9.2: Realism, Conventionalism, and Subjectivism

An ethical truth would just be any true claim about what is good, right, wrong, permissible, virtuous, vicious, just, or unjust. That's at least a partial list of the ethically significant things that might be said about something. It will do for our purposes here. So here are some ethical claims:

- It's wrong to torture innocent puppies just for fun.
- Paying your taxes is good.
- Racism is unjust.
- Honesty is a virtue.
- It's permissible to dine at the soup kitchen when you are down and out.

These should all seem like pretty plausible candidates for ethical truth. Note that none of these claims is about what is wrong, good, unjust, or virtuous for somebody or relative to somebody. Sometimes we say things like “abortion is wrong for Frank” or “abortion is permissible relative to Sue.” It's not clear whether these are ethical claims at all. One pretty straightforward way to understand sentences like these is as simply reporting what people think, as saying that Frank thinks abortion is wrong, or that abortion is permissible according to Sue. But if this is all we mean, then we aren't making ethical claims at all. One pretty straightforward way to understand sentences like these is as simply reporting what people think, as saying that Frank thinks abortion is wrong, or that abortion is permissible according to Sue. But if this is all we mean, then we aren't making ethical claims at all. That is, we aren't saying anything about what is good, right, permissible, just, or unjust. Rather we are making claims about Frank and Sue, in particular that he or she has this or that moral opinion. If this is how we are to understand talk about what is “wrong for” or “right relative to,” then we are leaving open the possibility that one or more of the ethical opinions attributed is just plain false. Somebody thinking things are so is no guarantee that they are so. Of course we might actually mean to say that right and wrong are relative to people or groups. If we take the sentences about Frank and Sue to really be ethical claims, then we are invoking a kind of Moral Relativism. We'll take
Moral Relativism up later in this chapter.

The ethical claims listed above are all general in the sense that they make claims that are intended to hold for lots of people in lots of situations. But not all of these claims are “absolute,” where this means something like “no exceptions allowed.” Taking honesty to be a virtue doesn’t necessarily mean that it would be wrong to mislead the Nazi SS officer about the Jews hiding in your attic. And ethical claims needn’t be so general. For instance, “It would be wrong to torture Laura’s puppy after we go the movies on Friday,” is a pretty specific claim about particular things. But it is still a candidate for being an ethical truth. So there might be plenty of ethical truths even if there aren’t any true absolute universal ethical generalizations.

Hopefully we are now clear about what sorts of claims are candidates for ethical truth. Now, what would it mean for any claim like those listed above to be an ethical truth? Ordinarily, when a claim is true there is some fact out there in the world somewhere that makes it true. If it’s true that Russ’ favorite bike has 20 speeds, then what makes this claim true is that there is a certain object in the world that is Russ’ favorite bike and it has 20 speeds. So, one pretty straightforward proposal is that if there are ethical truths, then there are corresponding facts in the world that make them true. These facts needn’t involve concrete physical objects like my favorite bike. We often attribute rightness or wrongness to kinds of actions, for instance. So it might be that certain kinds of action, like torturing innocent puppies just for fun, have ethical properties like wrongness. Likewise, certain social institutions could have ethical properties of justice or injustice, characteristics of personalities could be virtuous or vicious.

We are narrowing in on a way to understand a view we will call ethical realism. Ethical realism is the view that there are ethical truths and that they are made true by facts independent of anyone’s say so, will, or sentiment. These facts will be the truth-makers for ethical truths. We will examine a few realist ethical theories of right action in the next chapter. For any realist ethical theory, we will want some account of what makes the theory true, if it is true. This can be given in terms of a theory of objective value. Utilitarianism, for instance, says that right action is action that maximizes overall happiness. This realist ethical theory is based on a view about objective value. Namely that happiness has value (objectively, independent of how much we might like it).

We live in an ethically skeptical age. Many people fail to recognize ethical realism as a serious contender when they think about whether there are ethical truths and what could make them true. Usually, when people think there are ethical truths at all, they take them to be made true by facts independent of anyone’s say so, will, or sentiment. These facts will be the truth-makers for ethical truths. We will examine a few realist ethical theories of right action in the next chapter. For any realist ethical theory, we will want some account of what makes the theory true, if it is true. This can be given in terms of a theory of objective value. Utilitarianism, for instance, says that right action is action that maximizes overall happiness. This realist ethical theory is based on a view about objective value. Namely that happiness has value (objectively, independent of how much we might like it).

We live in an ethically skeptical age. Many people fail to recognize ethical realism as a serious contender when they think about whether there are ethical truths and what could make them true. Usually, when people think there are ethical truths at all, they take them to be made true by facts independent of anyone’s say so, will, or sentiment. These facts will be the truth-makers for ethical truths. We will examine a few realist ethical theories of right action in the next chapter. For any realist ethical theory, we will want some account of what makes the theory true, if it is true. This can be given in terms of a theory of objective value. Utilitarianism, for instance, says that right action is action that maximizes overall happiness. This realist ethical theory is based on a view about objective value. Namely that happiness has value (objectively, independent of how much we might like it).

Conventionalist ethical views needn’t make morality relative to social groups or the say so of people though. Another very popular conventionalist view of morality is Divine Command Theory (DCT) which holds that there are moral truths and they are made true by the will or command of God. Morality is not relative to social groups according to DCT. It is absolute and holds everywhere for all people. But DCT is still a variety of conventionalism because it makes what is
good or bad a matter of convention, just God’s rather than ours.

Conventionalist views of ethics, either DCT or Moral Relativism, are far and away the most popular among the philosophically untutored. Conventionalism is also the most roundly rejected view about the nature of ethics among philosophers. Much of this chapter will be devoted to making it clear why Moral Relativism and DCT are both, well, horrible views about ethical truth. Religious believers and non-believers alike have better options.

There is one further meta-ethical position to introduce before we consider our options in greater detail. An alternative to realism and conventionalism is that there are no ethical truths at all. We’ll call this view ethical subjectivism. You might recall David Hume holding a view like this. Many others, including the Logical Positivists, have endorsed something like ethical subjectivism. The sentences on our list above certainly look like the sorts of sentences that could be true or false. The sentence “Honesty is a virtue” seems to be a simple subject predicate sentence that asserts something about honesty. But according to the subjectivist, this isn’t the sort of sentence that could be true or false because there is no such property as being a virtue. In fact, another way to understand ethical subjectivism is as the view that there are no ethical properties. If there are no ethical properties, then being virtuous can’t be a property of honesty. Likewise, we can’t attribute goodness to paying your taxes or wrongness to torturing puppies according to ethical subjectivism because there is no property of goodness or wrongness to attribute.

We might be tempted to say that if there are no ethical truths then it would be ethically OK to do whatever we want. But, perhaps surprisingly, ethical subjectivism denies this too since there is no property of being ethically OK to attribute to whatever we want to do. Subjectivism doesn’t settle any questions about what we should or shouldn’t do. It is just the view that there are no ethical properties and hence there are no ethical truths.

Subjectivists like Hume don’t deny that we have ethical sentiments. We feel indignant at the thought of torturing puppies, for instance. A subjectivist can readily grant this and take our moral and ethical talk to be ways of displaying our moral sentiments. This view is sometimes called “yea-booism” since it takes sentences that look like ethical claims to in fact be displays of ethical sentiment. So, the real meaning of “It’s wrong to torture innocent puppies” is something more like “Boo, puppy torture!” Exclamations like this can display our feelings. But exclamations like “Boo, puppy torture!” or “Yea, go team go!” just aren’t the sorts of sentences that can be true or false. They don’t assert anything. We can feel just terrible about puppy torture without puppy torture itself having any kind of ethical property.

In this section we have introduced three general meta-ethical positions:

- Realism is the view that there are ethical truths and they are made true by something other than convention.
- Conventionalism is the view that there are ethical truths and their truth is a matter of convention (God’s in the case of DCT, people’s conventions in the case of Moral Relativism).
- Subjectivism is the view that there are no ethical truths, only subjective ethical sentiments.

It should be clear that these three meta-ethical positions cover all the logical possibilities. In the remainder of this chapter we will take up some evaluation of these positions. As we’ve already mentioned, conventionalist ethical theories are pretty uniformly rejected by philosophers and we’ll want to get clear on why. Subjectivism is a contender, but a puzzling one. We will say a bit more about challenges for subjectivism. In rejecting conventionalism and raising problems for subjectivism, we build a case for ethical realism. Of course this meta-ethical position may face its own
concerns and we needn’t settle the score between subjectivism and realism here. But for reasons that will become clear soon enough, we will need to get conventionalism out of the way before we take up our inquiry into normative ethical theories in the next chapter.

Against Conventionalism

There are many variations on conventional ethical theory depending on who gets to say what’s right or wrong for whom. What they all have in common is that these theories make right and wrong a matter of somebody’s authority or some group’s authority. Since it is generally actions that are commanded, we will conduct this discussion in terms of right and wrong action. Things would go pretty much the same if we conducted our inquiry in terms of virtue and vice or good and bad more generally. To keep things simple, we will just discuss the two views we’ve already mentioned: DCT (Divine Command Theory) which makes right and wrong a matter of God’s say so, and societal Moral Relativism that makes right or wrong relative to a society’s say so.

According to DCT, what is right is right simply because God commands it. This view makes ethics easy, so long as we can be sure we know what God commands. If we can somehow be confident about that, ethics requires no critical thinking, just total obedience. We had a much earlier encounter with DCT in our discussion of Plato’s dialogue, *Euthyphro*. In that dialogue Socrates points towards the classic and still cogent objection to DCT. The central problem for DCT is that it makes ethics completely arbitrary. In principle, God could command that anything be right. God could command that we torture puppies, commit genocide, and treat children like livestock. According to DCT, if God does command these things, then they are right, end of story. In fact, many people have sincerely taken God to have commanded these things (perhaps except for puppy torture). However, hopefully, the idea that any of these things could be morally right strikes you as absurd. In spite of our occasionally differing ethical opinions, ethics does seem to be systematic and coherent. Right and wrong are not completely arbitrary. It seems at least that there is some reasoned systematicity to our ethical opinions in spite of the differences we sometimes arrive at. If this is right, then we should reject any meta-ethical view that makes ethics completely arbitrary. And this means rejecting the view that right and wrong is simply a matter of God’s command.

The religious believer has better meta-ethical options than DCT. When I present students with the knock down objection to DCT just given, it’s not uncommon for someone to object that God would never command us to torture innocent puppies because God is good. I think this is exactly the right response for a believer to offer. But this response is not a defense of DCT. Any believer that makes this move is joining Socrates in rejecting DCT and taking God to command what is good because it is good. If God is essentially good, then what is right is not made right merely by his command. Rather he commands what he commands because of his goodness. When the religious believer takes God’s goodness to be what is ethically fundamental he abandons conventionalist meta-ethics in favor of a kind of theological ethical realism. Of course, the challenge of understanding God’s good nature remains.

People whose ethical opinions are not guided by religious faith have a very unfortunate tendency to retain the conventionalist authority-based view of the nature of ethical truth. The result, most frequently, is some variety of Moral Relativism. Perhaps the shift to Moral Relativism is based on the assumption that if there is no God to decide what’s right and wrong, then it must be people who get to decide right from wrong. The idea that ethics might be a matter of inquiry and discovery rather than authority and command seldom gets a foothold without some structured philosophical
critical thinking. Descartes’ vision of shaking off the shackles of authority and thinking freely is far from fruition in our culturally dominant way of thinking about morality.

Let’s take societal Moral Relativism to be the view that what is right relative to a society is whatever is deemed right by that society. We could ask for a few clarifications. In particular, it would be good to know what counts as a society and what it takes for a society to deem something right. In the broadest sense, we might take any social group to constitute a society, though I don’t think anyone is a chess club moral relativist or a garden society moral relativist. People are much more inclined to take culture to identify the social groups relevant to morality. And this sounds appealing given that moral traditions are often incorporated into cultural traditions. Keep in mind, though, that ethics is about what moral opinions are best, not what moral opinions are in fact held by people or how they come to be held by people. While most of us are pretty likely to inherit our moral opinions from the dominant traditions in our culture, being entrenched by culture might not be the best guide to what is good. Given this, we might ask why it is culture that gets to decide right and wrong rather than the chess club or the garden society. Moral Relativism seems to suffer a kind of arbitrariness even at the level of selecting the groups to which right and wrong are supposed to be relative.

Next, what is it for a group to deem something right or wrong? As we are culturally engrained to think egalitarianism is a good thing, most of us would probably say that a group deems something right when a solid majority of its members deem it right. But why not take a group to deem something to be right with the strongest and most aggressive member of the group deems it right? This is how things work with gangs and outlaw militias. If right and wrong are merely matters of convention, why should we favor egalitarian democratic say so over gangland style strongman say so? Note that it won’t do to appeal to values independent of the say so of groups here, since Moral Relativism denies the existence of any value independent of group say so. It appears that a further element of worrisome arbitrariness lurks just in the attempt to formulate a plausible version of Moral Relativism.

Whatever version of Moral Relativism we lump for, the problems will be basically the same. Because Moral Relativism grounds right and wrong in authority, it suffers the same central problem as DCT. The commands of people can be just as arbitrary as the commands of any god. Anything can be right relative to a culture. All it takes is for the culture to deem it right. So if a culture deems it right to cut the genitals of young girls without regard to their consent, then, according to cultural Moral Relativism, this is right relative to that culture. Should this example seem at all ethnocentric, let’s add another. If a culture deems it good for women to walk around all day in shoes that wreck their feet, then, according to cultural Moral Relativism, this is good relative to that culture. If neither of these examples strikes you as morally absurd, then consider racism, genocide, terrorism, or exhausting natural resources leaving future generations to suffer and die off. According to Moral Relativism, all it takes for any of these things to be right relative to a culture is for that culture to deem it right. As ethical theories go, Moral Relativism begins to look like a bit of a train wreck. Yet all we have done here is reason very straightforwardly and deductively from what Moral Relativism says.

The arbitrariness of Moral Relativism leads directly to the central and most compelling objection to the view. But there is more to consider including dispelling some myths that seem to speak in its favor. Many would endorse some version of Moral Relativism on the grounds that it seems to support tolerance and respect for societies with differing moral views. Moral Relativism seems to be a view that allows for different societies to embrace different moral standards that are right relative to the respective societies. Moral Relativism rejects the notion that the moral standards of one society could be objectively correct. This line of thought has led many who value cultural diversity and tolerance to embrace Moral Relativism. But this is a mistake. Moral Relativism does not entail that we should be tolerant of diversity. Moral Relativism entails that we should be tolerant of diversity if and only if our group deems tolerance of diversity to be a
good thing. If a group deems intolerance to be good, then, according to Moral Relativism, intolerance is good relative to that group. Since goodness is relativized to groups, our view that tolerance and respect for diversity is good fails to provide the intolerant group with any grounds for reconsidering its intolerance. Moral Relativism thus turns out to be a deeply conservative view in the sense that it undermines all possible reasons for changing our moral outlook. Moral Relativism is a view that gives the dominant racist culture moral standing and further denies us any reasonable grounds for arguing against the intolerance of the dominant racist culture. We who value tolerance and respect for diverse individuals or groups would do much better to endorse tolerance and respect as objective realist ethical values than to endorse Moral Relativism.

A further strong argument against Moral Relativism is the argument from change. Sometimes our view about the moral status of some practice changes. A person might, for instance, think that eating meat is morally unproblematic at one time and then become convinced that animals deserve some kind of moral regard that speaks against eating them. When moral views change in this fashion, people do not merely drop one moral belief in favor of another. Typically, they also hold that their previous moral views were mistaken. They take themselves to have discovered something new about what is morally right. Likewise, when the prevalent moral belief in a society undergoes a significant change, as in the civil rights movement, we are inclined to see this as a change for the better. Moral Relativism has no problem with changes in moral standards. But the relativist cannot account for any changes in our moral beliefs as being changes for the better. This is because the Moral Relativism recognizes no independent standard of goodness against which the new moral opinions can be judged to be better than the old moral opinions.

A closely related problem for Moral Relativism is the moral reformer’s dilemma. We recognize a few remarkable individuals as moral reformers, people who, we think, improved the moral condition of their society in some way. Common examples might include the Buddha, Jesus, Ghandi, or Martin Luther King Jr. While the relativist can allow that these individuals changed the moral views of their societies, none can be said to have changed their societies for the better. Again, this is because the societal moral relativist recognizes no standard of moral goodness independent of what is accepted in a society according to which a society that changes can be said to change for the better. The relativist is committed to taking the most overt forms of racism to be right relative to pre-civil rights American society and wrong relative to post-civil rights American society. But since standards of goodness are determined by the prevalent views in a society, there is no standard of goodness to appeal to in judging that the change our society underwent in the civil rights movement was a change for the better. According to societal Moral Relativism, anyone who takes Martin Luther King to have improved American society by leading it to reject many forms of racism is just mistaken about the nature of ethical truth.

Relativism and the Social Sciences

The social sciences are in the business of trying to better understand and explain the diversity of cultural practices and world views. But in describing culturally based beliefs about what is right or wrong, they are not defending ethical claims about what is right or wrong. The social sciences are often concerned with what people in different cultures believe is right or wrong. And social scientists will often discuss a kind of descriptive cultural relativism in explaining how what is deemed good or bad in various cultures is relative to their respective values and traditions. But the question of what is good or bad remains a question for ethics.
Suspending judgment is methodologically important for understanding. This is just as true in philosophy as it is in sociology or anthropology. We suspend judgment at the stage of trying to understand a new view. Only once we have a clear understanding can we then turn to critical evaluation. The social sciences are out to understand cultural practices and perspectives and suspending judgment is essential to doing this well. So guarding against ethnocentrism is important when an anthropologist investigates cultures that are different from her own. But the methodological importance of suspending judgment for the sake of better understanding is not a permanent obstacle to critical evaluation of the moral points of view transmitted through culture. Ethics, unlike sociology or anthropology, is a fundamentally normative discipline. Its goal is to evaluate moral views and try to see which is most reasonable in light of the kinds of ethical evidence and argument we can uncover. Here we benefit from the social sciences and the understanding they produce of the moral perspectives of different cultures.

When we take up ethics and critically evaluate moral opinions, we are moving beyond the suspension of judgment. In ethics our goal is to better understand which moral opinions are reasonable and which aren’t. But our ethical judgments are to be grounded on ethical reasons. It remains just as important that we avoid ethnocentrism in evaluating moral views. Criticizing a practice that is morally accepted in another culture because it is not in line with in our own culturally based values is simply a non-starter as an argument in ethics. If we have some reason for thinking that an evaluation of a moral opinion is based on some culturally loaded value or bias, then to that degree we have a good reason to discredit that evaluation.

Lots of people find societal Moral Relativism appealing as a means of conflict avoidance. It is a way for everyone to feel that they have things right. But, to engage in a bit of social science, relativism about morality seems plausible only in comfortably decadent cultures. Nobody buys Moral Relativism once someone starts shooting. When you don’t have the option of avoiding conflict, that there is a difference between just and unjust, right and wrong, is often too starkly apparent to ignore. Given this, we should worry that Moral Relativism as a means of conflict avoidance is really a lazy and cowardly way for the comfortable and complacent to avoid addressing important issues.

There should not be so much to fear in investigating ethical issues. When we sit down to formulate and evaluate ethical arguments, it’s not really about who is right or who gets to have their way. Like any other kind of inquiry, it’s really about looking into issues and trying to reason well. Rational inquiry done well doesn’t have to include unpleasant conflict, but it does hold out some hope for resolving conflicts reasonably. In ethics we put an argument for a view about what is right or wrong on the table and talk about the quality of the argument. Where the argument came from is not what is at issue at this point. Neither is who likes or dislikes the conclusion. All that is at issue is whether or not the premises of the argument should be accepted, and whether or not the conclusion follows from the premises. Making carefully reasoned judgments about ethical views is not the same thing as condemning or seeking recourse against those who hold them. Careful inquiry into what is good, right, or just is an essential precursor to effectively fighting for social justice. But in the context of inquiry, we are not joining the battle and to conflate these two activities is very likely to result in doing both of them badly. Philosophy is only concerned with whether or not good reasons can be given for accepting or rejecting positions and opinions. Free and open inquiry, inquiry that employs as many diverse perspectives as possible, provides the only method we have for identifying and filtering out culturally based biases. Bringing a righteous battle to inquiry can only silence voices whose inclusion would be valuable.

For yet another compelling line of argument against Moral Relativism, see Paul Boghossian’s piece, “The Maze of Moral Relativism.” Boghossian argues that attempts to relativize morality undermine the normativity of moral beliefs altogether and so ultimately collapse into nihilism, the view that nothing matters, nothing is good. If you prefer to listen, here’s
a Philosophy Bites podcast in which Boghossian explains his line of argument.

If ethics is a matter of authority as both DCT and Moral Relativism would have it, then there is no inquiry to engage in beyond figuring out what the relevant authority says. This would make ethics a singularly boring topic to look into. But we will find quite a few interesting things to say about plausible normative ethical theories. So we might take our inquiry into normative ethics in the next chapter to constitute one further argument against conventionalist approaches to ethics. Ethics just isn’t as dull as conventionalism would have it. Before we get there, we need to address subjectivism, the view that there are no ethical truths, or no ethical properties.

Against subjectivism

Here, I want to discuss just one consideration that I think speaks for a realist view of ethics over the subjectivist view. We seem to reason about ethics quite a lot. We don’t just express ethical sentiments, but we incorporate ethical expressions into complicated strings of expressions that look an awful lot like arguments. People who think the death penalty is wrong don’t just say “The death penalty is wrong.” Sometimes at least, they also say things like, “The death penalty is wrong because it involves the killing of a person and it’s wrong to kill a person.” It certainly seems like what is offered here is an argument. And we commonly evaluate such expressions as if they were arguments. But if the subjectivist is right, then whatever the opponent of the death penalty offers with this expression, it isn’t an argument. That’s because, as we learned in Chapter 2, an argument consists of a series of claims that admit of truth or falsity. In order to be a part of an argument (in order to be a premise or a conclusion) a sentence has to be a statement that makes some claim about how things are (and therefore is capable of being true or false). But the subjectivist who follows Hume in taking moral sentences like “murder is wrong” to be mere expressions of sentiment, equivalent in this case to “Boo, murder!” denies that such sentences make claims that admit of truth or falsity. Subjectivism would thus have it that the apparent line of reasoning against the death penalty mentioned above should really be taken to express something like this:

1. The death penalty is the killing of a person.
2. Boo, killing persons.
3. So, boo the death penalty.

Whatever this is, it is not an argument and we have no means of evaluating it as a good reason or a bad reason. Remember that ethics is normative. Our sentiments may guide our own behavior. But if they are to guide policy or the sentiments and behaviors of others, we would need to provide some reason for thinking our sentiments are relevant to what policies we should adopt. But this would require a normative ethical claim of some sort and subjectivism denies that there are such things. So, ethical subjectivism has a hard time explaining the role of reasoning in our ethical behavior. I think this affords a cogent inference to the best explanation in favor of a realist ethical theory. The best explanation for our apparent ability to reason about ethical matters is that there are ethical claims and they can be evaluated as more or less reasonable in the standard way, by evaluating arguments that are made up of claims that can be true or false.

At the very least, the subjectivist owes us an adequate alternative story about what we are doing in our ethical discourse.
if we are not offering and evaluating arguments and it is not at all clear how the subjectivist might accomplish this. Whatever account of our seemingly reasonable ethical discourse is offered, it would seem to open a path to doing normative ethics. Subjectivism doesn’t on its own settle any questions about how we should live or what we should do. Nor does it take those issues off the table. Robust normative ethics, where this is understood to be about ethical sentiments rather than facts outside of us, remains an open possibility. Ethical subjectivism is not nihilism. It leaves open the possibility of normative ethics built on a foundation of what matters to us. This seems to be how Hume understood it. He was not concerned about ethical subjectivism leading to social collapse, anarchy, or nihilism because he thought we had more or less the same capacities for moral feeling. Even when we disagree about ethical matters, our indignation or approbation usually makes sense even to those who disagree. It would be worth noting here that much of Hume’s writing appears to be straightforward applied normative ethics as you will find in his Essays, Moral and Political. Hume, at any rate, found no contradiction between subjectivism as a meta-ethical view and robustly endorsing some applied ethical positions while rejecting others.