Professional Ethics
PE 3340
Today’s Topics
Cultural Relativism &
Ethical Subjectivism

Drawing by David Shrigley
Five Features of Cultural Relativism

1. Different societies have different moral codes.

2. (a) The "good" is determined by society; (b) an act is "right" if it is allowed by the guiding ideals of the society in which it is performed, and "wrong" if it is forbidden by those ideals.

3. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society’s code as better than another’s.

4. The moral code of our society has no special status.

5. We should adopt an attitude of tolerance.
1. We could no longer say that the customs of other societies are morally inferior/superior to our own.
2. We could decide whether our actions are right or wrong just by consulting the standards of our society.
What If.....
Cultural Relativism Were True?

3. The idea of moral progress is called into doubt.
How Much Do Cultures Disagree?

• Reconsider the case of eating the dead. Perhaps this is done to protect the spirit of the deceased.

• Indeed compare the practice to the Catholic Eucharist or Holy Communion.

• Has there ever been a society that allows for murder?

• Has there ever been a society that allows for unlimited lying?
1. Those who defend cultural practices typically give reasons. (Consider the case of female genital mutilation.)

2. Cultural relativism violates the fundamental norm of impartiality by giving preferences to individual cultural groups.
Subjectivism In Ethics
**Factual vs. Normative Statements**

**Factual Statements:** statements describing some state of affairs.

1. “It rained on this day last year.”
2. “Same sex couples have the right to marry in Spain.”
3. “Silver has the highest electrical conductivity of all metals.”
4. “There is a giraffe in the room.”

- Inquiry into the relevant facts would confirm or disconfirm these statements.
Normative Statement: expresses a value judgment of some kind. It is defended by appeal to a norm or standard. There are many different kinds of normative statements.

1. “Antonio Gaudi is a great architect and artist.”
2. “Do not chew with your mouth open.”
3. “You should give something to a charity.”
4. “Don’t Mess With Texas.”
5. “Do not use a semicolon when listing items.”
Characteristics of Ethical Statements

1. Prescription of conduct: differentiates ethical from aesthetic statements.

2. Impartiality: moral norms are not supposed to advance the interests of one person or group exclusively.

3. Independence from Arbitrary Authority: moral norms cannot be determined simply by appeal to consensus or tradition, unlike etiquette.

4. Overriding Importance: moral norms are more important than the rules of law and aesthetic judgments. This is taken by many to be the central feature of moral norms.
Subjectivism In Ethics

Consider your reactions to the following images.

**Warning:** these images are graphic.
Subjectivism In Ethics

Images from the war in Afghanistan
Subjectivism In Ethics

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Take any [vicious action]... 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 [disapproval], which arises in you, toward this action. Here is a matter of fact; but ‘tis the object of feeling, not reason.

David Hume - *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1740)
The Dutch-Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza suggested a similar idea when he asserted that:

“We do not endeavor, will, seek after or desire because we judge a thing to be good. On the contrary, we judge a thing to be good because we endeavor, will, seek after and desire it.”

Spinoza, *Ethics* (1677)
The cry *How beautiful!* or *How good!* may be sincere, and it may be applauded, but it is never true. If sincere, such a cry is also never false, even if not re-echoed by the public conscience; because the public feeling that contradicts it can also never be true, but at best also sincere.

George Santayana, *Realms of Being*, (1942)
People have different opinions, but where morality is concerned, there are no “facts,” and no one is “right.” People just feel differently, and that’s all there is to it. (p.33)

Example: Republican congresswoman Michele Bachmann has asserted: "If you're involved in gay and lesbian lifestyle, it's bondage. It is personal bondage, personal despair, and personal enslavement."

• For Hume, such an assertion is founded on sentiment.
• If true, the implications for ethical theory are varied and open to debate.
Version 1: Simple Subjectivism

• Consider once again normative statements: these express a value judgment of some kind.

• For the Simple Subjectivist, normative statements are really just factual reports of the speaker’s attitudes.

1. “X is good” or “X is right” = “I (the speaker) approve of X.”

2. “X is bad” or “X is wrong” = “I (the speaker) disapprove of X.”

• Note that this is not unlike the Cultural Relativist’s position that moral judgments report the folkways of a culture.
Two Objections to Simple Subjectivism

I. We could not account for moral disagreement.

1. When there is a moral disagreement one person involved must be correct and the other person must be wrong.
2. If two people disagree morally and one of them must be correct, then simple subjectivism is false.
3. Hence, simple subjectivism is false.

• As usual, we would want to know if this argument is valid and if the argument is sound.
II. Simple Subjectivism Implies We Are Always Right.

Rachels argues as follows:

1. Our moral judgments are not always correct.
2. If our moral judgments are not always correct, Simple Subjectivism is false.
3. Hence, Simple Subjectivism is false. (p.35-36)

• Again, we need to ask if this argument is valid and if it is sound.
Reply to Objection Two

• Premise two, "If our moral judgments are not always correct, Simple Subjectivism is false", assumes a very simple view of simple subjectivism. The subjectivist may be wrong, if she has her facts wrong.
Emotivism is a version of ethical subjectivism made popular by the American philosopher Charles L. Stevenson (1908-1979).

Stevenson pointed out that language is used in many ways. He held that contrary to appearances moral language is not fact-stating. Rather, moral judgments are expressions of attitude and/or commands.

“X is good” = “Hurrah X!”
“X is right” = “Do X!”
“X is bad” = “Boo X!”
“X is wrong” = “Don’t do X!”

• In general, for the emotivist the purpose of moral language is to express one’s attitudes and persuade others to share those attitudes.
Version 2: Emotivism

Note that Emotivism seems to easily avoid the previous two objections raised against simple subjectivism.

1. Emotivists hold that people do disagree in ethics, but the kind of disagreement is **disagreement in attitude**.

2. Emotivism avoids the objection that we are always correct in our moral judgments since they are not true or false statements.

• But, as Rachels’ points out, for the Emotivist there is a sense in which our moral judgments are “beyond reproach” (p.39)
Objection: Rachels holds that any adequate theory of ethics should be able to explain how reasons can support moral judgments.

• But since for the Emotivist moral judgments are expressions of preference, “reason can play no important role here”. (p. 40)

• Note: not all Emotivists agree with Rachels on this point. Some have argued that reason can play a role in Emotivism. For now, we will set this point aside. But keep in mind the debate is not over.