

Simple Subjectivism

Take any action allowed to be vicious: Willful 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. In whichever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact, but it is the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it.

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

Subjectivism states that moral statements or judgements are merely **descriptions** of personal approval or disapproval

X is morally acceptable)	all mean "I (the speaker) approve of X"
X is right)	
X is good)	
X ought to be done)	

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

Problems with subjectivism

Problem 1

Premise 1: Because all we are doing is describing our emotions, we can never be mistaken when making moral statements. (assuming we describe them sincerely)

Premise 2: However, we do sometimes make mistakes in our moral judgements.

Conclusion: Therefore, simple subjectivism cannot be correct

Problem 2

Premise 1: Because I am describing my feelings and you are describing yours, it should be impossible for us to disagree over a moral theory

Premise 1: Yet we do disagree over moral issues

Conclusion: Therefore, simple subjectivism fails

Emotivism

Emotivism is a slightly more sophisticated version of subjectivism.

Moral statements are **not descriptions** of a state of mind (as simple subjectivism states), but are **expressions** of disapproval or approval, and as such **cannot be true or false**.

“Homosexuality is immoral” → “Homosexuality – boo!”
“giving to charity is good” → “giving to charity – hooray!”

Problem

Premise 1: Any statement that alters another person’s attitude can be considered as a “moral reason”.

Premise 2: A reason such a racist one may help change somebody’s attitude.

Premise 3: The racist reason would have to be considered as a moral reason and this seems counterintuitive

Conclusion: Emotivism has counterintuitive implications