral judgment be subjective or objective?
- What are the arguments for and against either?

# Types of Subjectivism

Normative Subjectivism

Meta Ethical Subjectivism

# Normative Subjectivism

- According to normative subjectivism, an act is morally right if, and only if, the person judging the action approves of it.
- Normative ethical theories attempt to specify conditions under which an action is right or wrong.
- Normative subjectivism allows that moral judgments can be true or false. There is truth in ethics, but no objective truth. A moral judgment is true just in case it accurately reports the sentiments of the speaker.
- Sincerity is the mark of ethical truth. If normative subjectivism is true, then one's sincere moral judgments cannot be mistaken.

- For instance, when one says, “infanticide is wrong,” even though this looks like a statement that could be true or false, it is in fact just an expression of dislike or dissatisfaction with infanticide. It would be like saying “Boo infanticide” or “I don’t like infanticide.”
- These things can’t be true or false because emotive expressions and likes/dislikes can’t be true or false.

# Normative Subjectivism

- When someone utters the phrase “Murder is wrong,” what they say is true if, and only if, they actually disapprove of murder.
- When someone utters the phrase “Murder is right,” what they say is true if, and only if, they actually approve of murder.
- On normative subjectivism, some moral judgments can be false. A moral judgment would be false if the speaker who utters it is not honestly reporting his or her beliefs. For example, if one lies about what they approve or disapprove of, then they’re statement would be false.

For example, if a man lies about his ethical views because he thinks that’s what his audience wants to hear, then what he has said is false.



# Critique of Normative Subjectivism

The Argument from Disagreement:

- › There is persistent disagreement about moral matters, disagreement that cannot be rationally resolved.
- › The best explanation for such persistent, unresolvable disagreement is that there is no objective truth about moral matters.
- › Moral judgments can nevertheless be true or false.
- › Therefore, the truth or falsity of moral judgments is not objective, but depends on the attitudes of those making the judgments.

- Most of the objections to this argument are going to focus on premise 2: the best explanation premise.
- One might think that the best explanation of moral disagreement is that we haven't enough information to settle the issue yet.
- › There was a time when people disagreed about the shape of the Earth, whether the Earth rotated around the sun or vice versa, and many other issues. Ethics, the objection goes, may be just like these disagreements.
- Other explanations?

# Meta-Ethical Subjectivism

- According to meta-ethical subjectivism, the purpose of moral judgment is not to report personal or social attitudes, but rather to express one's feelings or voice one's commitments.
- Meta-ethical subjectivism is not a normative view; it makes a claim about normative views.
- Meta-ethical subjectivism claims that normative ethical theories, and moral judgments in general, cannot be true.
- › Note: meta-ethical subjectivism implies the falsity of normative subjectivism, and vice -versa.

- The Argument from Moral Motivation:
  - › 1) Every moral judgment motivates all by itself.
  - › 2) Factual judgments cannot motivate all by themselves.
  - › 3) Therefore moral judgments are not factual judgments.

- Premise 1 claims that moral judgments are motivational. This means that to judge an action right is to be motivated to perform it. Similarly, to judge an action wrong, is to be motivated to not perform it.
- › If one judges that eating animals is wrong, then such a person must be motivated to not eat animals.

# Cultural Relativism

- Cultural relativism is the theory which claims that, because different societies have different ethical beliefs, there is no rational way of determining whether an action is morally right or wrong other than by asking whether the people of this or that society believe it is morally right or wrong.
- Ethical relativism is the theory which claims that, because different societies have different ethical beliefs, there is no rational way of determining whether an action is morally right or wrong other than by asking whether the people of this or that society believe it is morally right or wrong.
- Ethical relativism is the view that there are no ethical standards that are absolutely true and that apply or should be applied to the companies and people of all societies. Instead, relativism holds, something is right for the people or companies in one particular society if it accords with their moral standards, and wrong for them if it violates their moral standards.

# Summary of Relativism

- What ethical relativism comes down to . Different cultures have different moral codes/ beliefs. What is considered right within one group may be utterly abhorrent to the members of another group. THEREFORE: What is moral is relative to a particular culture. It would be naive and mythical to think that there is universal truth in ethics. There are no standards of morality that cut across cultures. Every standard is culture-bound.

# Challenge of Relativism

- Challenge posed by ethical relativism. The person who encounters societies with many different moral standards. will be advised by the theory of ethical relativism that in one's moral reasoning one should always follow the moral standards prevalent in whatever society one finds oneself. After all, since moral standards differ and since there are no other criteria of right and wrong, the best one can do is to follow the old adage "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."



- **At the very heart of relativism as a moral theory are the following contentions –**

**Diversity Thesis**

**Relativity Thesis**

**Toleration Thesis**

# Diversity Thesis

- People do in fact disagree in their moral beliefs. Cultures exhibit vastly different attitudes toward adultery, premarital sex, property ownership, violence, etc. Even the same moral tradition varies over time.
- Objection: While there is variation in moral beliefs between cultures, much of the apparent diversity in moral beliefs can be traced to differences in circumstances and in non-moral beliefs that are not directly related to questions of morality. **Thus, appearances to the contrary, the difference may not be a genuine moral difference. The difference may be - difference in non-moral beliefs or difference based on circumstances.**

# Relativity Thesis:

- The thesis says that the rightness or wrongness of moral beliefs can be determined only in relation to the culture or moral tradition of the individuals who hold them.
- **Objection:** But the fact that moral beliefs differ may only show that some beliefs – or perhaps all of them – are false. From the fact that different people have different moral beliefs about same issue, **it does not follow logically that there is no objective truth about the issue nor that all beliefs about that issue are equally acceptable.** When two people or two groups have different beliefs, at most all that follows is that at least one of them is wrong.

# ***Toleration Thesis***

- This thesis says that we should adopt a tolerant attitude towards other individuals or social groups that hold different moral beliefs. “Toleration” presumably means refraining from using force to impose the moral beliefs of one's own culture on other cultures.
- Objection: But if a principle of toleration is **not a part of the moral beliefs of another culture, the members of that culture have no moral obligation to practice tolerance toward us**, even if we believe in toleration.

# Major Criticism of Ethical Relativism

- Just in case the conclusion of cultural relativism is true, i.e., that there is no universal truth in morality, by implication, it also claims that there can be no universal truth at all.
- The most telling criticisms against the theory of ethical relativism are those that point to the incoherent consequences of the theory. If the theory of ethical relativism were true, then it would make no sense -
  - to criticize the practices of other societies so long as they conformed to their own standards;
  - to criticize any of the moral standards or practices accepted by our own society.
- The theory of ethical relativism implies that whatever the majority in our society believes about morality is automatically correct.