

Ethical Relativism/Subjectivism

Subjective, inter-subjective, and objective claims:

- A claim or judgment is subjective if its truth depends on whether or not it conforms to the tastes, attitudes, and beliefs of the claimer (the person making the claim).
 - Example: “Anchovies taste yummy.” (a matter of taste)
- A claim or judgment is inter-subjective if its truth depends on whether or not it conforms to the beliefs, attitudes, and conventions of the group to which the claimer belongs.
 - Example: “It is rude to belch at the dinner table.” (a matter of custom)
- A claim or judgment is objective if its truth does NOT depend on whether it conforms to the beliefs or attitudes of any group or individual.
 - Example: “The earth is spherical.” (a matter of fact)

State whether the following are subjective, inter-subjective, or objective:

- “It’s not normal to feel good after murdering innocent people.” (inter-subjective)
- “Sailing in the open ocean is a pleasant experience.” (subjective)
- “The boiling point of water is 100°C.” (objective)
- “The time it takes to travel from earth to another planet, 20 light-years away, at 50% of the speed of light is 10 years.”
- “The Mona Lisa is the most beautiful painting put to canvas.” (subjective)

Ethical relativism is the view that ALL moral claims are inter-subjective.

Conventional ethical relativism, a more specific type of ethical relativism, holds that the moral conventions of a culture determine what it is right and wrong for the members of that culture to do.

- On this view, seemingly conflicting moral judgments can be equally correct when made from within different cultural contexts.
 - (Consider the claim “It is wrong to eat beef,” which is true from within orthodox Hinduism but false from within certain other cultures.)
- It claims that moral reformers are simply misguided and that moral progress is impossible.
- It claims that there is little, if any, point to moral argument and deliberation.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

- “Different Cultures have different moral codes.”
 - Is this the key to understanding morality?
- Says that there are no independent standards by which to judge “correct” or “incorrect” actions
 - All standards are “culture-bound.”

The concept of cultural relativism contains the following claims:

- There is no objective “truth” in morality. Right and wrong are only matters of opinion, and opinions vary from culture to culture.
- There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one societal code better than another.
- Different cultures have different moral codes, and the moral code of a society determines what is

right within that society.

- The moral code of our own society has no special status.
- It is mere arrogance for us to try to judge the conduct of other peoples. We should, therefore, adopt an attitude of tolerance toward the practices of other cultures.

Is this a sound argument?

Does it follow that just because people disagree that there is no objective truth?

Can we take Cultural Relativism seriously?

We could no longer say that the customs of other societies are morally inferior to our own. Any customs!

Is there anything good about cultural relativism?

We become more tolerant of other people and realize that we may be blinded by our own cultural prejudices.

What are some questions we might have concerning cultural relativism?

- What problems arise if ethical relativism requires a value to be accepted by 75 percent of the population before it is a cultural value?
- What problem will arise if ethical relativism accepts a simple majority?
- Is there any definitive way to decide what counts as a society?
- What about the fact that outlaw bikers, druggies and criminals are considered to have their own cultures?
- What about cases when these societies interact with each other?
- What about people who are members of more than one culture?

Are there any values that all cultures might have in common?

- Care for the young.
- Truth telling
- Prohibition against murder
- Others?

What would a culture-neutral standard of rightness be like?

- Objectively valid moral principles are those that promote and protect the interests of all relevant beings.
- On this view, whether a cultural practice is morally good or bad depends on whether it promotes or hinders the welfare of those who are affected by it.

ETHICAL SUBJECTIVISM

- The idea that our moral opinions are based on our feelings, and nothing more.
- There is no right or wrong, only expressions of our feelings.
- Therefore, we can't judge another's opinion as being "wrong" or "right" since it is merely an opinion and nothing else.

The problem is that subjectivism assumes only two possibilities:

- There are moral "facts" in the same way that there are facts about stars and planets; or
- Our "values" are nothing more than the expression of our subjective feelings.

This argument overlooks a crucial third possibility:

- Moral truths are truths of reason.
- That is, a moral judgment is true if it is backed by better reasons than the alternatives.

Think of accepting Ethical Subjectivism as an excuse...

- We don't usually allow people to do things simply because they "feel" they're right.
- We want reasons.

What we have done instead is to develop theories of rightness and obligation based on the notion of reason:

- Each person ought to do whatever will best promote his or her own interests. (Ethical Egoism)
- We ought to do whatever will promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number. (Utilitarianism)
- Our duty is to follow rules that we could consistently will to be universal laws—that is, rules that we would be willing to have followed by all people in all circumstances. (Kant's theory)
- We ought to strive to develop a "good" character. (Virtue Ethics)

Theory

- A theory is a model, based on and representing reality
- If it works as a model, it can be used to guide and/or predict reality.

The Ethical Theories

- Consequential theories
- Non-Consequential theories
- Social Contract theory
- Virtue/Character ethics