

3. CHAPTER 3: SUBJECTIVISM IN ETHICS

3.1. The Basic Idea of Ethical Subjectivism

Ethical subjectivism is the idea that our moral opinions are based on our feelings, and nothing more. Ethical subjectivism is not a theory about what things are good and what things are bad. It does not try to tell us how we should live or what moral opinions we should accept. It is not that sort of theory. Instead, it is a theory about the nature of moral judgments. It says that no matter what moral judgments we make, we are only expressing our personal feelings, and nothing more.

3.2. The Evolution of the Theory

Ethical subjectivism began as a simple idea, that morality is a matter of sentiment rather than fact.

3.3. The First Stage: Simple Subjectivism

Ethical subjectivism in its simplest version implies that, when a person says “something is morally good or bad”, this means that he or she approves of that thing, or disapprove of it, and nothing more.

Simple subjectivism implies that each of us is infallible.

3.4. The Second Stage: Emotivism

Emotivism does not interpret moral judgments as statements that are true or false; it represents expressions of attitude, therefore, people cannot be infallible with respect to them.

3.5. Emotivism, Reason, and "Moral Facts"

If the connection between moral judgments and reasons is necessary and important, then any adequate theory of the nature of moral judgment should be able to give some account of the connection.

A fundamental mistake is to assume that there are just two possibilities in making in a moral decision:

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

A crucial third possibility must be examined.

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

3.6. Are There Proofs in Ethics?

Ethical proofs are difficult if not impossible. Nevertheless, we can support our judgments with good reasons if we can provide explanations for why those reasons matter.

It is a common, if frustrating, experienced to have an impeccable argument that someone refuses to except. But that does not mean that there is something wrong with the argument or that "proof" is somehow unattainable. It may only

mean that someone is being unreasonable. And in ethics we should often expect that people do not listen to reason: after all, ethics often requires us to do things we don't want to do, so it is only to be expected that sometimes we would try to avoid hearing its demands.

3.7. The Question of Homosexuality

Many people object to homosexuality as *unnatural*. However, if gay sex were condemned for this reason, a host of other sexual practices would have also to be condemned: masturbation, oral sex, an even sex by women after menopause.

This whole line of reasoning is faulty. It rests on the assumption that *it is wrong to use parts of one's body for anything other than their natural purposes*, and this is surely false.

The idea that homosexuality is "unnatural," and that there is something wrong with this, has great intuitive appeal for many people. Nevertheless, it appears that this is a defective argument. If no better understanding of "unnatural" can be found, this whole way of thinking will have to be rejected.