

James Rachels

## *Subjectivism in Ethics*

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.

David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740)

### **1. The Basic Idea of Ethical Subjectivism**

In 2001 there was a mayoral election in New York, and when it came time for the city's annual Gay Pride Day parade, every single Democratic and Republican candidate showed up to march. "There is not a single candidate who can be described as not good on our issues," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the Empire State Pride Agenda, a gay rights organization. He added that "In other parts of the country, the positions taken here would be extremely unpopular, if not deadly at the polls." The national Republican Party apparently agrees; at the urging of religious conservatives, it has made opposition to gay rights a part of its national stance.

What do people around the country actually think? The Gallup Poll has been asking Americans "Do you feel that homosexuality should be considered an acceptable alternative lifestyle or not?" since 1982, when 34% responded affirmatively. The number has been rising, however, and in 2000, a majority 52%-said that they think homosexuality should be considered acceptable. This means, of course, that almost as many think otherwise. People on both sides have strong feelings. The Reverend Jerry Falwell spoke for many when he said in a television interview, "Homosexuality is immoral. The so-called 'gay rights' are not rights at all, because immorality is not right." Falwell is a Baptist. The Catholic view is more nuanced, but it agrees that gay sex is impermissible. Gays and lesbians, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "do not choose their homosexual condition," and "They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided." Nonetheless, "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered" and "Under no circumstances can they be approved." Therefore, to lead virtuous lives, homosexual persons must be chaste.

What attitude should we take? We might say that homosexuality is immoral, or we might say it is all right. But there is a third alternative. We might say something like this:

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 the end of it.

This is the basic thought behind Ethical Subjectivism. Ethical Subjectivism is the idea that our moral opinions are based on our feelings and nothing more. On this view, there is no such thing as "objective" right or wrong. It is a fact that some people are homosexual and some are heterosexual; but it is not a fact that one is good and the other bad. So when someone such as Falwell says that homosexuality is wrong, he is not stating a fact about homosexuality. Instead, he is merely saying something about his feelings toward it.

Of course, Ethical Subjectivism is not just an idea about the evaluation of homosexuality. It applies to all moral matters. To take a different example, it is a fact that the Nazis exterminated millions of innocent people; but according to Ethical Subjectivism, it is not a fact that what they did was evil. When we say their actions were evil, we are only saying that we have negative feelings toward them. The same applies to any moral judgment whatever.

## **2. The Evolution of the Theory**

Often the development of a philosophical idea will go through several stages. At first the idea will be put forward in a crude, simple form, and many people will find it attractive for one reason or another. But then the idea will be subjected to critical analysis, and it will be found to have defects. Arguments will be made against it. At this point some people may be so impressed with the objections that they abandon the idea altogether, concluding that it cannot be right. Others, however, may continue to have confidence in the basic idea, and so they will try to refine it, giving it a new, improved formulation that will not be vulnerable to the objections. For a time it may appear that the theory has been saved. But then new arguments may be found that cast doubt on the new version of the theory. Once again the new objections may cause some to abandon the idea, while others keep the faith and try to salvage the theory by formulating still another "improved" version. The whole process of revision and criticism will then start over again.

The Theory of Ethical Subjectivism has developed in just this way. It began as a simple idea – in the words of David Hume, that morality is a matter of sentiment rather than fact. But as objections were raised to the theory, and as its defenders tried to answer the objections, the theory evolved into something much more sophisticated.

### 3. The First Stage: Simple Subjectivism

The simplest version of the theory, which states the main idea but does not attempt to refine it very much, is this: 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”	}	all mean: “I (the speaker) approve of X”
“X is right”		
“X is good”		
“X ought to be done”		

And similarly:

“X is morally unacceptable”	}	all mean: “I (the speaker) disapprove of X”
“X is wrong”		
“X is bad”		
“X ought not to be done”		

We may 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 objections, because it has implications that are contrary to what we know (or at least, contrary to what we think we know) about the nature of moral evaluation. Here are two of the most prominent objections.

**Simple Subjectivism Cannot Account for Our Fallibility.** None of us is infallible. We are sometimes wrong in our evaluations; and when we discover that we are mistaken, we may want to correct our judgments. But if Simple Subjectivism were correct, this would be impossible, because Simple Subjectivism implies that each of us is infallible.

Consider Falwell again, who says homosexuality is immoral. According to

Simple Subjectivism, he is merely saying that he, Falwell, disapproves of homosexuality. Now, of course it is possible that he is not speaking sincerely – it is possible that he really does not disapprove of homosexuality, but is merely playing to his conservative audience. However, if we assume he is speaking sincerely – if we assume he really does disapprove of it – then it follows that what he says is true. So long as he is honestly representing his own feelings, he cannot be mistaken.

But this contradicts the plain fact that none of us is infallible. We are sometimes wrong. Therefore, Simple Subjectivism cannot be correct.

**Simple Subjectivism Cannot Account for Disagreement.** The second argument against Simple Subjectivism is based on the idea that this theory cannot account for the fact of disagreement in ethics. Matt Foreman does not believe that homosexuality is immoral. So, on the face of it, it appears that he and Falwell disagree. But consider what Simple Subjectivism implies about this situation.

According to Simple Subjectivism, when Foreman says that homosexuality is not immoral, he is merely making a statement about his attitude – he is saying that he, Foreman, does not disapprove of homosexuality. Would Falwell disagree with that? No, Falwell would agree that Foreman does not disapprove of homosexuality. At the same time, when Falwell says that homosexuality is immoral, he is only saying that he, Falwell, disapproves of it. And how could anyone disagree with that? Thus, according to Simple Subjectivism, there is no disagreement between them; each should acknowledge the truth of what the other is saying. Surely, though, there is something wrong here, for Falwell and Foreman *do* disagree about whether homosexuality is immoral.

There is a kind of eternal frustration implied by Simple Subjectivism: Falwell and Foreman are deeply opposed to one another; yet they cannot even state their positions in a way that joins the issue. Foreman may try to deny what Falwell says, but according to Simple Subjectivism he succeeds only in changing the subject.

The argument may be summarized like this. When one person says “X is morally acceptable” and someone else says “X is morally unacceptable,” they are disagreeing. However, if Simple Subjectivism were correct, there would be no disagreement between them. Therefore, Simple Subjectivism cannot be correct.

These arguments, and others like them, show that Simple Subjectivism is a flawed theory. It cannot be maintained, at least not in such a crude form. In the face of such arguments, some thinkers have chosen to reject the whole idea of Ethical Subjectivism.

Others, however, have worked to produce a better version of the theory that would not be vulnerable to such objections.

#### **4. The Second Stage: Emotivism**

The improved version was a theory that came to be known as Emotivism. Developed chiefly by the American philosopher Charles L. Stevenson (1908-1979), Emotivism was one of the most influential theories of Ethics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is far more subtle and sophisticated than Simple Subjectivism.

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

“Abraham Lincoln was president of the United States.”  
“I have an appointment at four o’clock.”  
“Gasoline costs \$1.39 per gallon.”  
“Shakespeare is the author of Hamlet.”

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

However, there are other purposes for which language may be used. Suppose I say “Close the door!” This utterance is neither true nor false. It is not a statement of any kind; it is a command, which is something different. Its purpose is not to convey information; rather, its purpose is to get you to do something. I am trying to influence your beliefs; I am trying to influence your conduct.

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

“Hurrah for Abraham Lincoln!”  
“Alas!”  
“Would that gasoline did not cost so much!”  
“Damn Hamlet”

These are familiar types of sentences that we understand easily enough. But none of them is “true” or “false.” (It makes no sense to say, “It is true that hurrah for Abraham Lincoln” 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 Abraham Lincoln," I am reporting the fact that I have a positive attitude towards him. This is a statement of fact, which is either true or false. On the other hand, if I shout "Hurrah for Lincoln!" I am not stating any sort of fact, not even about my attitudes. I am expressing an attitude, but 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 different. It is used, first, as a means of influencing people's behavior: If someone says "You ought not to do that," he is trying to *stop you from doing it*. Thus the utterance is more like a command than a statement of fact; it is as though he had said, "Don't do that!" Second, moral language is used to express (not report) one's attitude. Saying "Lincoln was a good man" is not like saying "I like Lincoln," but it is like saying "Hurrah for Lincoln!"

The difference between Emotivism and Simple Subjectivism should now be obvious. Simple Subjectivism interpreted ethical statements as statements of fact, of a special kind—namely, as reports of the speaker's attitude. According to Simple Subjectivism, when Falwell says, "Homosexuality is immoral," this means the same as "I (Falwell) disapprove of homosexuality"—a statement of fact about Falwell's attitude. Emotivism, on the other hand, denies that his utterance states any fact at all, even a fact about himself. Instead, Emotivism interprets his utterance as equivalent to something like "Homosexuality—yechh!" or "Would that there was no homosexuality."

Now this may seem to be a trivial, nit-picking difference that isn't worth bothering with. But from a theoretical point of view, it is actually a very big and important difference. One way to see this is to consider again the arguments against Simple Subjectivism. While those arguments were severely embarrassing to Simple Subjectivism, they do not affect Emotivism at all.

1. The first argument was that if Simple Subjectivism is correct, then we are all infallible in our moral judgments; but we certainly are not infallible; therefore, Simple Subjectivism cannot be correct.

This argument is effective only because Simple Subjectivism interprets moral judgments as statements that can be true or false. "Infallible" means that one's judgments are always true; and Simple Subjectivism assigns moral judgments a meaning that *will* always be true, so long as the speaker is sincere. That is why, on that theory, people turn out to be infallible. Emotivism, on the other hand, does not interpret moral judgments as statements that are true-or-false; and so the same

argument will not work against it. Because commands and expressions of attitude are not true-or-false, people cannot be “infallible” with respect to them.

2. The second argument had to do with moral disagreement. If Simple Subjectivism is correct, then when one person says “X is morally acceptable” and someone else says “X is morally unacceptable,” they are not really disagreeing. They are, in fact, talking about entirely different things—each is making a statement about his or her own attitude with which the other can readily agree. But, the argument goes, people who say such things really are disagreeing with one another, and so Simple Subjectivism cannot be correct.

Emotivism emphasizes that there is more than one way in which people may disagree. Compare these two kinds of disagreement:

First: I believe that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in the assassination of John Kennedy, and you believe there was a conspiracy. This is a disagreement about the facts—I believe something to be true that you believe to be false.

Second: I favor gun-control legislation and you are opposed to it. Here, it is not our beliefs that are in conflict but our desires—I want something to happen that you do not want to happen. (You and I may agree about all the facts surrounding the gun-control controversy and 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 the latter kind of disagreement *disagreement in attitude*, and he contrasts it with disagreement *about* attitudes. You and I may agree in all our judgments about our attitudes: We agree that you are opposed to gun control, and we agree that I am for it. But we still disagree *in* our attitudes. Moral disagreements, says Stevenson, are like this: They are disagreements in attitude. Simple Subjectivism could not explain moral disagreement because, once it interpreted moral judgments as statements *about* attitudes, the disagreement vanished.

Simple Subjectivism was an attempt to capture the basic idea of Ethical Subjectivism and express it in an acceptable form. It ran into trouble because it assumed that moral judgments are statements about attitudes. Emotivism was better because it jettisoned the troublesome assumption and replaced it with a more sophisticated view of how moral language works. But, as we shall see, Emotivism also had difficulties. One of its main problems was that it could not account for the place of reason in ethics.

## 5. Are There Any Moral Facts?

A moral judgment—or for that matter, any kind of judgment—must be supported by good reasons. If someone tells you that a certain action would be wrong, 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 judgments are different from mere expressions of personal preference. If someone says “I like coffee,” she does not need to have a reason; she may be making a statement about her personal taste and nothing more. But moral judgments require backing by reasons, and in the absence of such reasons, they are merely arbitrary.

Any adequate theory of the nature of moral judgment should, therefore, be able to give some account of the connection between moral judgments and the reasons that support them. It is at just this point that Emotivism foundered.

What did Emotivism imply about reasons? Remember that for the emotivist, a moral judgment is like a command—it is primarily a verbal means of trying to influence people’s attitudes and conduct. The view of reasons that naturally goes with this basic idea is that reasons are any considerations that will have the desired effect, that will influence attitudes and conduct in the desired way. But consider what this means. Suppose I am trying to convince you that Goldbloom is a bad man (I am trying to influence your attitude toward him) and you are resisting. Knowing that you are a bigot, I say: “Goldbloom, you know, is Jewish.” That does the trick; your attitude toward him changes, and you agree that he is a scoundrel. It would seem that for the Emotivist, then, the fact that Goldbloom is Jewish is, at least in some contexts, a reason in support of the judgment that he is a bad man. In fact, Stevenson takes exactly this view. In his classic work *Ethics and Language* (1944), 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 judgment.”

Obviously, something had gone wrong. Not just any fact can count as a reason in support of just any judgment. For one thing, the fact must be relevant to the judgment, and psychological influence does not necessarily bring relevance with it. (Jewishness is irrelevant to viciousness, regardless of the psychological connections in anyone’s mind.) There is a small lesson and a larger lesson to be learned from this. The small lesson is that a particular moral theory, Emotivism, seems to be flawed, and with it, the whole idea of Ethical Subjectivism is brought into doubt. The larger lesson has to do with the importance of reason in ethics.

Hume emphasized that if we examine wicked actions—“wilful murder, for instance”—we will find no “matter of fact” corresponding to the wickedness. The universe, apart from our attitudes, contains no such facts. This realization has often been taken as cause for despair, because people assume this must mean that values

have no “objective” status. But why would Hume’s observation come as a surprise? Values are not the kinds of things that could exist in the way that stars and planets exist. (What would a “value,” thus conceived, be like?) A fundamental mistake, which many people fall into when they think about this subject, is to assume just two possibilities:

1. There are moral facts, in the same way that there are facts about stars and planets; or
2. Our values are nothing more than the expression of our subjective feelings.

This is a mistake because it overlooks a crucial third possibility. People have not only feelings but reason, and that makes a big difference. It may be that:

3. Moral truths are truths of reason; that is, a moral judgment is true if it is backed by better reasons than the alternatives.

Thus, if we want to understand the nature of ethics, we must focus on reasons. A truth of ethics is a conclusion that is backed by reasons: The correct answer to a moral question is simply the answer that has the weight of reason on its side. Such truths are objective in the sense that they are true independently of what we might want or think. We cannot make something good or bad just by wishing it to be so, because we cannot merely will that the weight of reason be on its side or against it. And this also explains our fallibility: We can be wrong about what reason commends. Reason says what it says, regardless of our opinions or desires.

## **6. Are There Proofs in Ethics?**

If Ethical Subjectivism is not true, why are so many people attracted to it? One reason is that science provides our paradigm of objectivity, and when we compare ethics to science, ethics seems to lack the features that make science so compelling. For example, it seems a great deficiency that there are no proofs in ethics. We can prove that the world is round, that there is no largest prime number, and that dinosaurs lived before human beings. But can we prove that abortion is right or wrong?

The general idea that moral judgments can’t be proved sounds appealing. Anyone who has ever argued about a matter like abortion knows how frustrating it can be to try to “prove” that one’s point of view is correct. However, if we inspect this idea more closely, it turns out to be dubious.

Suppose we consider a matter that is much simpler than abortion. A student says that a test given by a teacher was unfair. This is clearly a moral judgment—fairness is a basic moral value. Can this judgment be proved? The student might point out that the test covered in detail matters that were quite trivial, while ignoring matters the teacher had stressed as important. The test also included questions about some

matters that were not covered in either the readings or the class discussions. Moreover, the test was so long that not even the best students could complete it in the time allowed (and it was to be graded on the assumption that it should be completed).

Suppose all this is true. And further suppose that the teacher, when asked to explain, has no defense to offer. In fact, the teacher, who is rather inexperienced, seems muddled about the whole thing and doesn't seem to have had any very clear idea of what he was doing. Now, hasn't the student proved the test was unfair? What more in the way of proof could we want? It is easy to think of other examples that make the same point:

*Jones is a bad man.* Jones is a habitual liar; he manipulates people; he cheats when he thinks he can get away with it; he is cruel to other people; and so on.

*Dr. Smith is irresponsible.* He bases his diagnoses on superficial considerations; he drinks before performing delicate surgery; he refuses to listen to other doctors' advice; and so on.

*A certain used-car dealer is unethical.* She conceals defects in her cars; she takes advantage of poor people by pressuring them into paying exorbitant prices for cars she knows to be defective; she runs misleading advertisements in any newspaper that will carry them; and so on.

The process of giving reasons might even be taken a step further. If one of our reasons for saying that Jones is a bad man is that he is a habitual liar, we can go on to explain why lying is bad. Lying is bad, first, because it harms people. If I give you false information, and you rely on it, things may go wrong for you in all sorts of ways. Second, lying is bad because it is a violation of trust. Trusting another person means leaving oneself vulnerable and unprotected. When I trust you, I simply believe what you say, without taking precautions; and when you lie, you take advantage of my trust. That is why being given the lie is such an intimate and personal offense. And finally, the rule requiring truthfulness is necessary for society to exist—if we could not assume that other people will speak truthfully, communication would be impossible, and if communication were impossible, society would be impossible.

So we can support our judgments with good reasons, and we can provide explanations of why those reasons matter. If we can do all this, and for an encore show that no comparable case can be made on the other side, what more in the way of "proof" could anyone want? It is nonsense to say, in the face of all this, that ethical judgments can be nothing more than "mere opinions."

Nevertheless, the impression that moral judgments are "unprovable" is remarkably persistent. Why do people believe this? Three points might be mentioned.

First, when the proof is demanded, people often have in mind an inappropriate

standard. They are thinking about observations and experiments in science; and when there are no comparable observations and experiments in ethics, they conclude that there is no proof. But in ethics, rational thinking consists in giving reasons, analyzing arguments, setting out and justifying principles and the like. The fact that ethical reason differs from reasoning in science does not make it deficient.

Second, when we think of “proving our ethical opinions to be correct,” we tend to think automatically of the most difficult issues. The question of abortion, for example, is enormously complicated and difficult. If we think only of questions like this, it is easy to believe that “proof” in ethics is impossible. But the same could be said of the sciences. There are complicated matters that physicists cannot agree on; and if we focused entirely on them, we might conclude that there are no proofs in physics. But of course, there are many simple matters about which all competent physicists agree. Similarly, in ethics there are many simpler matters about which all reasonable people agree.

Finally, it is easy to conflate two matters that are really very different:

1. Proving an opinion to be correct
2. Persuading someone to accept your proof.

You may have an impeccable argument that someone refuses to accept. But that does not mean that there must be something wrong with the arguments or that “proof” is somehow unattainable. It may mean only that someone is being stubborn. When this happens, it should not be surprising. In ethics, we should expect people sometimes to refuse to listen to reason. After all, ethics may require us to do things we don’t want to do, so it is only to be expected that we will try to avoid hearing its demands.

## **7. The Question of Homosexuality**

We may conclude by returning to the dispute about homosexuality. If we consider the relevant reasons, what do we find? The most pertinent fact is that homosexuals are pursuing the only way of life that affords them a chance of happiness. Sex is a particularly strong urge—it isn’t hard to understand why—and few people are able to fashion a happy life without satisfying their sexual needs. We should not, however, focus simply on sex. More than one gay writer has said that homosexuality is not about who you have sex with; it’s about who you fall in love with. A good life, for gays and lesbians as well as for everyone else, may mean uniting with someone you love, with all that this involves. Moreover, individuals do not choose their sexual orientations; both homosexuals and heterosexuals find themselves to be what they are without having exercised any option in the matter. Thus to say that people should not express their homosexuality is, more often than not, to condemn them to unhappy lives.

If it could be shown that gays and lesbians pose some sort of threat to the rest of society, that would be a powerful argument for the other side. And in fact, people who share Falwell's view have often claimed as much. But when examined dispassionately, those claims have always turned out to have no factual basis. Apart from the nature of their sexual relationships, there is no difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals in their moral characters or in their contributions to society. The idea that homosexuals are somehow sinister characters proves to be a myth similar to the myth that black people are lazy or that Jews are avaricious.

The case against homosexuality thus reduces to the familiar claim that it is "unnatural," or to the claim often made by religious conservatives that it is a threat to "family values." As for the first argument, it is hard to know what to make of it because the notion of "unnaturalness" is so vague. What exactly does it mean? There are at least three possible meanings.

First, "unnatural" might be taken as a statistical notion. In this sense, a human quality is unnatural if it is not shared by most people. Homosexuality would be unnatural in this sense, but so would left-handedness. Clearly, this is no reason to judge it bad. On the contrary, rare qualities are often good.

Second, the meaning of "unnatural" might be connected with the idea of a thing's *purpose*. The parts of our bodies seem to serve particular purposes. The purpose of the eyes is to see, and the purpose of the heart is to pump blood. Similarly, the purpose of our genitals is procreation: Sex is for making babies. It may be argued, then, that gay sex is unnatural because it is sexual activity that is divorced from its natural purpose.

This seems to express what many people have in mind when they object to homosexuality as unnatural. However, if gay sex were condemned for this reason, a host of other sexual practices would also be condemned: masturbation, oral sex, and even sex by women after menopause. They would be just as "unnatural" (and, presumably, just as bad) as gay sex. But there is no reason to accept these conclusions, because this whole line of reasoning is faulty. It rests on the assumption that *it is wrong to use parts of one's body for anything other than their natural purposes*, and this is surely false. The "purpose" of the eyes is to see; is it therefore wrong to use one's eyes for flirting or for giving a signal? Again, the "purpose" of the fingers may be grasping and poking; is it therefore wrong to snap one's fingers to keep time with music? Other examples come easily to mind. The idea that it is wrong to use things for any purpose other than their "natural" ones cannot reasonably be maintained, and so this version of the argument fails.

Third, because the word *unnatural* has a sinister sound, it might be understood simply as a term of evaluation. Perhaps it means something like "contrary to what a

person ought to be.” But if that is what “unnatural” means, then to say that something is wrong because it is unnatural would be vacuous. It would be like saying thus-and-so is wrong because it is wrong. This sort of empty remark, of course, provides no reason for condemning anything.

The idea that homosexuality is unnatural, and that there is something wrong with this, has great intuitive appeal for many people. Nevertheless, it appears that this is an unsound argument. If no better understanding of “unnatural” can be found, this whole way of thinking will have to be rejected.

But what of the claim, often heard from religious fundamentalists, that homosexuality is contrary to “family values”? Falwell and others like him often say that their condemnation of homosexuality is part of their general support of “the family,” as is their condemnation of divorce, abortion, pornography, and adultery. But how, exactly, is homosexuality opposed to family values? The campaign for gay rights involves a whole host of proposals designed to make it easier for gays and lesbians to form families—there are demands for social recognition of same-sex marriages, for the right to adopt children, and so on. Gay and lesbian activists find it ironic that the proponents of family values wish to deny them precisely these rights.

There is one other, specifically religious argument that must be mentioned, namely that homosexuality is condemned in the Bible. Leviticus 18:22 says “You may not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination.” Some commentators have said that, contrary to appearances, the Bible is really not so harsh about homosexuality; and they explain how each relevant passage (there seem to be nine of them) should be understood. But suppose we concede that the Bible really does teach that homosexuality is an abomination. What may we infer from this? Sacred books have an honored place in religious life, of course, but there are two problems with relying on the literal text for guidance. One problem is practical and one is theoretical.

The practical problem is that sacred texts, especially ones composed a very long time ago, give us more than we bargain for. Not many people have actually read Leviticus, but if they did, they would find that in addition to prohibiting homosexuality, it gives lengthy instructions for treating leprosy, detailed requirements concerning burnt offerings, and an elaborate routine for dealing with women who are menstruating. There is a surprising number of rules about the daughters of priests including the notation that if a priest’s daughter “plays the whore,” she shall be burned alive (21:9). Leviticus forbids eating fat (7:23), letting a woman into church until 42 days after giving birth (12:4-5), and seeing your uncle naked. The latter, incidentally, is also called an abomination (18:14, 26). It says that a beard must have square corners (19:27) and that we may purchase slaves from neighboring states (25:44). There is much more, but this is enough to give the idea.

The problem is that you cannot conclude that homosexuality is an abomination simply because it says so in Leviticus unless you are willing to conclude, also, that these other instructions are moral requirements; and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century anyone who tried to live according to all those rules would go crazy. One might, of course, concede that the rules about menstruation, and so on, were peculiar to an ancient culture and that they are not binding on us today. That would be sensible. But if we say that, the door is open for saying the same thing about the rule against homosexuality.

In any case, nothing can be morally right or wrong *simply* because an authority says so. If the precepts in a sacred text are not arbitrary, there must be some reason for them—we should be able to ask *why* the Bible condemns homosexuality, and expect an answer. That answer will then give the real explanation of why it is wrong. This is the “theoretical” problem that I mentioned: In the logic of moral reasoning, the reference to the text drops out, and the reason behind the pronouncement (if any) takes its place.

But the main point here is not about homosexuality. The main point concerns the nature of moral thinking. Moral thinking and moral conduct are a matter of weighing reasons and being guided by them. But being guided by reason is very different from following one’s feelings. When we have strong feelings, we may be tempted to ignore reason and go with the feelings. But in doing so, we would be opting out of moral thinking altogether. That is why, in focusing on attitudes and feelings, Ethical Subjectivism seems to be going in the wrong direction.