

## AN ARGUMENT AGAINST ETHICAL SUBJECTIVISM

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*This article provides an argument against ethical subjectivism as a normative theory. It highlights how ethical subjectivism does not correspond with the phenomena of how we argue. Ethical subjectivism suggests that ethics is a matter of subjective preferences, but we do not usually enter into a serious debate on such matters. On the contrary, when we argue we believe that what we argue for is objectively true. This may pose a serious problem to an ethical subjectivist who holds that ethical conceptions are neither superior nor inferior to each other. The article also outlines the implications of the position of an ethical subjectivist and how they go against our deepest moral intuition that 'might is not right'.*

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A persuasive argument against ethical subjectivism as a normative theory is that it does not correspond with the phenomena of how we argue. Broadly speaking, ethical subjectivism claims that what we ought to do ethically is a matter of subjective preference. But we do not usually argue on matters that are thought to be purely subjective. For example, we do not enter into a serious debate on whether or not a particular dish is delicious. On the contrary, we argue on matters believed to be objectively true, like whether one plus one equals to two. In our context, to make a claim that an act of genocide is ethically wrong (a claim which most if not all would agree) is not so much an expression of one's subjective preference as it is a belief that genocide is a direct attack on an objective human good, i.e. life.

If ethics is subjective and one's subjective preference is as good as another, then there is no point in arguing. If theft in most circumstances is not believed to be objectively wrong, then we have no locus to persuade others to accept it. But our experiences reveal that we do argue on these issues and seek to persuade others to accept our point of view; the fact that we do so suggests a belief in some form of objectivism. Surely one may argue that there is still a point for a subjectivist to argue for his or her personal preference; one may attempt to persuade others to adopt one's preference, like how some would try to persuade others to read a book that one finds subjectively fascinating. To this, I reply that an ethical subjectivist who adopts this position must at least be ready to accept that ethical content is to be determined by the majority. If there is acceptance of (1) ethical subjectivity, and acceptance that (2) others may be persuaded to adopt a particular subjective preference, and since the point of persuading others is primarily to discourage or encourage a particular conduct, this may lead to what John Stuart Mill terms as the 'tyranny of the majority', where the preference of the majority is imposed on the minority.

Even if an ethical subjectivist accepts this majoritarian approach, it still does not correspond with the phenomena of how we argue. If ethical conceptions are determined by subjective preferences then, theoretically, each and every ethical conception is neither superior nor inferior to any other. However, in practice, in attempting to determine what would constitute as an ethical conduct, we do find that certain ethical conceptions are superior over others. For example, in the context of the Holocaust, we deem the sanctity of human life and non-discrimination as superior over the preservation and propagation of the Aryan race. This juxtaposition between theory and practice suggests that, for an ethical subjectivist, what may justify the preference of one conception over another is that of numerical support. For to deem inferior a particular ethical conception is to prefer one conception over another, and if ethical

subjectivism is about (a) determining what our subjective preferences are and if these (b) preferences are tabulated, it is almost certain that a dominant ethical conception held by the majority would emerge. The majority who hold to this dominant ethical conception would then impose it over the minority. But this view does not correspond with how we argue either, for how we argue and the numerical support behind the argument are not conceptually related. Take for example the absurdity of compurgation, of winning one's 'legal' dispute by the number of witnesses that one may produce in his favour. We find this to be absurd because we disassociate the strength of the argument from the numerical support behind it.

Instead, this recognition of the superiority of one ethical conception over another suggests that when we argue, we believe that what we argue is objectively true. To illustrate my point I ask: what would be the response of an ethical subjectivist to the almost universal condemnation of the atrocities of the Nazi regime, particularly, the treatment of the Jews? Is it the sheer number of subjective preferences in support of the condemnation that justify coercive laws in several European nations against those who deny the Holocaust? For example, the *National Socialism Prohibition Law of Austria* penalises one who 'denies, grossly plays down, approves or tries to excuse the National Socialist genocide...'. If the sheer number would suffice, then the position held by such ethical subjectivists does not correspond with the language we use in condemning the Holocaust. Winston Churchill wrote in 1944 that 'this is the most horrible crime ever committed in the whole history of the world...'. This example shows that our argument against and our condemnation of the Holocaust draw their strength not from numerical support but from a belief that the treatment of the Jews was objectively and ethically wrong.

In sum, ethical subjectivism loses its potency as a normative theory because it does not correspond, from various vantage points, with the phenomena of how we argue on

ethical issues. In every ethical question, when arguments are put forth, an assumption is always made that there is an objectively correct answer to the question. When we argue that abortion is wrong, for example, we argue that it is objectively wrong and this is what we regard as the correct answer. Whether or not it *is* the objectively correct answer is a non-issue, what is more important here is that we *assert* and *believe* that it is the objectively correct answer. If not, we would not argue for it in the first place. Ethical subjectivism as a normative theory fails to address this adequately.

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