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38

Subjectivism

JAMES RACHELS

In 1973 religious conservatives were stunned by the US Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion. Since then they have worked for the reversal of that decision. They have had powerful allies in the White House, first in Ronald Reagan, who made opposition to *Roe* v. *Wade* a condition for appointment to the federal bench, and subsequently in George Bush, who after his election suggested to the Court that it should reconsider the entire matter.

In President Bush's mind, the question whether abortion should be legal is closely linked to whether it is morally wrong: he opposes legalized abortion, he says, because he believes that abortion is immoral. What should be our reaction to this? One possibility is that we might agree with him, and say that abortion is in fact immoral. Another possibility is that we might disagree, and say that abortion is in fact morally acceptable. But there is a third possibility. We might say something like this:

'Where morality is concerned, there are no "facts" and no one is "right" or "wrong". President Bush is expressing his own personal feelings about abortion, and nothing more. He says it is wrong, but that is merely the way *he* feels about it. Others disagree, and his feelings are no more "correct" than anyone else's. Different people have different feelings, and that's the end of it.'

This is the basic idea of ethical subjectivism. Ethical subjectivism is a theory which says that, in making moral judgements, people are doing nothing more than expressing their personal desires or feelings. On this view, there are no moral 'facts'. It is a fact that there have been over a million abortions performed annually in the United States since 1973, but it is not a fact that this is a good thing or a bad thing. And of course, abortion is only a convenient example; the same thing can be said about any moral issue whatever.

This idea has appealed to a wide range of thinkers, especially those with an empiricist turn of mind. David Hume expressed the essential point in 1738 when he wrote in his great work *A Treatise of Human Nature* that morality is a matter of 'feeling, not reason':

> Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call *vice* ... You can never find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, toward this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not reason.

The function of moral judgement, says Hume, is to guide conduct; but reason alone can never tell us what to do. Reason merely informs us of the nature and consequences of our actions. and of the logical relations between propositions. Thus, reason may tell a woman that if she has an abortion, her life will be easier in some ways, but the fetus will die. However, nothing follows from this about whether she *should* have an abortion. In order to decide what to do, it is necessary for her emotions to come into play – does she *care* whether the fetus dies? How much does she care about the easier life she may have? If she imagines herself having the abortion, is she comfortable with the thought, or is she repelled by it? Hume concludes that, in the final analysis, 'Morality is determined by sentiment'.

People have been attracted to this view for various reasons, some of them good and some not so good. Sometimes people embrace ethical subjectivism because they associate it with an attitude of tolerance. We should be tolerant, they say, of those who disagree with us. Each person has a right to their own opinion, and no-one has the right to dictate to others what moral views they must accept. Ethical subjectivism, which says that morality is nothing but a matter of personal feelings, provides a plausible rationale for this attitude of tolerance. If no-one's feelings are any more 'correct' than anyone else's, then no-one could be justified in forcing their opinions upon others. Where morals affect politics, as it does in the case of abortion, the implication is obvious: no segment of the community has the right to impose its moral view on another.

This line of thought, however, involves a subtle mistake. The idea that we ought to be tolerant is itself a moral judgement, and subjectivism does not mandate the acceptance of any particular moral judgement, including this one. It is not that sort of theory. Someone who accepts the theory will still have moral opinions, of course – they might say that abortion is morally acceptable, or that it is odious. But the theory does not tell us *which* stance to adopt. It only says that, whichever stance we choose, our choice will not represent the 'truth'. Our opinions will represent our own personal feelings, and nothing more.

Exactly the same is true of a value such as tolerance. People who accept ethical subjectivism might affirm the value of tolerance or deny it. But whichever stance they choose. they will not believe their choice represents the 'truth' about how we ought to behave. They will instead recognize that they are only expressing their personal feelings. Moreover, a belief in tolerance is not the exclusive prerogative of the subjectivist. Those who *reject* ethical subjectivism, and believe instead that there are objective moral truths, might nevertheless believe that they should be tolerant, because they might believe that 'We should be tolerant' is one of the objective moral truths. (See Article 39, RELATIVISM, for a discussion of tolerance in the context of cultural or social divergence of moral views.)

Another common misconception is that, if ethical subjectivism is true, then nothing is 'really' right or wrong. This notion might be expressed in different ways: it might be said that 'Everything is permitted' or that 'Nothing really matters'. However it is expressed, many people find it a liberating idea and count it as an argument in favour of subjectivism. Others think it is a pernicious idea which negates all morality, and conclude that subjectivism should be rejected on

account of it. Both reactions, however, are misguided, because ethical subjectivism does not really entail that nothing is morally right or wrong.

To see why not, we need only to remember that, according to ethical subjectivism, moral judgements express feelings. Therefore, if you say that 'Nothing is right or wrong' or that 'Nothing matters', you are expressing a truly extraordinary lack of feeling about anything. This hardly seems possible, unless you are suffering from some sort of extreme melancholia. Does it follow, if you accept ethical subjectivism, that you will stop having feelings of the sort associated with moral opinions? Does it even follow that you *should* stop having such feelings, or that it is improper for you to have them? No. Therefore, it does not follow, if you accept ethical subjectivism, that you must conclude that 'Nothing is right or wrong'. You may, in fact, have exactly the same moral views that you would have had if you were not a subjectivist. Being a subjectivist only means that you have a particular philosophical understanding of what such views come to.

We might call the idea that nothing is right or wrong *moral nihilism*. While many philosophers have been attracted to subjectivism, few have been nihilists. There is a simple reason why not. Consider what it would be like for someone actually to believe that nothing is right or wrong. Someone who said this would mean, presumably, that rape is neither right nor wrong; that torture is neither right nor wrong; that murder is neither right nor wrong; and so on for anything else that might be mentioned. If all this were said *seriously*, and not just as part of a philosophical discussion, it would be alarming in the extreme. It would mean that they *were not opposed* to rape, torture, murder, or anything else. Think how strange this would be. Would they not mind if such things were done to them? Would they think nothing of doing as much to others? No-one who was not in the grip of a frightening pathology could endorse such an outlook; on the contrary, it might be suggested that anyone tempted by it – really tempted to adopt it in real life, and not just tempted to defend it in a philosophy seminar – should seek psychiatric help.

This dismissal of moral nihilism may strike some readers as too quick. Surely, they might think, there must be a connection at some deeper level between subjectivism and nihilism. Doesn't subjectivism mean that nothing is *really* right or wrong? The answer just depends on what is meant by '*really* right or wrong'. If by this we mean 'right or wrong independent of how anyone feels', then of course subjectivism denies that anything is right or wrong in *that* sense. Ethical subjectivism denies that there are moral facts independent of our feelings. If this is what one means by moral nihilism, then ethical subjectivism does imply moral nihilism. Nonetheless, it is still worth emphasizing that the subjectivist is not committed to moral nihilism in our original sense: the subjectivist is not compelled to say that nothing matters, or that nothing is right or wrong.

The historical development of ethical subjectivism illustrates a process typical of philosophical theories. It began as a simple idea – in the words of David Hume, that morality is more a matter of feeling than of reason. But, as objections were raised against the theory, and as its defenders tried to answer those objections,

the theory became more complicated. So far, we have not attempted to formulate the theory very precisely – we have been content with a rough statement of its basic idea. Now, however, we need to go a bit beyond that.

One way of formulating ethical subjectivism more precisely is this: we take it to be the thesis that *when a person says that something is morally good or bad, this means that he or she approves of that thing, or disapproves of it, and nothing more.* In other words,

'X is morally acceptable'
'X is right'
'X is good'
'X ought to be done'

} all mean: 'I (the speaker) approve of X';

and, similarly:

'X is morally unacceptable'
'X is wrong'
'X is bad'
'X ought not to be done'

} all mean: 'I (the speaker) disapprove of X'.

We might call this version of the theory *simple subjectivism*. It expresses the basic idea of ethical subjectivism in a plain, uncomplicated form, and many people have found it attractive. However, simple subjectivism is open to several rather obvious objections, because it has implications that are contrary to what we know to be the case (or at least, contrary to what we *think* we know) about the nature of moral evaluation.

For one thing, simple subjectivism contradicts the plain fact that we can sometimes be *wrong* in our moral evaluations. None of us are infallible. We make mistakes, and when we discover that we are mistaken we may want to change our judgements. But, if simple subjectivism were correct, this would be impossible – because simple subjectivism implies that each of us is infallible.

Consider again Mr Bush, who says that abortion is immoral. According to simple subjectivism, what he is really saying is that he, George Bush, disapproves of it. Of course it is possible that he is not speaking sincerely – as recently as 1980 he publicly supported *Roe* v. *Wade*. Either he has changed his mind, or now he is merely playing to his conservative audience. But, *if we assume he is speaking sincerely* – if we assume he really does disapprove of abortion – then it follows that what he says is true. So long as he is honestly representing his own feelings, he cannot be mistaken.

Another serious problem is that simple subjectivism cannot account for the fact that people *disagree* about ethics. George Bush says that abortion is immoral. Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* and a leading feminist thinker, denies this, saying that abortion is not immoral. Plainly, Mr Bush and Ms Friedan disagree. But consider what simple subjectivism implies about this situation.

According to simple subjectivism, when Mr Bush says that abortion is immoral, he is merely making a statement about his attitude – he is saying that he, George Bush, disapproves of abortion. Would Ms Friedan disagree with that? No, she would *agree* that Bush disapproves of abortion. At the same time, when she says that abortion is not immoral, she is only saying that she, Betty Friedan, does not disapprove of it. And why should Mr Bush disagree with that? In fact, Mr Bush would certainly acknowledge that Friedan does not disapprove of abortion. Thus, according to simple subjectivism, there is no disagreement between them – each would acknowledge the truth of what the other is saying! Surely, though, there is something wrong here, for surely Bush and Friedan do disagree about whether abortion is immoral.

There is a kind of eternal frustration implied by simple subjectivism: Bush and Friedan are deeply opposed to one another; yet they cannot even state their positions in a way that joins the issue. Friedan may *try* to deny what Bush says, by denying that abortion is immoral, but according to simple subjectivism she only succeeds in changing the subject.

These considerations, and others like them, show that simple subjectivism is a bad theory. In the face of such difficulties, many philosophers have chosen to reject the whole idea of ethical subjectivism. Others, however, have taken a different approach. The problem, they say, is not that the basic idea of ethical subjectivism is wrong. The problem is that 'simple subjectivism' is too simple a way of expressing that idea. Thus, these philosophers have continued to have confidence in the basic idea of ethical subjectivism, and have tried to refine it – to give it a new, improved formulation – so that these difficulties can be overcome.

The improved version was a theory that came to be known as *emotivism*. Developed most fully by the American philosopher Charles L. Stevenson, emotivism has been one of the most influential theories of ethics in the twentieth century. It is a more subtle and sophisticated theory than simple subjectivism because it incorporates a more sophisticated view of language.

Emotivism begins with the observation that language is used in a variety of ways. One of its principal uses is in stating facts, or at least in stating what we believe to be facts. Thus we may say:

> George Bush is President of the United States;
> George Bush opposes abortion;
> There have been over 1,000,000 abortions in the US each year since *Roe* v. *Wade*;

and so on. In each case, we are saying something that is either true or false, and the purpose of saying such things is, typically, to convey information to the listener.

However, there are other purposes for which language may be used. For example, suppose I say to a pregnant woman, who is contemplating an abortion, 'Please don't do it!' This utterance is neither true nor false. It is not a *statement* of any kind; it is a *command* (or a request, or an entreaty), which is something altogether different. Its purpose is not to convey information; rather, its purpose is to prescribe a particular action or course of conduct.

Or, consider utterances such as these, which are neither statements of fact nor commands:

> Hurrah for Betty Friedan!
> Would that abortion were illegal!
> Alas!
> Damn *Roe* v. *Wade*!

These are perfectly familiar, common types of sentences which we understand easily enough. But none of them is true or false. (It would make no sense to say 'It is true that hurrah for Betty Friedan' or 'It is false that alas'.) Again, these sentences are not used to state facts; instead, they are used to express the speaker's attitudes.

We need to note clearly the difference between *reporting* an attitude and *expressing* the same attitude. If I say 'I like Betty Friedan', I am reporting the fact that I have a positive attitude toward her. The statement is a statement of fact that is either true or false. On the other hand, if I shout 'Hurrah for Friedan!' I am not stating any sort of fact. I am expressing an attitude, but I am not reporting that I have it.

Now, with these points in mind, let us turn our attention to moral language. According to emotivism, moral language is not fact-stating language; it is not typically used to convey information. Its purpose is entirely different. It is used first, as a means of influencing people's behaviour: if someone says 'You ought not to do that', *they are trying to stop you from doing it.* And, second, moral language is used to express (*not* report) one's attitude. Saying 'Betty Friedan is a good woman' is not like saying 'I approve of Friedan', but it *is* like saying 'Hurrah for Friedan!'

The difference between emotivism and simple subjectivism should now be obvious. Simple subjectivism interpreted ethical sentences as statements of fact of a special kind – namely, as reports of the speaker's attitude. According to simple subjectivism, when Mr Bush says 'Abortion is immoral', this means the same as 'I (Bush) disapprove of abortion' – a statement of fact about his attitude. Emotivism, on the other hand, would deny that his utterance states any fact at all, even a fact about himself. Instead, emotivism interprets his utterance as equivalent to something like 'Abortion – yecch!' or 'Don't have an abortion!' or 'Would that no one ever had an abortion'.

This may seem to be a trivial, nit-picky difference that isn't worth bothering about. But, from a theoretical point of view, it is actually a very big and important difference. It means that emotivism will not be vulnerable to the sorts of difficulties that plagued simple subjectivism. Consider the two problems that we mentioned having to do with infallibility and disagreement. The problem about infallibility arose only because simple subjectivism interprets moral judgements as statements about our feelings. If people sincerely report their feelings, how can they be wrong? Emotivism does not interpret moral judgements as statements about feelings, or as statements that in any sense are true-or-false; and so the same problem will

not arise for it. Similarly with moral disagreement. Emotivism deals with this problem by emphasizing that there is more than one way in which people may disagree. If I believe that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in the assassination of John Kennedy, and you believe there was a conspiracy, it is a disagreement over the facts – I believe something to be true that you believe to be false. But consider a different type of disagreement. Suppose I favour strict gun-control legislation, and you are opposed to it. Here we disagree, but in a different sense. It is not our beliefs that are in conflict, but our desires. (You and I may agree about all the facts surrounding the gun-control controversy, and yet still take different sides concerning what we want to see happen.) In the first kind of disagreement, we believe different things, both of which cannot be true. In the second, we want different things, both of which cannot happen. Stevenson calls this a disagreement *in* attitude, and contrasts it with disagreement *about* attitudes. Moral disagreements, says Stevenson, are disagreements in attitude. Simple subjectivism could not explain moral disagreement because, once it interpreted moral judgements as statements *about* attitudes, the disagreement vanished.

There is no doubt that emotivism represented an advance over simple subjectivism. This was not, however, the end of the story. Emotivism also had its problems, and they were sufficiently serious that today most philosophers reject the theory. One of the main problems was that emotivism could not account for the place of reason in ethics.

A moral judgement – or, for that matter, *any* kind of value judgement – must be supported by good reasons. If someone tells you that a certain action would be wrong, for example, you may ask *why* it would be wrong, and if there is no satisfactory answer, you may reject that advice as unfounded. In this way, moral judgements are different from mere expressions of personal preference. If someone says 'I like coffee', he does not need to have a reason – he may be making a statement about his personal taste, and nothing more. But moral judgements require backing by reasons, and in the absence of such reasons, they are merely arbitrary. This is a point about the *logic* of moral judgement. It is not merely that it would be a good thing to have reasons for one's moral judgements. The point is stronger than that. One *must* have reasons, or else one is not making a moral judgement at all. Therefore, any adequate theory of the nature of moral judgement should be able to give some account of the connection between moral judgements and the reasons that support them. It is at just this point that emotivism falters.

What can an emotivist say about reasons? Remember that, for the emotivist, a moral judgement is primarily a verbal means of trying to influence peoples' attitudes and conduct. The view of reasons that naturally goes with this idea is that reasons are any considerations that will have the desired effect, that will influence attitudes and conduct in the desired way. Suppose I am trying to persuade you to reject Betty Friedan's view of abortion. Knowing you are anti-Semitic, I say: 'Friedan, after all, is one of those Jews'. That does the trick; your attitude changes, and you agree that her view of abortion ought to be rejected. Therefore, it would seem that, for the emotivist, the fact that Friedan is Jewish is, at least in some contexts, a reason in support of the judgement that abortion is

immoral. In fact, Stevenson takes exactly this view. In his classic work *Ethics and Language* he says: '*Any* statement about *any* fact which *any* speaker considers likely to alter attitudes may be adduced as a reason for or against an ethical judgement' (Stevenson, 1944).

Obviously. something had gone wrong. Not just any fact can count as a reason in support of just any judgement. The fact must be relevant to the judgement, and psychological influence does not necessarily bring relevance with it. Emotivism will not do; we need at least one more refinement to produce a theory that will account not only for the connection between moral judgement and emotion, but for the connection between morality and reason as well.

The third and final refinement of ethical subjectivism, which its defenders hope might solve this problem, has been suggested by such thinkers as John Dewey and W. D. Falk. They have argued that, while moral judgements express feelings, not just any feelings will do. The process of 'thinking through' the various facts, arguments, and other considerations surrounding a moral issue can change the way a person feels. It can cause old feelings to weaken, to be modified, or to disappear; and new feelings to form. Or, it might have the effect of strengthening the feelings that one already had. A distinction must be made, therefore, between the feelings one has prior to 'thinking things through', and the feelings one might have afterwards. It is the latter feelings – the ones that are produced or sustained by reason – that are the proper basis of moral judgement. Hume had already made this point in his *Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, when he wrote:

> But in order to pave the way for such a sentiment [i.e. a sentiment that forms the basis of a moral judgement] and give a proper discernment of its object, it is often necessary, we find, that much reasoning should precede, that nice distinctions be made, just conclusions drawn, distant comparisons formed, complicated relations examined, and general facts fixed and ascertained. (Hume, 1752)

A person might have strong feelings about abortion, for example, without ever having thought through the various issues surrounding it. Who, exactly, are the women who have abortions? How are their lives affected by it? How are the lives of women who do *not* have abortions affected? What of the fetus itself? Should it be regarded as a person with a right to life? What characteristics must an individual possess in order to have a right to life? Does a fetus have such characteristics? If a fetus is a person with a right to life, does it follow that abortion is wrong in all circumstances? In any circumstances? What part, if any, should religious arguments play in supporting moral judgements? Is there, in fact, a decent religious argument against abortion, or is the so-called religious argument just a fundamentalist bluff? Obviously there is a lot to think about here. Anyone who wants to have an informed opinion about any of these matters has a great deal of work to do.

But suppose someone *had* thought through all this in a thoroughly intelligent and impartial manner, with their feelings being shaped by this process. Then their feelings would be as much in harmony with reason as is possible. They would have considered the nature and consequences of abortion, along with every

possible reason for or against it, in an open-minded way, and every such consideration would have been allowed to have whatever effect on their attitudes it could have. Reason, then, could do no more. Any disagreements that remained between such people would be irresoluble – or at least, not resoluble by rational means. Surely, one might think, there is no further role that reason in ethics could have.

Thus, as our final attempt to formulate an adequate subjectivist understanding of ethical judgement, we might say: something is morally right if it is such that the process of thinking through its nature and consequences would cause or sustain a feeling of approval toward it in a person who was being as reasonable and impartial as is humanly possible. This is just a convoluted way of saying that the morally right thing to do is whatever a completely reasonable person would approve. This may seem to be some distance from the simple idea with which we started, but it is the closest thing to that original idea which has a chance of being true.

It is an encouraging fact that, as we have added qualifications to ethical subjectivism to make it more adequate, it has become less subjectivist and has begun to resemble other theories whose advocates have been working toward the same goal. Our final formulation of ethical subjectivism makes it a close relative to the ideal observer theory, which says that the right thing to do is whatever a perfectly rational, impartial, and benevolent judge would think best. It also has much in common with Richard Brandt's theory – Brandt holds that, in deciding what is right, the key question is 'What would a person (perhaps all persons), if rational in the sense of having made optimal use of all available information, want and choose to do?' And it has many obvious features in common with R. M. Hare's theory (see Article 40, UNIVERSAL PRESCRIPTIVISM.) This is encouraging because, if there is any such thing as truth in moral philosophy, we should expect eventual convergence in those theories which seek after it. Agreement on basic points, while not an absolute guarantee of truth, is at least more reassuring than ceaseless argument.

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