

Chapter 5

Moral Subjectivism

5.1 Homework

Readings – EMP 3, RTD 7, RTD 3

Study Questions – give a short answer to the following questions:

1. What is Moral Subjectivism?
2. What is the simple version of moral subjectivism? How does it fail?
3. How can moral subjectivism be refined so that it does not fall under the criticisms leveled against the simple version of moral subjectivism?
4. Explain the distinction between our use of language for stating matters of facts and our use of language for expressing attitudes
5. Explain Hume's argument in favor of the claim that "The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason". If not from reason, where do the rules of morality come from according to Hume?
6. Hume asserts that there is nothing in the world that corresponds to what we call good and bad (these are ideas). Explain.
7. What is an hypothetical imperative? What is a categorical imperative? How is the distinction relevant to Mackie's defense of moral scepticism?
8. How does Mackie answer our rejection of the Cultural Differences Argument?
9. What is the argument from queerness? How is it relevant to Mackie's defense of moral scepticism?

5.2 Introduction – Morality, feelings or reason?

From Cultural Relativism to Moral Subjectivism – We go on inquiring forms of moral skepticism, i.e. views in which the objectivity and rationality of morality is put into question.

With cultural relativism, we have discussed the view that all moral values are relative to culture and/or societies.

With moral subjectivism, we are going to discuss the view that moral values depend on subjects and their feelings.

The basic idea of moral subjectivism – The basic idea of moral subjectivism is that:

1. there are no objective moral values which can be agreed upon through reasons,
2. rather, values vary from individual to individual and an individual's moral values depend on his or her subjective feelings.

Definition 14 – Moral Subjectivism

Moral Subjectivism is the view that there are no objective moral truths, that morality is just a set of values derived from each individual's subjective feelings, and that we should act accordingly.

Why discussing moral subjectivism is important – It is important to discuss moral subjectivism because *the intuition lying behind it is an intuition that we all share*:

It is a fact that people tend to judge moral issues more on the basis of their feelings than on the basis of reasons and arguments.

We all have experienced a discussion over moral issues where no agreement were found, not because of the lack of arguments, but because of the *rejection* of rational arguments as irrelevant to the matter. This seems to be a case in which the power of feelings beat the power of reason.

Feelings and reasons have really different properties:

Reasons	Feelings
Universal	Individual
Argumentation	Emotion
Mediate	Immediate

Moral subjectivism takes this fact seriously, and draws from it the conclusion that moral judgment do not belong to the domain of universal reason. If true, a philosophical discussion over moral issues is doomed to failure, ultimately. Reason would not be the appropriate tool when discussing moral issues.

Does moral subjectivism fall under the same objection as Cultural Relativism?

– One might think we could use the kind of analysis we used against Cultural Relativism against Moral Subjectivism. But we cannot.

Cultural Relativism:

1. People have different beliefs about right and wrong

2. So: there is no objective right and wrong

This is *not valid* because whether or not something exists or not does not depend on what people think about it.

Moral Subjectivism is different though:

1. Morality is based on feelings
2. People feel differently about morality
3. There is no objectively true or false way to feel because sincere feelings are always true
4. There is no objective moral values

So, the analysis we used against Cultural Relativism won't defeat Moral Subjectivism. We need further analysis.

Hume's argument: feelings vs. reason – Hume provides an argument in favor of the view that moral values come from our feelings and not our reason. The argument goes as follows:

1. Moral values are so strongly in us that they can influence our actions
2. Reason cannot influence our actions, only feelings can
3. Therefore: moral values are not implanted by reasons but by feelings

Look at the text: learn how to read philosophy!

The obvious assumption to discuss is the second one: is it true that reason alone cannot influence our actions, while feelings can?

This idea is the strong intuition which leads to moral subjectivism.

5.3 Simple Subjectivism

Simple Subjectivism –

Definition 15 – *Simple Subjectivism*

Simple subjectivism is the view that in making moral statements one is reporting his or her feelings. As a consequence, there are no objective moral truths.

So, when Bill says: “It is good to give to charity”, what really Bill says is: “I feel that it is good to give to charity”.

This is the simplest version of moral subjectivism: morality is nothing but feelings

Two arguments against simple subjectivism – Two arguments (modus tollens) show that the simplest version of moral subjectivism is not a viable view on morality.

- **Reminder : what is a modus tollens?**

This is a rather common form of argument: it consists in proving the *falsity* of a claim in showing that the claim has false consequences. What we do is:

Given that you want to show that P is false:

- (a) Show that if P is true, then Q is true as well
- (b) Show that Q is false
- (c) Conclude that P is false as well

Example:

To show that: “Prof. Le Bihan is German” is false

- (a) If a person is German, he or she wears socks in their sandals
- (b) Prof. Le Bihan does not wear sock in her sandals
- (c) Conclusion: Prof. Le Bihan is not German

- **Modus Tollens 1: No moral disagreement**

Imagine two friends arguing over whether it is good or bad to eat meat:

Luke: “Eating meat is right”

Bill: “Eating meat is wrong”

The moral subjectivist does not care what arguments, or reasons they can provide in support for their claims. According to the moral subjectivist, what Luke and Bill really say is:

Luke: “I feel that eating meat is right”

Bill: “I feel that eating meat is wrong”

But neither Luke nor Bill can deny what the other’s feelings are. This means that if the moral subjectivist’s translation is the correct translation, then Bill and Luke have no disagreement! They are mistaken if they think they do.

So the modus tollens is :

1. If simple subjectivism is true, then there is no moral disagreement between people
2. There is moral disagreement between people
3. SO: Simple subjectivism is false.

So: Simple subjectivism is untenable.

- **Modus Tollens 2: Infallibility**

Same form of argument:

If moral subjectivism is true then:

- whenever I make a moral statement, I in fact report a feeling of mine:

“Lying to your wife is wrong” really is: “Lying to your wife is wrong”

Now, everytime someone is sincere about his/her feelings, her or his report of his or her feeling is true!

Example: Couple dispute: Compare:

- “You lied to me: you treat me in a bad way”

- “I feel like you treat me in a bad way”

There is no way to deny feelings!

SO: A sincere report of feeling is always true. Hence, if moral statements are but feeling reports, moral statements are always true. The consequence is that *we are never mistaken in our moral statements!*

This seems to be unacceptable: it seems that a good theory of morality should leave room for our realizing we have made a mistake and our revising our beliefs accordingly.

Again, the argument in its simplest form is:

1. If Simple Subjectivism is true, then there is no way anyone can make moral mistakes and revise his or her moral views (because any sincere feeling is true)
2. People can make moral mistakes
3. SO: Simple Subjectivism is false

→ *The simplest version of moral subjectivism fails.*

5.4 A more elaborate version of subjectivism: Emotivism

A refined theory of moral subjectivism is the view called “Emotivism”. Emotivists elaborate on the theory of moral subjectivism through an *analysis of moral language*. The following might seem a rhetorical point to you, but it is actually an important theoretical point. Emotivists take it that *moral statements are not propositions, rather: they express attitudes*. What is an attitude?

Propositions vs. Attitudes 1. Propositions:

Definition 16 *Proposition*

A proposition is the content of an assertion.

A proposition is independent of the means of expression or communication – a single proposition can be expressed in a indefinite number of ways – and non-contextual.

A proposition is true or false.

2. Attitudes

Beliefs, hopes, feelings, fears, joy, excitement: all these are attitudes. Attitudes are not generally expressed through propositions, rather:

- Good for you!

- Don’t ever do this again!

etc.

The important aspect of these sentences is that they are neither true or false.

Expressions of attitudes are neither true or false.

Emotivism: Moral judgments express attitudes – The emotivist’s claim is that moral judgment are not propositions, but rather expressions of attitudes.

Definition 17 – *Emotivism*

Emotivism is the view that in making a moral statement, one is expressing an attitude, a certain feeling. As a consequence, there are no moral truths (whether objective or subjective: moral judgments are not true or false).

When one says that “it is awful to give gifts to a Professor in order to get good grades”, one just expresses his or her attitude toward gifts for Professors.

Is this really different from simple subjectivism and why would it matter?? It matters because this simple distinction allows emotivism to avoid the two objections that simple subjectivism faced above:

A crucial aspect of simple subjectivism is that moral statements, when interpreted as sincere reports of feelings, are always true. It was this feature which caused the problems above. Now we have a different story:

Compare:

Moral Objectivism	“To give gifts to a Professor is wrong”
Simple Subjectivism	“I feel that to give gifts to a Professor is wrong”
Emotivism	“To give gift to Professors? yecch... ”

The first two are propositions: they are true or false. But the last version is not a propositions: it is neither true or false!

→ Because emotivism interprets moral statements as expressing attitudes and not reporting feelings, and because expressions of attitudes are neither true or false, the two objections against simple subjectivism fail to apply to emotivism:

1. There can be moral disagreement: Disagreements *in* attitudes, not *about* attitudes
2. There can be moral revision: attitude revision

Now, all we have proved is that Emotivism does not fall under the obvious objection against simple subjectivism. This means that we do not have (yet) good arguments against it. That said, we need more to accept a theory: we need positive arguments. In the following, we will examine the possible arguments/ counter-arguments for Emotivism.

5.5 Emotivism: arguments and counter-arguments

Hume: Lack of evidence – (paragraphs 7-end) makes a strong case that there is nothing in the world that possesses “moral value” by itself.

1. If moral values existed in the objective world, then they would exist:

- either as objective facts

- or as objective relations between objective facts

Example of relation between matters of fact: equality of length

2. Hume shows that moral values are neither of them: objective facts and objective relations do not have value by themselves.

Example: ingratitude: ill-offices // good offices

- by themselves: ill-offices and good offices have no values

- the relation of contrariety has no value by itself (consider the opposite behavior: same relation, opposite value)

- one cannot say it is a relation to the right and wrong, because this begs the question of where we can find these right and wrong in the world

3. Hume’s conclusion is too strong:

Hume concludes that moral values do not exist as objective features of the world, but only in our sentiments. This is too strong. What we can conclude from the above is **not** that moral values do not exist as objective features of the world, but only that *if moral values exist as objective features of the world, then they “exist” is a different way than objective facts and objective relations do.*

But how? how can something exist if not as a fact or as a relation between facts?

Mackie: the argument from queerness – Mackie can be seen as taking the lead of Hume on this one. His point is that if we accept moral objectivism, then we are committed to claim the existence of weird things: moral values.

(1) From Hume: Moral values are neither objective facts, nor objective relations between objective facts

(2) If moral values exist, then they exist in a very strange way, another way than facts and relations between facts exist.

(3) There are no such things which exist in another way than facts and relations between facts

(4) So: Objectivism is false.

The argument is valid. The question remains whether it is sound or not. Let us see the assumptions. (1) comes from Hume and we have seen that Hume made a strong case. (2) directly follows from the first one. The only assumption we can discuss is

(3) that is, the assumption that there is nothing but facts and relations between facts exist in the world.

Example for thinking: Do squares exist? Mathematical notions in general seem to have a weird kind of existence, which differs from physical facts.

The emotivists' argument stand only if we accept the assumption that there exists nothing but physical facts in the world, thus excluding other "weird objects" such as mathematical objects. . Mackie:

The only adequate reply to it would be to show how, on empiricist foundations, we can construct an account of the ideas and beliefs and knowledge that we have of all these matters. I cannot even begin to do that here, though I have undertaken some parts of the tasks elsewhere. (RTD p.41)

The problem is the existence of mathematical objects (and other weird things similar to mathematical objects) is a matter of controversy in philosophy. There are people on both sides, but most people would like to accept that mathematical object have some kind of existence. The burden is on them (us?) then to explain how these weird object "exist". This is a tough metaphysical question, but the point here is not to settle the question. Instead, *the point for us is that Mackie's argument relies on a strong metaphysical assumption which is far from being uncontroversial.*

longrightarrow Along these lines, Rachels defends the idea that there exist moral truths even if these moral values do not exist in the same way as physical objects do:

Just as mathematical truths, moral truths are not about facts in the world. There is not a single perfect square, triangle or circle in the world. Even less is there "imaginary numbers" or other fancy mathematical construction. Similarly, you won't find the "right" and the "wrong" as physical objects in the world.

And yet, we have mathematical truths: theorems:

Does the fact that mathematical object do not exist as physical objects make these theorems less true?

Does it make these theorems less objective?

Isn't mathematics at least as "true and objective" than physics?

→ According to Rachels, the same holds for moral truths: the fact that moral values do not exist as physical objects does not imply that there are no moral truths

Are there moral standards? – We can read Rachels and Mackie as offering a discussion on this:

Rachels – Rachels offers criticisms against emotivism:

- **There are clear moral standards**

According to Rachels, there are clear cases concerning moral issues, and within these clear cases, we can find compelling reasons to back up our moral judgments.

His examples (EMP p. 42):

- Jones is a bad man
- Dr. Smith is irresponsible
- A certain used-car dealer is unethical

- **Denying that there are clear moral standards make emotivism unacceptable**

If we simply follow the idea that moral judgments are expressions of feelings, and not statements of rational truths, then our justifications for our moral values will often be misguided:

Stevenson (EMP p.40): “Any statement about any fact which any speaker considers likely to alter attitudes may be adduced as a reason for or against an ethical judgment”

The point is : you can use anything which you know will alter the feelings of your partner in discussion to convince him

In this view, relevance or logical consistency are not required for morally justify a moral view! This seems difficult to swallow: racism, bigotry, fear etc. would then legitimate to use??

Example: Party on saturday night and neighbors: is it wrong? Neighbor Stupid 1: “But you know, they are jewish/black/homosexual!” Should considerations like this change our moral views??

At the end of the day, Rachels’ point is: *we have good reasons to believe that certain moral statements are true, and these reasons are good justifications for holding our moral beliefs. Emotivism fails to account for this and for this reason is unacceptable.*

Mackie: counter-arguments – Mackie seems to have answers to these objections

- **Of course there are moral standards!**

Mackie does not deny that we can make objective moral judgments, but he claims that we always do so *with respect to some agreed upon moral standards.*

Example: justice

It is objectively true that to declare an innocent guilty and punish him is *unjust.*

But Rachels and Mackie have different takes on this:

- Rachels thinks that this proves the objective existence of moral values
- Mackie thinks that it only pushes the problem a step higher.

We agreed upon a definition of justice, and we can judge action in the light of this definition. But this does not tell us why we take that justice is right!!

Recognizing the objectivity of justice in relation to standards, and

of evaluative judgments relative to standards, then, merely shifts the question of the objectivity of values back to the standards themselves” (Mackie RTD. p 34)

So, Rachels’ criticisms are largely misguided.

- **Hypothetical / Categorical imperative**

- Imperative: prescriptive statements, “ought” statements

- Hypothetical Imperative: “If you want X , then you ought to do Y ”, where X and Y bear a causal relationship

Example: If you want your friends to trust you, you ought not to lie to them

- Categorical Imperative: no “if” clause, the imperative alone:

Example: “You ought not to lie”

- Kant: true moral prescriptions are categorical: they do not depend on further considerations

The idea is that if you consider further consideration, then this is not truly moral – your judgment still depends on your desires, and not on reason alone.

Mackie holds that there is no such thing as categorical imperative – that is *there is no such thing as unconditional moral prescriptions.*

Take back Rachels’ examples: Joe the bad man; Dr. Smith the drunk; and the dishonest car dealer. All these are fine for Mackie: but we still don’t have prescriptive statements here. What we need to add is that “we ought not to be bad men”, “we ought not to be irresponsible”, and “we ought not to be dishonest”. We can start on giving good reasons for this, but each time we give reasons, the same question applies to the new set of reasons.

“We ought not to be dishonest”. Why? “because we would not be able to maintain a proper society if we were all dishonest”. The question apply again at this level: “Why would we think it is “right” to protect the society?” etc.

→ *What Mackie denies is not that we make rational moral judgments, neither does he deny that there are moral truths. However these moral truths do *not* originate in absolute moral values. Instead, they rely on moral standards that we agreed upon. These moral standards, in turn, are not truths, but expression of our deep feelings.*

- **How this makes Emotivism acceptable** – Distinguish between first and second order moral skepticism.

- 1st order: Skepticism about particular people’s having morality.

- 2nd order: Skepticism about the ultimate nature of morality.

Mackie points out that we can be 2nd order moral skeptic, without being a 1st order one. He does not deny that people have values, but denies that ultimately, these moral values are rooted in absolute moral standards.

*This is to say that it is *not* because one does not believe in the existence of objective moral values that one does not have moral values.*

Conclusion – Mackie’s view is more subtle than Rachels wants us to believe. Mackie does not deny the possibility of making moral judgment, whenever these rely on previously

accepted values. Now, the question of where ultimately these values come from is the question on which Rachels and Mackie disagree: Rachels takes it that there might exist objective absolute moral values, while Mackie takes it that there aren't such things. All values are relative to standards according to Mackie.

This is the real challenge for ethics: *are there such things as absolute moral values?*

5.6 Conclusion

Moral Subjectivism –

1. Moral values are based on feelings
2. There is no objectively false or true way to feel
3. So: There are no objective moral values

Simple Subjectivism – Moral statements are reports of feelings

We have shown that it is untenable with 2 counter arguments (Modus Tollens): it is simply the case that there are moral disagreements and we are able to revise our moral judgments

Emotivism – a refinement of the theory through an analysis of the use of language

- Moral statements do not report feelings, but express attitudes
- Thus: disagreements in attitudes, change in attitude

Arguments for and against Emotivism :

1. Lack of evidence and argument from queerness :

Not clear that it is totally convincing. Granted, moral values could have a weird kind of being, but we already have other weird kinds of beings in our inventory of the world: mathematical objects

2. Absolute vs. Relative moral standards:

There might well be objective ways to make moral judgment *hypothetically*, but not *categorically*. The moral emotivist does not deny the existence of standards, and that there are objective, unconditional (or absolute) moral standards.

Now, the game for us is answer the challenge that Mackie set up for us: *Is there any ultimate moral standard that we accept as "right" by itself.*

One way to see the various theories we will study is to see them as attempts to find such standard.

