5

Introducing subjectivism and objectivism

> … there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so …
>
> (*Hamlet* II.ii)

> God made man simple; his complex problems are of his own devising.
>
> (*Ecclesiastes* 7.29, Jerusalem Bible)

5.1 Ethical subjectivism and some subjectivist qualms

Chapter 1 pointed us towards four key initial questions about ethics, and Chapters 2–4 discussed the first three of these. In Chapter 5 we come to the fourth and last of these initial questions: the question of objectivity. That question will remain our focus until the end of Chapter 7.

Socrates poses the question "How should life be lived?", and urges his hearers to try to answer it. But many today will feel subjectivist qualms about even trying to give an answer. Their response to Socrates' question is something like this: "No one has the right to impose their views about how they think I should live on *me*. So I can't have the right to do that to anyone else. Who am I to tell other people how they should live?"

This common view at the level of individuals is paralleled by an equally common view at the societal or cultural level: what right has my society to impose its views of how human beings should live together

on other societies? The arguments run in close parallel at the two levels. Here I shall talk mainly at the individual level, but it will not be hard to construct the parallel argument at the level of cultures.

"Who am I to tell other people how they should live?" seems to be an ultra-democratic response to Socrates' question. The idea is that it is because we are all equal that no one has the right to impose his views on others. But then, who says ethics involves an attempt to impose our views on others? I have argued that ethics is about *the use of reason* to determine how life should be lived. Using reason need not mean imposing any views on anybody. It can mean reaching agreement in the most consensual, egalitarian and democratic way possible.

Of course reasoning, or a show of reasoning, can be misused to bully or browbeat people. One way to describe what Mr Collins does to Elizabeth Bennet is to say that he misuses reason to try to browbeat Elizabeth Bennet into accepting his offer of marriage. But this is a *mis*-use of reason precisely because the right use of reason is to *persuade* people to agree with you, not *force* them. When people reach agreement by the right use of reason, they agree *freely*, on the basis of good arguments that they have thought through for themselves and decided to accept. In this sense, agreeing by way of reasoned argument is the *opposite* of coercion, and there is nothing more democratic than reason.

But (it might be objected here) how are such arguments to go? What sort of facts can we appeal to, to settle a disagreement about how life should be lived? And how can we tell that we are appealing to the *right* sort of facts? We know what sort of facts are relevant to solving a specific technical problem such as "How should I keep warm in my cave at night?", or "What's the best sort of stone to use if you want to make a pyramid?" But (it might be said) there are *no* facts about how life should be lived overall. As the old journalists' saying has it, "Opinion is free but facts are sacred". You have to take care to get the facts right, but you can think what you like at the level of mere opinion. And that is the level at which we find ethics.

Here we might deploy a distinction made in §4.3. We might say that although there is something that we cannot argue about in ethics, namely ends or basic values, there is also something we *can* argue about, namely means. If someone's ends, his or her basic values, are quite different from ours, then we will indeed be stuck about how to argue with him. If what he cares about at the most basic level is just

collecting saucers of mud, or protecting his little fingers from every conceivable threat at every conceivable cost, then we will not be able to argue him out of thinking that it is worthwhile to spend his life this way. (He might change his mind, of course, but that is not being *argued* out of his previous views.) Nor, conversely, will he be able to argue *us* into a change of mind about our basic values. Disagreements about basic values, on this view, will never be amenable to reason.

But now suppose that you and I agree about all our basic values, or even just about most of them. In that case (we might suggest), we will be able to argue about different ways in which we might try to realize those values. So, for instance, you and I might share "loving and being loved in return" as an end that we value. But we might disagree completely about what is the best *means* to that end. Does this kind of disagreement not appear to be one that we can resolve? After all, it usually is not that hard to see which means go with which ends. And so, the suggestion would be, there can be fruitful argument about ethics provided we restrict ourselves to arguing about means and do not try to argue about ends.

There is something to this suggestion. But it runs into two problems, both already hinted at in §4.3. The first is that it moves us away from the main difficulty: that of arguing about basic values themselves. If all we have is a consensus to pursue a set of basic values, then we cannot know that those values are anything more than what all of us in the consensus just happen to prefer. It looks as if restricting our argument to means is not solving the problem of objectivity, but giving up on it.

The second problem is that there is a difference between means–end relations (*instrumental* relations) and constituent–whole relations (*constitutive* relations). It is more often the latter sort of relation that we have to deal with in cases of ethical dispute. But, unfortunately, constitutive relations are much harder to argue about than instrumental relations.

The distinction between instrumental and constitutive relations is this. We can ask whether a particular practice *is a means to* a given end or value. For example, we can ask whether collecting saucers of mud is a means to the end of having a large saucer collection or the end of running a marathon in less than three hours. We can also ask whether some practice *is an instance of* some value. For example, we can ask whether collecting saucers of mud is an instance of intellectual enquiry, or just of irrational obsession.

When we make judgements of the means–end sort it is usually fairly easy to tell whether they are right or wrong just by asking whether the means involved reliably causes the end. So, for example, collecting saucers of mud does look like a means to the end of having a large saucer collection, because collecting saucers of mud does, in the long run, cause you to have many saucers. But collecting saucers of mud does *not* look like a means to running a sub-three-hour marathon because, as a rule, there is no causal connection between mud-saucer-collecting and marathon-running. So means–end questions are quite easy to answer because it is quite easy to tell, in most cases, what means are likely to cause what ends.

Constitutive questions are much harder. Asking whether collecting saucers of mud is an instance of intellectual enquiry is not asking to be shown how mud-saucer-collection *causes* intellectual enquiry. It is asking to be shown how mud-saucer-collection *is* intellectual enquiry. Asking how "loving and being loved in return" constitutes happiness is not asking how mutual love *causes* happiness; it is asking in what sense loving and being loved in return *is* happiness. Constitutive questions are not questions about *routes to* values or *how to get* values. They are questions about what, in detail, those values *are.* So the suggested distinction between questions about means and about ends does not help us with constitutive questions.

The trouble is that nearly all the questions that matter most in ethics are questions about constitutive relations, not means–end relations. In particular, Socrates' question "How should life be lived?" is a constitutive question. As I said in §3.1, it is easy to answer this in outline by saying "Life should be lived well". The interesting – and difficult – bit is saying what *counts* as living well: what *constitutes* living well. This is obviously a question about constitutive relations, not instrumental relations. The worry remains that we have no practicable way of arguing rationally about all the biggest issues in ethics.

This point about the difficulty of constitutive questions, and their centrality in ethics, tends to feed the subjectivist qualms mentioned above. Another thought that also feeds those qualms is about *creativity.*

For each of us, answering the general question "How should life be lived?" means answering the specific and personal question "How should *I* live?". Whatever answer I give to this specific and personal question, my answer surely will not be just waiting for me in a how-

to-live manual. Answering my question "How should I live?" will be a creative process, not just a process of following someone else's instructions. So ethical answers cannot just be "out there" independently of us, waiting to be found, in the way that scientific or technical answers are generally thought to be. A good answer to "How can I keep warm at night?" or "What is the chemical formula of water?" can be the same for anybody; a good answer to "How should I live?" will have to be specifically *my* answer. This sounds like grounds for suspicion that whereas answers to scientific and technical questions are objective, answers to ethical questions are subjective.

5.2 Objectivism, and some objectivist responses to subjectivist qualms

These, then, are some of the thoughts that lead many people, both philosophers and non-philosophers, towards the view called ethical subjectivism. This view can be defined as follows:

> *Ethical subjectivism:* No ethical judgement is objectively true.

"Objectively true" here means true as a matter of fact: not just a matter of opinion. For example, it is not just a matter of opinion that there are seven days in a week; that Columbus reached the Americas in 1492; and that the atomic number of gold is 79. All three of these statements are true as a matter of fact, hence objectively true. The ethical subjectivist's claim is that in ethics there *are* no matters of fact; everything in ethics, according to him, is just a matter of opinion.

The negation of ethical subjectivism is ethical objectivism:

> *Ethical objectivism*: At least some ethical judgements are objectively true.

Notice the form of this view. The ethical subjectivist says that *no* ethical judgements are objectively true, but the ethical objectivist does not say that *all* ethical judgements are objectively true. The objectivist cannot say this, because it would lead straight to contradiction. "Hitler was a bad man" and "Hitler was a good man" are both ethical judgements. But

they cannot both be true because they contradict each other. We get a workable objectivism only when we allow that there are both objectively true *and* objectively false ethical judgements.

Notice, too, that there is nothing in the definition of ethical objectivism to prevent the objectivist from allowing that *some* ethical judgements are only subjectively true or false. Perhaps, for instance, it is no more than a matter of opinion whether the French way of greeting people by kissing them on the cheeks is ethically better or worse than the American way of greeting them by shaking their hands. From the objectivist's point of view, that there should be *some* subjective ethical truths and falsehoods is just fine.

On the other hand, it would be a strange kind of ethical objectivism that only recognized *two or three* ethical truths, none of them very important. My definition says that an ethical objectivist is someone who believes that "*at least some* ethical judgements are objectively true". This might mislead the unwary. After all, on this definition, you count as an ethical objectivist if you believe that there is just one objective moral truth and everything else is subjective. The kinds of ethical objectivism that philosophers are mainly interested in say not only that *at least some* ethical judgements are objectively true, but also that *a lot of important and interesting* ethical judgements are objectively true. (Call this "full objectivism"; "full subjectivism", by contrast, is the view that no ethical judgements at all are objectively true.)

So we can have *degrees* of ethical subjectivism or objectivism, depending on *which* ethical truths we say are objective or subjective. It is common for philosophers to talk as if full ethical objectivism and full ethical subjectivism were the only serious alternatives; indeed, I myself am going to spend most of Chapters 5–7 talking that way. This helps to keep the discussion simple, but it should not be allowed to obscure the fact that there is a whole range of more nuanced possible positions in between full subjectivism and full objectivism, depending on what we think about the objectivity or subjectivity of *particular ranges* of ethical judgements. Maybe, for instance, ethical objectivism is right about the ethics of killing, but ethical subjectivism is right about the ethics of sport. Such in-between positions are not very common, but they are perfectly possible.

A different way of nuancing our views about objectivity and subjectivity is this. We might observe that *ethical* objectivism is just one spe-

cies of a wider genus, *value* objectivism: the view that there are at least some true judgements *about value*. Value is a much wider category than ethical value. There is aesthetic value, for instance – the value that is there in the *Mona Lisa*, or the view from the summit of Mont Blanc, or a graceful ballerina. Or there is epistemic value – the value that knowledge and understanding have; or comic value – the value that attaches to funniness; and so on. The truth of objectivism (or subjectivism) in any one of these areas apparently does not force the truth of objectivism (or subjectivism) in any other of them. There is nothing inconsistent in the position of an aesthetic objectivist who is also an ethical subjectivist. (Perhaps that was Oscar Wilde's position, or Nietzsche's.) This, too, is an interesting possibility that I shall not explore much here.

If this is what ethical objectivism is, what is there to be said for the view? And how might an ethical objectivist deal with the subjectivist qualms described in the previous section? In the rest of this chapter I shall take these two questions in turn.

Here, then, to begin with, are three rather simple arguments to motivate the objectivist view, and undermine ethical subjectivism:

- *Argument from rational criticism*. Ethical subjectivism makes rational ethical criticism impossible. If no ethical judgement is objectively true, then there are no objective standards for criticism. Any criticism is as good (and as bad) as any other. There is no difference between a good ethical criticism of somebody's action or character and a bad one. A moment's reflection shows that this cannot be right. Suppose you criticize Hitler for being a murdering, racist, war-crazed, fanatical monster while I criticize him for not always being as kind as he might have been to his pet Alsatian Blondi. If we know anything at all about ethics, we know that your criticism of Hitler is better than mine ("better" here meaning "more accurate and more rational"). A theory that, like ethical subjectivism, gives us no way of telling your criticism and my criticism apart, as good and bad, respectively, is surely hopeless.
- *Argument from experience*. The second objectivist argument begins from a thought about the *phenomenology* of our ethical experience: what that experience seems like from the inside; what it is like to have ethical beliefs or thoughts or opinions. The argument is that we experience our typical ethical thoughts as beliefs in facts, not as

attitudes or feelings. Remember here a point I made at the beginning of Chapter 2: you could say "It's wrong to steal, *and* I don't personally like people stealing" without repeating yourself. In the same way, disliking someone is fundamentally different from thinking that he is a bad person. I can like someone who I think is a bad person, and dislike someone who I think is a good person. And again, I can coherently think "I don't like bull-fighting, but that's just my attitude"; but I cannot coherently think "Bull-fighting is wrong, but that's just my attitude". As Bertrand Russell (himself an ethical subjectivist) admits: "Suppose that someone were to advocate the introduction of bull-fighting in this country. In opposing the proposal, I should *feel*, not only that I was expressing my desires, but also that my desires in the matter are *right*, whatever that may mean" (1944: 51).

Thinking that bull-fighting is wrong commits me to thinking that there is more to the wrongness of bull-fighting than my negative attitude to it. It commits me to thinking that bull-fighting would be wrong *no matter what* my attitude to bull-fighting was: negative, positive or indifferent. The wrongness of bull-fighting has the hardness and obstinacy of a fact. In a phrase of Williams's, it is part of "how the world is anyway" (1968: 65), quite apart from me and my attitudes to it. But if our ethical thoughts are typically beliefs in facts that are part of "how the world is anyway", quite apart from us and our attitudes to it, then they are beliefs in *objective* ethical facts. And if there are any objective ethical facts, then ethical subjectivism must be wrong.

- *Argument from language*. The third thought that works in favour of ethical objectivism is a thought about a phenomenon about language that I shall call *default literalism*. The simplest and most natural way to take ordinary sentences – "The grass is green", for instance – is this: to be true, the sentence must ascribe (1) a genuine property to (2) a real thing and (3) that thing must really have that property. But it looks pretty obvious that "The grass is green" *is* true. So it looks pretty obvious, too, (3) that grass really is green, (2) that grass really exists and (1) that greenness is a real property. Similarly, it looks pretty obvious that "Murder is wrong" is another true sentence. So it seems equally obvious (3) that murder really is wrong, (2) that murder really exists and (1) that wrongness is a real property. The

natural way to take any ordinary sentence is as literally true (or else, as literally false). But if we take the sentences of ethics as literally true or false, then we get the conclusion that properties such as wrongness are as real and objective as greenness or any other property.

These simple arguments make a very basic case for ethical objectivism. To this case, we can add some initial responses to the subjectivist qualms described in §5.1.

Take the issue of creativity first. An objectivist can agree that ethical truth is unlike scientific truth in its close and personal relation to the individual. He can agree that the truth about how I should live is something that I have to invent, and cannot simply discover. But (the objectivist will say) we need to think harder about what is involved in inventing or creating an answer to "How should I live?". Will any old random invention do? Can I pick my creative answer to "How should I live?" out of a hat? Of course not. *Inventions are criticizable*. Some inventions are brilliant ideas, such as the internet, and some are not such great ideas, such as garlic-flavour ice cream. The mere fact that something is invented goes nowhere near showing that we cannot say, objectively, whether that something is useful or good. (In this sense, there is something to question in the title of J. L. Mackie's famous defence of ethical subjectivism, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* [1977].) Similarly, *creativity is criticizable*: it can be exercised more or less well, and there are standards for what counts as the good or the bad exercise of creativity. As long as I am exercising my own creativity, I will constantly be using these standards to assess and appraise what I have done so far, and to ask myself how I might do better in the future. But I can use these same standards to assess and appraise other people's creativity too.

Certainly – to come back to the "ultra-democratic" thoughts developed in §5.1 – I need to avoid arrogance and high-handedness in the views I take of other people's creativity. If I am allowed to criticize *them* then they are allowed to criticize *me*, and maybe I will hear some unpalatable truths when they do. But allowing us to criticize each other is not necessarily a recipe for judgementalism. It can also be a recipe for open-minded humility.

To say that we have standards for criticizing exercises of creativity, and that everyone can use those same standards, is to say that those

standards are *objective* standards. So there is nothing for the ethical objectivist to fear in the idea that some sorts of ethical truth that are central to the living of good lives are invented, not discovered. He can happily agree, and just respond that what are objective are the standards that make the difference between good invention and bad invention.

Notice, incidentally, that we can put "creativity is criticizable" another way: we can equally say "creativity is *a rational process*". Putting it that way helps to bring out the connection with an important question that arose in Chapter 4: the question what sort of rationality we need for a satisfactory account of how life should be lived. If the argument just given is right, the sort of rationality that we need is, at least in part, the rationality of creativity: the application of the kinds of standards that creativity involves.

And where do the standards come from for assessing creativity? From several sources, no doubt, but the objectivist can point to one in particular. He can say that the background for the individual's question "How should I live?" is always set by the general question "How should life be lived?". One important way of assessing how well any particular human being is living is by the standard of what living well means for human beings in general.

The objectivist calls this a *standard*. The subjectivist may worry that there is not much content to the standard; perhaps not enough to provide us with a determinate answer to the question "How should life be lived?". The subjectivist might think that this question no more admits of a determinate answer than the question "How long is a piece of string?".

But, the objectivist will respond, this is an exaggeration. Of course there is *some* indeterminacy about how human beings should live their lives. In fact there needs to be some indeterminacy, to make room for the vitally important activities of individual creativity in deciding how to live. But this indeterminacy is not total. We know that a life of counting blades of grass would not be a very good answer to the Socratic question, whereas a life of loving and helping others would be. We know that the life of a talented and successful composer is a better answer to that question than the life of a hopeless alcoholic. (We also know that it is better than the life of a talented and successful composer who *is* a hopeless alcoholic.) We know that finding fulfilment in a life of worthwhile activities is better than finding no fulfilment in a life of

worthless activities, while an unfulfilling life of worthwhile activities and a fulfilling life of worthless activities come somewhere in between. These familiar truths about what makes human lives go well or badly are, apparently, objective truths; they are not just matters of opinion. The ethical subjectivist does himself no favours if his theory gets him into a position where he has to deny them.

What is still missing from the objectivist story so far is any account of how to *argue* for such claims as the ones made in the previous paragraph (or as people often say, "how to prove them", although asking for claims to be *proved* is a much stronger demand than asking for claims to be *argued for*). Even if everyone does know that the life of a successful composer is a better life than the life of a hopeless alcoholic, I still have not shown how to support such a claim with reasons.

Here we seem to get back to the problem noted at the end of §4.3: that claims about basic values are beyond argument. What is more, to restate the subjectivist's other main qualm from §5.1, it is not as if most ethical claims are merely about means–end relations, like the relation between scratching someone's back (a cause) and the physical pleasure this gives him (an effect). Typically they are about constitutive relations, for example those between going to the ballet and having a good time. And as we saw, claims of this sort are much harder to argue for than means–end claims. It may look as if the subjectivist has the only good explanation of these phenomena. He explains them by saying that claims about basic values and about constitutive relations are beyond argument because they are really claims about our feelings and preferences, not claims about facts.

Here the objectivist can say that, even if we cannot prove our claims about basic values in the same way that we can prove mathematical results or scientific theories, still we are not *totally* without resources for arguing about basic values and what constitutes them. In comparing the composer's life with the alcoholic's, for example, we can point out the indignity and degradation of alcohol-dependency (a point about constitutive relations). And we can point out the ways in which alcoholism affects people's ability to control their own lives or address their own problems (a point about means–end relations). Looking, by contrast, at the composer's life, we can point out what a good thing it is to be creative, and what a privilege it is for anyone to immerse himself in the extraordinary history and the rich and various traditions of human

music. We can also point out that a living can be made – sometimes, and with a bit of luck – out of music, and show the well-documented health benefits of having a master passion or enthusiasm in your life. (Here, too, there is a mix of points about constitutive relations and points about means–end relations.)

So it is not true that we have *no* resources for arguing about basic values. Very commonly we can appeal to instrumental and constitutive relations to enrich and support our picture of what the basic values are, and of the diverse and creative ways in which they can be fitted into human lives. That is, we can argue for basic values by showing how some things are means to achieving certain values and/or how other things are more specific instances of more general values.

Of course, as Hume points out (§4.3), we cannot justify *everything* by relating it back to some more general or more basic value. But that need not show what Hume thinks it shows: that our most basic values are mere preferences or desires. It might simply show that our basic values are *basic*. Hume's move from "basic values cannot be argued for" to "basic values cannot be objective" is a move that the ethical objectivist can reject. The objectivist can say, "All that Hume shows is that we haven't yet worked out how to argue for basic values". Or else he can say, "All that Hume shows is that our basic values are like mathematical axioms, or scientific data, or simple perceptions [§7.4]. They are raw data, inputs to deliberation, not outputs of deliberation." As Aristotle puts it (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a31), we argue *from* them, not *to* them. So the fact that we cannot argue for or prove our basic values – at least not in the same way that we argue for other things – is not, all on its own, a good enough reason for thinking that our basic values are subjective.

The trouble is, the ethical subjectivist may respond at this point, that we do not yet have a good enough reason for thinking that our basic values are objective, either. Objectivism, he will claim, comes at too high a philosophical cost. However attractive the view may be in itself, believing it forces you to believe too many other things that are not attractive at all.

To show how this claim might be made out, as part of the wider case for ethical subjectivism, will be our next task. Chapter 6 will develop and examine five arguments for ethical subjectivism.