Lecture 3 – Ethical Subjectivism and Emotivism

I. ETHICAL SUBJECTIVISM: All moral standards or truths are dependent only upon the opinions and feelings (not fact) of the utterer making the subjective moral judgment.

A. With ES, there are moral truths; we can do right and wrong, but who determines right or wrong is the individual.

1. EX1: Bob has two children. While at the convenience store, one picks up a bottle of coca-cola and spills it all over the floor. Bob bends him over his knee, and gives him a good swat on his behind. A woman who saw this interrupts the spanking by yelling at Bob, “Hitting your children is horrible.” Bob’s response is “You have no right to tell me what is right or wrong with raising my own kids, only I can determine what is right and wrong for them.”

2. EX2: Jon is a torturer of small children. He has recently captured a young boy and has imprisoned him in a small iron box. Jon has begun to poke needles into his feet and eyes; the boy, will surely die a slow but painful death. Jon, being an ES, thinks he is in the right because there is no objective truth to the matter, your ethics is just that your ethics.

B. ES is a theory about the nature of our moral judgments, which claims that these judgments are an expression only of our personal feelings and/or opinions.

C. Illustration

“X is morally acceptable”
“X is good or right”
“X ought to be done”

“I (the utterer) approve of X”

And, in the same vein:

“X is immoral”
“X is bad or wrong”
“X ought not to be done”

“I (the utterer) disapprove of X”

D. NOT A FACT: It may be a fact that a given group is homosexual (descriptive), but it is not a fact that they are good or bad (normative).

E. Ethical Subjectivism contends that moral evaluation is dependent only upon subjective moral judgments, not upon inter-subjective or objective moral judgments.

1. Subjective Judgment: A moral judgment is subjective if its truth depends on whether or not it conforms to the tastes, attitudes, beliefs, preferences of the utterer.

   a. “I think Olives taste disgusting” (a matter of taste)
   b. “I think Baseball is the best sport” (a matter of preference)
2. **Inter-subjective Judgment**: A moral 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 utterer belongs.
   a. “Her dress is so out of style” (a matter of societal taste)
   b. “Homosexuals should not marry” (a matter of societal opinion)

3. **Objective Judgment**: A moral judgment is *objective* if its truth depends upon something independent of the belief of any individual or group.
   a. EX1: “Texas is 268,601 square miles” (empirical truth)
   b. EX2: “2+2=4” (*a priori* truth)

II. **Subjectivism as distinct from**:
   A. **Tolerance**
      1. ES Doesn’t imply Tolerance
      2. Argument by the Ethical Subjectivist for Tolerance

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ethical Subjectivist Argument for Tolerance</th>
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<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>All moral standards or truths are dependent only upon the opinions and feelings (not fact) of the utterer making the subjective moral judgment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>I feel that tolerance is right for me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>FC</td>
<td>People ought to tolerate (respect) other people’s feelings and lifestyles</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>I ought to tolerate other people’s feelings and lifestyles.</td>
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3. The statement that “we should all be tolerant” is a **universal moral principle**, and not within the subjectivist system.
4. Furthermore, ES is *prescriptive/normative* and not *descriptive*. It is not to be confused with the principle that “we, ourselves, really do believe a given principle is right.” ES is about what a person *ought* to do, and not about what a person *does* do.

B. **Ethical Skepticism**
   1. ES not the same as being skeptical; skeptics are characterized by their **agnosticism**. Subjectivists have a **believed position**.
   2. **Uncertainty** about what to do does not imply moral skepticism
      a. EX 1: Unsure how many sides are in an icosahedron (20), but we know that it has a certain number of sides.
      b. EX 2: Unsure how far away certain stars are, but we know that they are a certain distance away.
      c. EX 3: Priest unsure whether or not to inform the police about a confessed murder, but that doesn’t imply there is no right and wrong.
   3. Ethical Skeptics remain equipollent on the issue of whether or not there are moral truths.
   4. Ex 1: Jon and His Neighbor. Jon knows that his neighbor George is an evil mastermind, and knows that the police will never catch him if Jon tries to turn him in. Jon figures that everyone would be better off if George was dead.
Jon’s List for Whether or Not to Kill his Neighbor

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<th>For</th>
<th>Against</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>George wouldn’t be able to hurt anyone else</td>
<td>Killing someone sets bad precedent, encourages other people to think they can get away with it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>It would make Jon feel better if George was dead</td>
<td>He might get caught</td>
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<td></td>
<td>His family members might miss him</td>
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5. Ethical Skeptics don’t readily acknowledge that there is no moral truth to whether Jon should or shouldn’t kill George; they just simply say that when you weigh the reasons, you cannot convincingly choose one option over the other.

III. **EMOTIVISM**: The moral theory that moral language is not a fact-stating language but that the purpose of moral language is to persuade others to do something or to express a given attitude.

A. No moral truths

B. **Positivism** making the foundation of ethics logical empiricism: all knowledge and meaning is based upon scientific observation of the physical world. No observation of Moral Truth

C. Language used in a variety of ways
   1. Declarative Statements
   2. Imperative Statements
   3. Exclamatory Statements

D. Moral language is not a fact-stating language.
   1. Expresses a particular attitude
   2. Persuades you to do or not do something

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Three Ethical Theories</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ethical Skepticism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agreement on a set of objective standards for resolving moral differences</td>
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<td>Convincing Evidence for Objective standards?</td>
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<td>Moral Statements Are?</td>
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<td>Truth-Value?</td>
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<td>Truths Based Upon?</td>
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<td>Conclusion</td>
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IV. Critique of Ethical Subjectivism

A. The Argument Against Moral Infallibility
   1. We can be mistaken in our moral beliefs or are wrong in our moral evaluation.
   2. Ethical subjectivism contends that moral rightness is determined upon the basis of our personal opinions, but this seems to make us infallible moral creatures.
   3. EX 1: Jon believes his girlfriend is cheating on him, and thinks that he is within his rights to slash her tires. After he punctures holes in each one of her tires, he later discovers that the man he saw her with at the shopping mall was not her new lover, but her cousin.
   4. The Argument Against Moral Infallibility

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<thead>
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<th>Argument Against Moral Infallibility</th>
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<tr>
<td>P1 If ES is correct, then each of us is morally infallible so long as we speak sincerely.</td>
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<tr>
<td>P2 At least some one is morally infallible (except maybe God); we may make moral mistakes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C ES is not correct.</td>
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5. We are capable of moral mistakes because of change in our opinions over time (contradictory opinions) and lack of information (regret).

B. Ethical subjectivism is disastrous for the weak and defenseless
   1. If moral right and wrong is simply a matter of personal opinion or our feelings, then there is no need to respect anyone’s individual rights.
   2. Ex 1: Jon is a wealthy billionaire, and wants a small country depopulated, but he knows they won’t go willingly. From the standpoint of ER, Jon is justified in killing all of them if he thinks it is acceptable.

V. Ethical subjectivism’s “grain of truth”

A. Morality seems to have an intricate connection with the individual. We do what we believe is right, but this doesn’t necessarily mean that what we do is actually the right thing.

VI. Critique of Emotivism

A. Emotivism doesn’t back up its moral judgments up with reasons.
   1. Moral facts aren’t found in the same way we find observational ones.
   2. Found through critical analysis and contemplation of experience
B. Nothing implies that our values are merely our subjective feelings.

VII. Emotivism’s “grain of truth”

a. Moral judgments are not something we can necessarily find in the same way we do facts about animals and plants. Involves a contemplation and
critical analysis of a general kind. Not found in experience, but prompted by it.

VIII. END MATTER

A. Ethical Subjectivism cannot account for disagreement in ethics.
   1. Jon believes murder is good. Frank believes murder is bad. According to ES, when Jon says murder is good he is merely expressing his moral opinion, therefore Frank should not disagree with him because all that is being expressed is his opinion. At the same time, when Frank says murder is bad, Jon should agree with him, because Frank is merely expressing his moral opinion. Why should there be any disagreement if the two understand that the other is simply expressing his/her moral opinion?
   2. Disagreement emerges because Jon actually does believe murder is not merely his opinion,

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<th>Why Disagree Argument</th>
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<td><strong>P1</strong></td>
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<td><strong>P2</strong></td>
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B. History of the Theory
   1. Began with David Hume: *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk 3, Part I (1740) with the theory that morality is a matter of sentiment rather than fact.
   2. Rousseau
   3. Wollenstonecraft (?)

IX. Types of Ethical Relativism

A. Descriptive Relativism: There is extensive diversity of moral judgment across time, societies, and individuals, and that it concerns central moral values and principles
   1. Version 1: Extreme Descriptive Relativism
   2. Version 2: Moderate Descriptive Relativism
   3. Ex 1:
   4. Objection: Despite that there is moral diversity there are a number of shared moral norms across cultures.
      a. Ex 1: Torturing individuals that are valued by the society
B. **Normative Relativism**: The doctrine that it is morally wrong to pass judgment on or to interfere with the moral practices of others who have adopted moralities different from one’s own.

C. **Meta-ethical Relativism**: There is no single true or most justified morality.
   1. Types
      a. **Moderate**: No single true morality, but there are some that are more justified than others.
      b. **Extreme**: Any morality is as true or as justified as any other.
   2. Meta-ethicists contend that meta-ethical relativism explains the descriptive moral diversity present. Moral diversity is present because there is no one justified morality, and what accounts for this diversity is that moral determination is centralized in an individual’s feelings.
   3. Unlike science, no fact of the matter can be found to appease conflicting moral judgments.

<table>
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<th>Three Types of Ethical Relativism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Descriptive</strong></td>
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<td>There is extensive diversity of moral judgment across time, societies, and individuals, and that it concerns central moral values and principles</td>
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X. **Rousseau and Wollstonecraft**
   A. Rousseau
   B. Wollstonecraft

C. We do pass judgments on our feelings and actions
   1. If moral right and wrong is simply a matter of personal opinion or our feelings, then we shouldn’t reconsider any of our opinions.
   2. Ex 1: After a long day, Jon walks into a bar, sits down, and orders a drink. When he gets his drink, he sees that the drink is only half-full. Immediately, he thinks “I’m going to punch the bartender in the face.” But, Jon analyzes his feelings and decides that maybe this isn’t the best choice.

D. We regard acting on certain feelings and desires as immoral
   1. Sometimes when we act on our feelings, we later regard our actions to be immoral. Additionally, we think that some acts our so heinous that there must be some objective moral criterion to prohibiting it.
   2. Ex 1: Jon is a psychopath, and takes pleasure in torturing individuals. He regards it to be a good thing, and as an ethical subjectivist contends that it is because he feels that it is.

E. Ethical Subjectivism leads to self-contradiction
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P1</th>
<th>Person 1 may sincerely say “X is right.” Therefore, it is true that “X is right.”</th>
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<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Person 2 may sincerely say “X is wrong.” Therefore, it is true that “X is wrong.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>According to ES, it may be true that both X is right and X is wrong.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>A thing cannot both be both right and wrong at the same time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>ES cannot be correct.</td>
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F. Moral disagreements do not necessarily imply that there are no universal moral standards.
   1. EX1: Person A disagrees with Person B, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t a position that is objective.
   2. EX2: Disagreements in Science, e.g. geocentric theory vs. heliocentric theory.

XI. Further Reading