

23. RELATIVISM AND SUBJECTIVISM

A judgment is objective iff it is true/false regardless of anyone's views on the matter.

A judgment is subjective iff it is not objective; it is true/false because of what we think.

Ethical subjectivism says that ethical judgments are subjective. But this can mean two things. Normative ethics asks what we ought morally speaking to do, and what is morally valuable. Should we be vegetarians? Is euthanasia permissible? Is pleasure good in itself?

Meta-ethics tries to understand normative ethics. Is morality absolute or relative? Are moral judgments objectively true or false? How can we hope to gain moral knowledge?

Consider a normative judgment "Action A is right." Normative theories try to specify when the judgment is true. Objectivist normative theories include Utilitarianism: it is true iff A produces the most overall happiness. Kantianism: it is true iff A is done on the basis of a principle that one would have everyone act on. Social contract theory: it is true iff A is permitted by rules that self-interested parties would willingly agree to as a basis for social order.

Normative subjectivism: "A is right" is true iff it sincerely expresses the speaker's (or group's) attitude.

Meta-ethical subjectivism: "A is right" is not true, but nor is it false. All normative ethical theories, insofar as they deny this, are wrong. (This is Shafer-Landau's definition; we can see why he says this, but his usage is not standard. More on this below)

They are incompatible. But they agree on something important: there are no objective moral truths. Let's assume for now there are moral truths of some sort. Arguments for normative subjectivism.

Democracy

1. If we all have an equal right to our moral opinions, then they are equally plausible.
2. We all have an equal right to our moral opinions.
3. Our moral opinions are equally plausible.

Disagreement

1. The best explanation of persistent disagreement about X is absence of objective truth about X.
2. There is persistent disagreement on right and wrong.
3. There are no objective moral truths.

Tolerance

1. If normative objectivism is true, then some people are deeply mistaken about right and wrong.
2. It's arrogant and intolerant to think that some people are deeply mistaken about right and wrong.
3. So normative objectivism is false; normative subjectivism is true.

Motivation

1. Moral judgments are "intrinsically motivating."
2. Factual judgments aren't; they can be viewed with indifference.
3. Moral judgments aren't factual.

Economy

1. Moral judgments are true/false only if the world contains genuine moral facts.
2. Genuine facts do explanatory work and moral facts don't, or wouldn't.
3. Moral facts don't exist; moral judgments aren't true or false.

Oddness

1. Moral judgments are true/false only if the world contains genuine moral facts.
2. Moral facts are too unlike natural facts to be believable.
3. Moral facts don't exist; moral judgments aren't true or false.

PROBLEMS FOR SIMPLE-MINDED NORMATIVE SUBJECTIVISM

Fallibility: moral claims shouldn't come out automatically true. Can't we develop moral insight?

Moral equivalence is implausible: Genocide (or *tsujigiri*) are not just alternative lifestyle choices.

Contradictions: if conflicting claims are "both true," then the action is both right and not right. So move to explicit relativism: 'x is wrong for A'. Now we lose disagreement: wrong-for-you is fully compatible with right-for-me.

Arbitrariness.

A LESS SIMPLE-MINDED NORMATIVE SUBJECTIVISM

Something is red iff it is judged (by the right people in the right conditions) to be red
Something is right iff it is judged (by the right people in the right conditions) to be red

This softens the problems, but do they go away? So long as we don't make it trivial by defining the 'right people' as those who are good, isn't it still arbitrary what the right people judge? Could we tie this in to some evolutionary story? (cf. Rachels on how there is less diversity than you might think.)

META-ETHICAL SUBJECTIVISM (SHAFFER-LANDAU STYLE)

Moral claims are not true or false; they're to be conceived on the model of imperatives (do A!, don't do B!), or exclamations (horray for A! boo for B!). More commonly called *expressivism* or *emotivism*.

Does this really help with any of the problems? Perhaps helps with contradiction. Does it add anything to disagreement that the normative subjectivist couldn't embrace?

And we add new problems: if moral claims aren't true or false but are like exclamations, then (i) what is the right notion of truth? (it's not just disquotational) and (ii) how can they work when they aren't being simply exclaimed, e.g. how can they work in conditionals ('If lying is wrong, you shouldn't encourage your little brother to lie')?

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