

## SUBJECTIVISM & ERROR: How Could I Be Wrong About What's Right (For Me)?

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**Background:** Distinguish Positive and Negative versions of Moral Subjectivism:

- (1) **as a Skeptical (Negative) Thesis** (à la J.L. Mackie): moral values are subjective in the broad sense that there are no *objective* moral values (i.e. “goodness” is not a real thing or property in the world). This is a negative thesis because, as Mackie puts it, it is not a theory about what there is, but about what there *isn't*.

*Mackie's Error-Theory:* Although there are no objective moral values, the moral judgments people make, such as, “Murder is wrong,” possess a *claim to objectivity*. Since there aren't any existing moral values that could answer to this claim, all of our moral judgments are false, because they fail to refer to anything.

Mackie sometimes calls his position “Subjectivism,” but this is misleading since he offers no positive account of the sense in which values are subjective (e.g. whether they are subjective at the level of persons, cultures, or species). He would have done better to simply call it “Anti-Realism,” or “Moral Skepticism.”

- (2) **as a (Positive) Theory of Moral Value & Judgment:** roughly, moral values are dependent for their “existence” upon the agents who make moral judgments and these judgments are justified via the moral experiences of these agents. As I will construe it, moral subjectivism has the following components:

*Metaphysical Subjectivism* (MS): Moral properties are properties of mental states.

*Epistemological Subjectivism* (ES): (1) A person P believes  $x$  is  $\phi$  iff  $x$  seems  $\phi$  to P,  
(2) P is justified in believing  $x$  is  $\phi$  iff  $x$  seems  $\phi$  to P.

(Note: Let's be charitable to the pure subjectivist and grant her the following qualifications: ES(2) will not hold if I am severely depressed, stark raving mad, on loads of drugs, and the like.)

Call the person who endorses MS and ES the **pure subjectivist**. I will be shaping up subjectivism by making improvements to pure subjectivism as the need arises, and by showing that the common objections don't dispose of subjectivism as quickly as they are claimed to do (in intro to ethics classes).

**Common Objections to Moral Subjectivism:** Disagreement and Infallibility

- (1) **The disagreement problem** – As David Wiggins puts it: “If, where John says  $x$  is good, Philip denies that  $x$  is good, Philip is not on this [subjectivist] account necessarily disagreeing with John. Certainly, if they are disagreeing, the purported subjectivist analysis of ‘ $x$  is good’ does not really bring out what they are disagreeing about.”
- (2) **The infallibility problem** – Since the conditions for belief and justification are equivalent according to ES, it seems I can't be mistaken about whether  $x$  is  $\phi$ . This also raises the question as to whether subjectivism can make sense of my changing my mind about a moral matter for non-arbitrary reasons: it seems that the subjectivist must say, “ $x$  seemed  $\phi$  to Matt yesterday, but now seems not- $\phi$  to him. That's all there is to it.”

**Strategy:** Solve the infallibility problem to get a response to the disagreement problem.

**The Difficulty:** Getting the pure subjectivist to play along. The pure subjectivist might be inclined to say: “Look, the ‘infallibility problem’ is not really a problem once you *understand* the claim that moral experience is subjective. Moral experience is, in this respect, like pain-experience. When I feel pain, I say that I am in pain, and nothing justifies this judgment other than my experience. The fact that you can't feel my pain, or verify that I have it, is no argument against my claim. As Wittgenstein said, I make this claim ‘without [external] justification’ but not ‘without right.’ It is the same with my moral judgments and the experiences upon which they are based.”

**The Nature of Moral Judgments:** One way to cash out the claim that moral properties are properties of mental states is to claim that goodness is determined by the agent's approval: "x is good" means, "I approve of x."

On this view, it appears that moral judgments are expressions of attitudes (e.g. of approval and disapproval).

**Objection:** Moral subjectivism is wrong because moral judgments express more than a mere attitude; when I say, "x is good," I don't mean simply, "I approve of (or like) x," because I also mean that other people *ought* to approve of x, too. Moral judgments possess a "claim to objectivity" (Mackie).

**(Typical) Subjectivist Response:** "What could a moral judgment possibly express besides an attitude?"

This question can be interpreted as a challenge to give an objective account of morality, or, as Mackie took it, to suggest that although moral judgments do possess a "claim to objectivity," they are *all* unfortunately false, because they are only expressions of subjective approval (i.e. an attitude) and not statements of some external objective fact.

**Alternative Option:** Accept that moral judgments are attitudes, but not *mere* attitudes, and reject the "claim to objectivity" thesis: it's not that moral judgments possess an objective claim; rather, what makes a judgment (or attitude) a *moral* judgment is that:

- (1) the agent holds the claim or evaluation expressed to be morally necessary (**note:** yes, this is circular),
- (2) the attitude is not contingent on the agent's particular features/characteristics.

Compare:

- (a) "Jagermeister is disgusting."
- (b) "Pedophiles are disgusting."

Supposing you agree with (a) and (b), consider the difference in how you react to the denial of each claim.

**The Possibility of Error:** An agent could be mistaken about whether her experience/attitude is contingent on her own particular character, and thus could misidentify the nature of her various attitudes, including their moral significance. (The "I hate sports fans" example.)

*The non-contingency restriction:* "x is  $\phi$ ," isn't justified merely by x's seeming  $\phi$  to me. It must also seem  $\phi$  to me in a way that is not contingent upon my particularity; otherwise, I will not regard "x is  $\phi$ " as a moral attitude but, rather, as a quirk.

This gives us *ES-restricted*:

- (1) A person P believes x is  $\phi$  iff x seems  $\phi$  to P and is not to P's knowledge dependent on her own particularity;
- (2) A person P is justified in believing that x is  $\phi$  iff x seems  $\phi$  to P and x's seeming  $\phi$  to P is not contingent on P's particularity.

**Disagreement:** The subjectivist who endorses ES-restricted rather than ES can explain moral disagreements by claiming that disagreements are about whether attitudes or judgments expressed satisfy the non-contingency restriction, i.e. disagreements are about whether a particular attitude or judgment expressed is morally relevant.

**But:** Can't the disagreement problem be pushed further? How can the subjectivist explain where the sense of moral necessity comes from? For (and here's the dilemma) if she says the feeling of necessity is simply subjective, then this modified subjectivism ultimately collapses into pure subjectivism, and if she says that moral necessity travels with the attitudes that are in fact correct or best (and we are able to detect this), then the subjectivist is no longer a subjectivist because she has claimed that there is an objective fact about which moral attitudes are correct.

**The Short & Sketchy Answer:** This kind of argument against subjectivism seems to rest on the assumptions (1) that subjectivism must imply (a bad kind of) relativism and/or (2) that a correct explanation of a moral disagreement must make some reference to a kind of truth to which the subjectivist has no right. Neither of these claims is true (although they both might seem reasonable enough).