

SUBJECTIVISM

(Ethical Subjectivism)

“TO EACH THEIR OWN”

There are no universal truths in ethics, just individual feelings. There is no independent standard of right and wrong, it's just up to each person's feelings. The morals of an individual cannot be wrong, just different.

QUESTIONS?

A SUBJECTIVIST MAY ASK:

Who am I to say what's right for you?

What do we each feel like doing in the moment?

How can I be as open as possible to another person's way of doing things?

SAYINGS

ASSOCIATED WITH THIS PERSPECTIVE:

“Who am I to judge?”

“To each their own”

“Live and let live”

“You be you” or “You do you”

PROS +

PREFERENCE. We shouldn't assume that someone's perspective (including our own) is based on some universally accepted objective standard and that it is better than other perspectives. Some behaviors and ideas are just based on feelings without good reasoning. One person's perspectives may not always make sense for others.

What is the proper way to dress? How much skin we show is often based on personal preference and may not have a "right answer". What is the proper way to give thanks for a good meal? Is there really a "right way" or just individual preference?

OPEN-MINDEDNESS. What one individual believes for themselves may not be right for others. We often base our ideas on our feelings and it can be helpful to realize that. We can become more open and understanding of different ways of viewing the world and get beyond imposing our individual preferences.

One person may want to be acknowledged for their good work or their birthday in a very public way (e.g. in front of a big group), whereas another person may prefer a private note. It is important to be open to different individual perspectives.

CONS -

IGNORES EVIDENCE. Is one opinion never more reasonable than another? It seems that we can make a clear case for why some ideas about right or wrong provide better evidence than others. Subjectivism ignores the idea that there can be very good and relevant reasons why one decision is more right.

There are very sound reasons, regardless of opinion, that show us that child abuse is wrong. The lack of compassion, the violation of rights, the trauma caused to the individual, family and community, etc.

UNABLE TO CRITIQUE. If there are no measures of right or wrong and it's just up to individual feelings, we cannot criticize any perspectives. Being open minded is often great, but there are some things that seem to be clearly wrong regardless of what someone feels.

Hitler felt it was OK to exterminate innocent people.

NO MORAL PROGRESS. If right and wrong are just up to individual feelings, how can there be any moral progress? To say that someone has progressed seems to contradict the main point of subjectivism, namely that there are no universal standards of right and wrong. If that's true, there can be no moral progress because we can't compare to our past selves.

Someone accepts others discriminating against people in interracial relationships ("Who am I to say that they shouldn't discriminate?"), but changes their mind when their own child is in an interracial relationship.

CONCLUSION

Subjectivism highlights a valuable lesson: some attitudes are just how people feel and are neither right nor wrong. However, this does not mean that nothing is right or wrong. Reasonable people agree that standing up against unfair persecution is right, even if we are not the perpetrators (e.g. the unfair treatment of people with disabilities). Therefore, we must look to other perspectives (e.g. see Pluralism) when deciding what is right or wrong. Note: Subjectivism can be seen as a more extreme type of Relativism.