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"That's Subjective": Subjectivism about Truth, Beauty, and Goodness

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"That's subjective!"

People sometimes respond like this to claims about what's true, what's ethical, what others find beautiful or aesthetically pleasing, and more.

To call a claim "subjective" *seems* in part to say that *something* important about the claim depends on the *subject*—the person—making the claim.[1] What this "something" is varies depending on the claim.

Are judgments like these truly "subjective"? What does "subjective" really mean?

This essay introduces different answers to these questions.[2]

1. Truth

1.1. When someone says that truth, or what's true, is "subjective," they *might* be thinking something like this:

> if someone believes some claim, then that claim is true: their believing it *makes* it true.[3]

This can be called *subjectivism about truth*. It appears to be *not true*.[4] *Belief* and *truth* are *not* the same: *believing* you're a billionaire doesn't mean you have a billion dollars; *believing* someone is imprisoned when they're not doesn't make that true.

In general, beliefs and claims are *true* when they correspond to the *facts* of the world—the way the world is—and false when they don't.[5] This is the *correspondence theory of truth*.[6]

When someone says something is "true to me" or "my truth," they are usually just stating what they *believe*, which *may* be false or based on poor evidence—*even if* they feel confident or the issue is important to them.[7]

2.2. A "that's subjective!" reaction might also be based on someone thinking something like this:

> there is not *strong evidence* for that belief; it is *not knowledge*; it is not something that everyone *must* accept or agree with.

If someone says on Tuesday afternoon that *today is Tuesday*, or that *2+2=4*, or that *most dogs have four legs*, they probably won't hear "that's subjective" because claims like these seem obviously *true*: there is strong evidence to believe them and almost nobody would disagree.[8]

But if someone makes claims about topics of controversy and disagreements—politics, religion, relationships, ethics, health, etc.—a "that's subjective" reaction isn't surprising. Sometimes it's hard to have truly compelling evidence here and so there's no one view that every rational person *must* believe.[9]

A challenge though: a "that's subjective" reaction might *itself* be "subjective," if it is based *not* on a strong understanding of the issues and arguments. Maybe people sometimes react "that's subjective!" to avoid the work needed to get that understanding.[10]

2. Ethics

2.1. It's common to hear "ethics is subjective." About some ethical judgments—e.g., claims that some action is wrong—"that's subjective" is a common reaction.

What might people who say this be thinking here? Perhaps this:

- if someone *disapproves* of doing an action, it's *wrong* for them to do it;
- if someone *approves* of doing an action, it's *right* for them to do it.[11]

Since different people approve and disapprove of different actions, this view entails that what's right and wrong are "subjective" or *dependent on the subject*. This can be called *ethical subjectivism*.[12]

Although people sometimes talk like they accept ethical subjectivism, it's unlikely that anyone *really* accepts it. First, it seems to imply that, e.g., if someone approved of assaulting innocent people for fun, then it'd be *not wrong* for them to assault people.[13] But almost nobody agrees with

that. Second, suppose we learned that some school shooters *sincerely believed* they did nothing wrong: almost nobody would think that means they *actually* did nothing wrong.

Someone might say an action isn't wrong "*to me*"—meaning they *believe* it isn't wrong—but that doesn't seem to mean it's *actually* not wrong: beliefs about ethical matters *can* be mistaken, just like other beliefs can. Ethical subjectivism denies that and so seems to be false.

If ethics (not *beliefs about* ethics) isn't "subjective," then it would be "objective": what *makes* actions wrong is *not* any *subjects*' beliefs about the action, but "objective" considerations such as whether it's harmful, or done with consent, or falls under rules all would agree to, among other considerations.[14]

2.2. Sometimes it's difficult to figure out what's ethical: careful fact-finding and reasoning are required:[15] e.g., we can't know whether a war is ethically justified without knowing about its causes and how it's being conducted.[16] Ethical subjectivism, however, implies that ethical questions are always easy: just check your own feelings to find what *you* approve of.

That it can be challenging to have informed, well-reasoned ethical judgments suggests that when people say "ethics is subjective," they might be thinking that our evidence isn't strong, and so we lack knowledge, and so there are different options for reasonable belief. That's why appeals to "subjectivity" are more common with complex ethical issues than judgments about, say, school shootings.

But sometimes saying "that's subjective!" just means we're unsure about what's true or justified. So, when someone says there aren't strong reasons for a particular ethical judgment, that may reflect an admirably humble recognition of complexity—*or* an unreflective dismissal of it.

3. Aesthetics

Aesthetic subjectivists understand judgments about what's beautiful and in good taste as claims about what people prefer and enjoy, which varies from person to person: "beauty is in the eye of the beholder."[17]

Suppose someone claims, "this singer has the *most beautiful* voice." According to subjectivists, what they are *really* saying is that *they most enjoy listening to this singer*.

While there is some plausibility here, there are reasons to doubt.[18] Suppose this singer is off-key and offbeat, but the person insists their voice is more beautiful than Aretha's, Whitney's, Mariah's, or Ariana's. Many people will think they are simply *mistaken* in that judgment: even if they *like* this singer the most, their voice is not *better* than any world-class singer: this person has *bad taste*.

Recognition of artistic excellence suggests that beauty isn't *simply* "in the eye of the beholder." What might *make* aesthetic judgments better and worse, however, is a challenging philosophical issue.[19]

4. Conclusion

Here we tried to better understand some common "subjectivisms." Are any of the insights we gained "just subjective"? No. At least, hopefully not.[20]

Notes

[1] There is no standard, set meaning of "subjective": different people use the word in different ways: ask them! (Does that mean it's "subjective" what *subjective* means?)

[2] This essay focuses on uses of "subjective" that are often made by "ordinary people," not academic philosophers. There may be some more sophisticated versions of the views discussed here, or different philosophical views that are *called* "subjectivism," but these are not discussed here.

[3] To *believe* a claim (or sentence, or proposition) is to consider it in your mind and mentally affirm it as true. That doesn't mean it *is* true, but that it is *considered* to be true. Beliefs can be about important matters, and beliefs can be about trivial matters: what a belief is about—a belief's "content" does not affect whether it's a belief or not.

[4] *Subjectivism about truth* is a broader view, applicable to seemingly *any* belief: for any belief, it's true ("true for that someone") if they believe it. The view also seems to include the idea that the belief is true *because* the person believes it. But there are some claims, called "necessary truths," that *must* be true: they cannot be false: e.g., it's true that 2+2=4 and that *all bachelors are unmarried*, and those *must* be true: there's no way they could be false. But necessary truths are not true *because* people believe them. For an introduction to necessary truths and how we might know them, see Andre Leo Rusavuk's Possibility and Necessity: An Introduction to Modality and Bob

Fischer's Modal Epistemology: Knowledge of Possibility & Necessity.

Here I am also setting aside any consideration of any *logically possible* person for whom, due to some miracle or cosmic fluke or good luck, *whenever* they believe something, their belief is true: the author and readers of this essay are not such a person!

[5] Some might want to call *facts*—the way the world is—"objective facts." The term 'objective', however, invites the question of what "non-objective facts" would be. One might think these would be "subjective facts," but what would *those* be? People's *beliefs*? Beliefs that may or may not be true, that may or may not correspond to the facts—to the way the world is? This line of questioning suggests there is no important difference between "facts" and "objective facts."

Likewise, people sometimes talk about "objective truths." The idea is that, in general, the existence of *facts*—the way the world is—does not depend on any subjects' or persons' beliefs about or attitudes toward them. For example, there are facts about what is happening right now on the tallest mountain on planet Mars; yet few, if any, people are currently consider*ing* those facts, few have ever consider*ed* those facts, and probably nobody know what these facts are. Calling some truths "objective" does, however, invite the question of what the contrast would be, such as what "non-objective truths" or "subjective truths" would be. (Sometimes people say that taste preferences could be called "subjective truths," but this is not a helpful way to talk since, for instance, if your favorite ice-cream flavor is chocolate, then it's just a fact, or truth that *your favorite ice-cream flavor is chocolate*). If those ideas make no sense, then "objective" truths are better just called *truths*.

[6] For more on truth, including the correspondence theory of truth, see Dowden and Swartz (no date). Also see Huemer (2021) and his other writings on truth.

[7] Sometimes people call beliefs "subjective truths." But since beliefs need not be true—they are sometimes false—calling beliefs "truths" is confusing: that allows for the possibility of "false truths." So the phrase "subjective truth" is likely best avoided. Some truths, however, are called "objective" truths, but since "non-objective truth" or "subjective truth" doesn't make sense—at best, that's just belief—"objective" truth is better just called *truth*.

[8] Suppose someone does disagree. Should that matter to what we should think? Not necessarily. They may be disagreeing just to be difficult, or just to be a contrarian. Or maybe they are trying to be clever by using the word 'dog' for snake. The real issue is whether they have good reasons or evidence to support denying the claim in question or affirming a contrary claim. For discussion of these ideas and their importance, see Epistemology, or Theory of Knowledge by Thomas Metcalf, Epistemic Justification: What is Rational Belief? by Todd R. Long, and "The Ethics of Belief": Is it Wrong to Believe Without Sufficient Evidence? by Spencer Case.

[9] It is often thought that, at least in philosophy and scientific fields, that people should believe what's supported by their evidence, and so if people lack evidence for some belief, they should not believe this. For discussion of these ideas and their importance, see Epistemology, or Theory of Knowledge by Thomas Metcalf, Epistemic Justification: What is Rational Belief? by Todd R. Long, and "The Ethics of Belief": Is it Wrong to Believe Without Sufficient Evidence? by Spencer Case.

[10] So responding "that's subjective!" sometimes functions as what Feldman (1999, 19) calls an "argument stopper," an unreflective saying used to try to stop people in *responsibly* thinking about whether what's said is true or false, whether arguments are strong or not, etc. The "that's subjective reaction" is also related to a phenomena that's been labelled "student relativism," which often involves people giving argument stoppers to try to establish their intellectual autonomy and freedom to believe what they want to believe: see Satris (1986) and discussions inspired by his article.

[11] There are details here that would need to be addressed: first, is the person who is disapproving (or approving) of the action in question also thinking about *other people* doing the action, or just *themselves*? Details here might make a difference to how we understand ethical subjectivism.

Another issue is that people sometimes accept what we might call "personal principles" that they think would be wrong *for them* to violate—and that accepting those principles can make other actions wrong for them to do—but think that such actions are not wrong at all for people who don't accept those principles. What we should think about these types of appeals largely depends on the "personal

principle," since it seems that such principles *could* prohibit morally permissible behavior and even require wrong behavior.

Finally, it's worth noting that ethical subjectivism is also sometimes presented as:

- if someone *believes* that an action is *wrong* for them to do, then it is *wrong* for them to do;
- if someone *believes* that an action is *not wrong* for them to do, then it is *not wrong* for them to do.

Such claims, however, require explaining what someone is believing when they think actions are wrong and not wrong: what is the "content" of their thought when they are thinking that an action is wrong? If it's *that the action is wrong*, what is that "it's wrong" that they are thinking of, *according to subjectivism*? The answer here is unclear.

[12] Ethical subjectivism might also be called "subjective relativism" or "individual relativism about ethics." A similar view that claims that what is ethical (not just *believed* to be ethical) is relative to cultures or groups is known as *cultural relativism*. For an introduction, see Nathan Nobis's Cultural Relativism: Do Cultural Norms Make Actions Right and Wrong?

[13] Of course, the victim here likely will not approve of their being assaulted, and so according to subjectivism, from the victim's point of view, *assaulting them was wrong*. However, from the perpetrator's perspective and what they approve of, *assaulting that person was not wrong*. So, ethical subjectivism seems to entail that someone being assaulted can be both *wrong* and *not wrong*. If this type of contradiction can follow from ethical subjectivism, that's another reason to reject it.

Some respond to this reasoning by arguing that while different people *approve* of different actions, *no actions are wrong, for anyone*: actions have the characteristics of *being approved* and *disapproved* by people, but they don't have the characteristic of being wrong or not wrong. For discussion of such a view, see Moral Error Theory by Ian Tully.

[14] For introductions to some of the most historically influential ethical theories or answers to the question, "What makes wrong actions wrong?" which appeal to harm, disrespect, and unfairness, see Consequentialism and Utilitarianism by Shane Gronholz, Kantian Deontology: Immanuel Kant's Ethics by Andrew Chapman, and John Rawls' 'A Theory of Justice' by Ben Davies. For a discussion of whether there might be moral truths or facts, and what they might be like if they exist, see Ethical Realism, or Moral Realism by Thomas Metcalf.

[15] For an introduction to the challenges involved in thinking about complex ethical issues, see Applied Ethics by Chelsea Haramia and Expertise: What is an Expert? by Jamie Carlin Watson.

[16] Here are further examples to make it clear that ethical issues can be complex and thus require fact-finding and careful reasoning:

- we can't have a reasonable view on whether a company's actions are exploitative without knowing how it treats its workers and what options those workers have;
- we can't have a reasonable view on whether someone's lying is wrong without knowing why they lied and what consequences the lie has;
- we can't have a reasonable view on whether abortion is morally permissible without considering details about fetal development, what persons are, and reflecting on ethical principles about personhood and bodily autonomy;
- we can't have a reasonable view on whether euthanasia is morally acceptable in a circumstance without understanding the patient's condition, their wishes, and the available alternatives;
- we can't have a reasonable view on whether the death penalty could be just without understanding how it's applied and whether it deters crime or risks executing the innocent;
- we can't have a reasonable view on whether eating animals is morally wrong without considering facts about harms to animals and the environment and whether eating meat is necessary for human health.

Introductory discussions of many of these issues above, all of which bring out the complexity of the issues, are available in our ethics category.

[17] For an introduction to what aesthetic judgments are, see Brock Rough's Aesthetics vs. Art.

[18] Another argument against aesthetic subjectivism as presented here is that it implies that what *seem* to be aesthetic disagreements are *not* disagreements; but they are, so the view is false. E.g., suppose I say, "Chocolate ice cream is the best flavor" and you say "Chocolate ice cream is not the best flavor: it's the worst." It seems like we disagree about what's best. However, subjectivism implies that I have said "*I like chocolate the most*" and you have said, "*I don't like chocolate the most: I dislike it the most.*" This is then not a disagreement, since both our claims are true (assuming we are speaking sincerely): disagreements involve one person making a claim and another denying that claim—so both claims can't be true. Since aesthetic subjectivism implies we are not disagreeing on which flavor is best, yet we are, it seems to be false.

[19] It's worthwhile to reflect on how there are "formal" characteristics of many arts (these concern the artwork's *form*) that tend to make them at least judged as better than artworks that are deficient in these characteristics: e.g., a better singer typically demonstrates stronger formal features such as precise pitch control, consistent tone quality, dynamic range, and clear diction. A painter of representational paintings who shows mastery of formal features like accurate proportion, controlled brushwork, realistic color use, and effective composition is likely to be considered a more skilled representational artist. If we can evaluate the quality of art based, in part, on these formal features—features which are characteristics of the artworks themselves—that provides some challenge to the view that beauty is entirely "in the eye of the beholder," so to speak.

For discussions of various alternatives to aesthetic subjectivism—views that hold that aesthetic judgments might be "objective," so to speak, and so there are truths or facts about aesthetic judgments apart from individuals' judgments—see Bender (2005), Hanson (2018), Levinson (2005), Slote (1971), and Zangwill (2005) and (2021).

[20] The discussion here might be adapted to better understand a common claim like "that's an opinion, not a fact." What facts are is discussed here, and some of the ideas presented here can be used to better understand different meanings of "opinion."

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