

Subjectivism in Ethics

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 OF HUMAN NATURE* (1740)

3.1. 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 Gay Pride Day parade, every single Democratic and Republican candidate showed up to march. Matt Foreman, the director of a gay rights organization, described all the candidates at the march as "good on our issues." He said, "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; for decades, it has opposed the gay rights movement.

What do people around the country actually think? Since 2001, the Gallup Poll has been asking Americans whether they personally believe gay relations to be morally acceptable or morally wrong. In 2001, 53% of Americans considered gay relations to be "morally wrong," with only 40% calling them "morally acceptable." By 2011, these numbers had changed dramatically: 56% called gay relations "morally acceptable," and only 39% deemed them "morally wrong."

People on both sides have strong feelings. Michele Bachmann, a Republican congresswoman from Minnesota, once told a conservative audience, "If you're involved in the gay and lesbian lifestyle, it's bondage. It is *personal* bondage, *personal* despair, and

personal enslavement.” Bachmann and her husband offer troubled gays a way to break free from their alleged chains: they run a “Christian Counseling Center” in Minnesota, which offers its clients “Reparative Therapy” as a “cure” for homosexuality. Ms. Bachmann is an evangelical Lutheran. The Catholic view may be more nuanced, but it agrees that gay sex is wrong. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, homosexuals “do not choose their homosexual condition” and “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, if gay people want to be virtuous, then they must resist their desires.

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

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.

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 is bad. So, when someone such as Bachmann says that homosexuality is wrong, she is not stating a fact about homosexuality. Instead, she is merely saying something about her feelings.

Of course, Ethical Subjectivism is not merely an idea about the assessment 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 call their actions “evil,” we are only saying that we have negative feelings toward them. The same applies to any moral judgment whatever.

3.2. The Evolution of the Theory

A philosophical theory may go through several stages. At first, it is put forward in simple terms, which many people find attractive. That simple formulation, however, is examined and found to

have defects. At this point, some people are so impressed with the objections that they abandon the theory. Others, however, retain confidence in the basic idea, and so they refine it. For a while, it looks like they can rescue the theory. But then further arguments cast doubt on the new version. Those new objections, like the old, cause some people to abandon the idea, while others keep the faith and propose another “improved” version. The whole process of revision and criticism then begins 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 its defenders tried to answer them, the theory became more sophisticated.

3.3. The First Stage: Simple Subjectivism

The simplest version of the theory 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” “X is right” “X is good” “X ought to be done”	}	all mean: “I (the speaker) approve of X”
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And similarly:

“X is morally unacceptable” “X is wrong” “X is bad” “X ought not to be done”	}	all mean: “I (the speaker) disapprove of X”
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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, it is open to some serious objections.

Simple Subjectivism Cannot Account for Disagreement. Gay rights advocate Matt Foreman does not believe that homosexuality is immoral. Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, however, believes it is. So, Foreman and Bachmann appear to 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 attitudes—he is saying, “I, Matt Foreman, do not disapprove of homosexuality.” Would Bachmann disagree with that? No, Bachmann would agree that Foreman does not disapprove of homosexuality. At the same time, when Bachmann says that homosexuality is immoral, she is only saying, “I, Michele Bachmann, disapprove of homosexuality.” 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, this is incorrect, because Bachmann and Foreman *do* disagree about homosexuality.

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

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 could be no disagreement. Therefore, Simple Subjectivism cannot be correct.

Simple Subjectivism Implies That We’re Always Right. We are sometimes wrong in our moral evaluations. But if Simple Subjectivism were correct, this would be impossible.

Again, consider Bachmann, who said that being gay is like being enslaved. In saying this, she probably meant that homosexuals are “slaves” to their wicked desires; they are living in the bonds of sin. According to Simple Subjectivism, when Bachmann called homosexuality “enslavement,” she was merely saying that she, Bachmann, disapproves of homosexuality. Of course, she might have been speaking insincerely—it is possible that she didn’t really mind homosexuality but was merely playing to her conservative audience. However, if Bachmann was speaking sincerely, then what she said was true. So long as someone is honestly representing her own feelings, her moral judgments will always be correct. But this contradicts the plain

fact that we sometimes make mistakes about ethics. Therefore, Simple Subjectivism cannot be correct.

These arguments, and others like them, suggest that Simple Subjectivism is a flawed theory. In the face of such arguments, some philosophers have chosen to reject the whole idea of Ethical Subjectivism. Others, however, have worked to improve the theory.

3.4. The Second Stage: Emotivism

The improved version came to be known as Emotivism. Emotivism was popular during the mid-20th century, largely due to the work of the American philosopher Charles L. Stevenson (1908–1979).

Language, Stevenson said, is used in many ways. One way is to make statements—that is, to state facts. Thus we may say:

“Gas prices are rising.”

“Lance Armstrong beat cancer and then won the Tour de France bike race seven times.”

“Shakespeare wrote *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, language is also used for other purposes. Suppose I say, “Close the door!” This utterance is neither true nor false. It is not a statement, intended to convey information; it is a command. Its purpose is to get the listener to do something.

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

“Aaargh!”

“Way to go, Lance!”

“Damn Hamlet!”

We understand these sentences easily enough. But none of them can be true or false. (It makes no sense to say, “It is true that ‘way to go, Lance’” or “It is false that ‘aaargh.’”) These sentences are not used to state facts or to influence behavior. Their purpose is to express the speaker’s attitudes—about gas prices, about Lance Armstrong, or about Hamlet.

Now think about moral language. According to the first theory, Simple Subjectivism, moral language is about stating facts—ethical statements report the speaker’s attitudes. According to Simple Subjectivism, when Bachmann says, “Homosexuality is immoral,” her utterance means “I (Bachmann) disapprove of homosexuality”—a statement of fact about Bachmann’s attitude.

According to Emotivism, however, moral language is not fact-stating language; it is not used to convey information or to make reports. It is used, first, as a means of influencing people’s behavior. If someone says, “You shouldn’t do that,” he is trying to *persuade you not to do it*. Thus, his utterance is more like a command than a statement of fact; “You shouldn’t do that” is like saying “Don’t do that!” Also, moral language is used to express one’s attitudes. Calling Lance Armstrong “a good man” is thus like saying “Way to go, Lance!” And so, when Bachmann says, “Homosexuality is immoral,” emotivists interpret her utterance as equivalent to something like “Homosexuality—gross!” or “Don’t be gay!”

This difference between Simple Subjectivism and Emotivism may seem trivial. But it is important. To see why, consider again the arguments against Simple Subjectivism. While those arguments were severely embarrassing to Simple Subjectivism, they are less effective against Emotivism.

1. The first 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, instead, talking about different things: each person is making a claim about his or her own attitude—a claim which the other person doesn’t dispute. But, the argument goes, such people really do disagree. Thus, Simple Subjectivism cannot be correct.

In response, Emotivism emphasizes that disagreement comes in different forms. Compare these two kinds of disagreement:

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

- I am rooting for the Atlanta Braves to win, and you want them to lose. Our beliefs are not in conflict, but our desires are—I want something to happen which you want not to happen.

In the first case, we believe different things, both of which cannot be true. Stevenson calls this *disagreement in belief*. In the second case, we want different outcomes, both of which cannot occur. Stevenson calls this *disagreement in attitude*. As Stevenson observes, we may disagree in attitude even if we don't disagree in belief. For example, you and I may have all the same beliefs regarding the Atlanta Braves baseball team: we both believe that the Braves' players are overpaid; we both believe that I am rooting for the Braves just because I am from the South; and we both believe that Atlanta is not a great baseball town. Yet despite all this common ground—despite our agreement *in belief*—we may still differ *in attitude*: I may still want the Braves to win, and you may still want them to lose.

According to Stevenson, moral disagreement is disagreement in attitude only. Matt Foreman's attitudes about homosexuality are very different from Michele Bachmann's, even if Foreman and Bachmann agree about all the facts. For Emotivism, then, moral conflict is real. By contrast, Simple Subjectivism interprets moral disagreement as disagreement in *belief*—moral judgments express beliefs about the speaker's attitudes—so, when people disagree, they must disagree about what attitudes the speaker has. However, this gets things wrong. Foreman and Bachmann do disagree about homosexuality, but they do not disagree about what their own attitudes are.

2. The second argument was that if Simple Subjectivism is correct, then we are always right in our moral judgments. But, of course, we are not always right. 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. "Always right" 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 right all the time. Emotivism, on the other hand, does not interpret moral judgments as statements that are true or false. Because commands and expressions of attitude cannot be true or false,

people cannot “be right” with respect to them, much less “be right all the time.”

Emotivism, then, also avoids this objection to Simple Subjectivism. However, it is susceptible to a related complaint. Although we’re not always right in our evaluations, we’re right some of the time. Sometimes our moral judgments are true and sometimes they are false. Emotivists, however, cannot say this, because they deny that moral discourse is about stating facts.

Consider this example. On January 26, 2004, an 8-year-old girl named Katie Shelton was walking down a street in Seymour, Indiana. Suddenly she was confronted by two rottweilers, each weighing over 80 pounds. The dogs knocked Katie down and bit her repeatedly. The little girl’s life, however, was saved by the heroic actions of 14-year-old Mark Friedrich, who lived nearby. When Mark saw what was going on, he rushed out of his family’s house with two sticks and attacked the dogs. Predictably, Mark got bitten, but he was able to keep the dogs off Katie until a police officer arrived with a gun. Both children recovered from their wounds (the dogs were not so lucky).

Now suppose that, upon hearing this story, someone said that Mark Friedrich acted badly: “If he was a good kid, he would have minded his own business and stayed in his house.” As long as this strange person was speaking sincerely, the Simple Subjectivist would have to say that his moral judgment was *true*. The emotivist’s position is different, but like the Simple Subjectivist, she is barred from saying that this person’s judgment is false. She must say that he is merely expressing his feelings.

Although Emotivism is an improvement on Simple Subjectivism, both theories imply that our moral judgments are, in a sense, beyond reproach. For Simple Subjectivism, our judgments cannot be criticized because they will always be true. For Emotivism, our moral judgments cannot be criticized because they are not judgments at all; they are mere expressions of attitude, which cannot be false. That is one problem for Emotivism. Another problem is that Emotivism cannot explain the role reason plays in ethics.

3.5. The Role of Reason in Ethics

If someone says, “I like peaches,” she does not need to have a reason; she may be making a statement about her personal taste and nothing more. But moral judgments are different. If

someone tells you that a particular act would be wrong, you may ask why, and if there is no satisfactory answer, then you may reject that advice as unfounded. A moral judgment—or for that matter, any kind of value judgment—must be supported by good reasons. Any adequate theory of ethics should be able to explain how reasons can support moral judgments.

What do emotivists say about reasons? Remember that for the emotivist, moral judgments have two functions: to express one's attitudes, and to try to influence other people's attitudes and conduct. Can the expressive function of moral language find a place for reasons? Insofar as moral judgments are mere expressions of attitude, they are like personal preferences. When I say, "Letting people be free is morally better than enslaving them," the emotivist hears this as similar to "Peaches are better than apples." The emotivist can recognize some differences between those two utterances. However, they are basically alike. Reason can play no important role here.

Thus, emotivists have usually looked to the command function of moral language to find a role for reasons. Suppose I had said to you in 2008, "You shouldn't vote for Barack Obama." If this utterance is like a command—if it is like saying, "Don't vote for Obama"—then what role can reasons play in such a judgment? If I am trying to influence your conduct, then perhaps the emotivist should say that a reason is any consideration that will influence your conduct. But consider what this means. Suppose I know that you are prejudiced against Muslims. And I say, "Obama, you know, is a Muslim." That does the trick; you now decide not to vote for Obama. For the emotivist, the claim that Obama is a Muslim would be, given the right audience, a moral reason not to vote for him. In fact, Stevenson takes exactly this view. In his classic work *Ethics and Language* (1944), he says, "Any statement about *any* matter of fact which *any* speaker considers likely to alter attitudes may be adduced as a reason for or against an ethical judgment."

Obviously, something has gone wrong. Not just any claim can count as a reason in support of just any judgment. For one thing, it must be relevant to the judgment, and psychological influence does not always bring relevance with it. Being Muslim is irrelevant to one's ability to be a good president, regardless of the psychological connections in anyone's mind. Also, to be

a legitimate reason, a claim must be true, and yet false claims can be persuasive. President Obama is not in fact a Muslim.

There are two lessons to be learned from this. The small lesson is that a particular moral theory, Emotivism, is flawed, which casts doubt on the whole idea of Ethical Subjectivism. The larger lesson has to do with the importance of reason in ethics.

Hume said 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. What can we conclude from this? Admittedly, value is not a tangible thing like a planet or a spoon. But this does not mean that ethics has no objective basis. A fundamental mistake, which many people fall into, is to assume just two possibilities:

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

This is a mistake because it overlooks a 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.

On this view, moral 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 so, because our will cannot determine what the reasons are. And this also explains our fallibility: We can be wrong about what is good or bad because we can be wrong about what reason recommends. Reason says what it says, regardless of our opinions or desires.

3.6. 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 lacking. For example, there are proofs in science, but there are no proofs in ethics. We can prove that the earth

is round, that dinosaurs lived before humans, and that there is no largest prime number. But we can't prove that abortion is acceptable or unacceptable.

The general idea that moral judgments can't be proved sounds appealing. Anyone who has ever argued about something like abortion knows how frustrating it can be to try to "prove" one's opinion. However, if we inspect this idea more closely, it turns out to be flawed.

Suppose we consider something much simpler than abortion. A student says that a test 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 a lot of material that was trivial while ignoring material the teacher had stressed as important. The test also included questions that were not covered in either the readings or the class discussions. Moreover, the test was so long that nobody could finish it in the time allowed.

Suppose all this is true. And further suppose that the teacher, when asked to explain, can offer no defense. In fact, the teacher, who is rather inexperienced, seems confused about the whole thing. Now, hasn't the student proved that 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 toys with people; he cheats at cards; he once killed someone in a dispute over 27 cents; and so on.
- *Dr. Smith is irresponsible:* He bases his diagnoses on superficial considerations; he refuses to listen to other doctors' advice; he drinks beer before performing delicate surgery; and so on.
- *A certain used-car dealer is unethical:* She conceals defects in her cars; she tries to pressure people into paying too much; she runs misleading ads on the Web; and so on.

The process of giving reasons might even be taken one step further. If we criticize Jones for being 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. And finally, the rule requiring truthfulness is necessary for society to exist—if we could not assume that other people would speak truthfully, communication would be impossible, and if communication were impossible, society would fall apart.

So we can support our judgments with good reasons, and we can explain 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? In the face of all this, it is absurd to say that ethical judgments are nothing but “opinions.”

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

First, when proof is demanded, people often want scientific proof. They want something like experimental verification, and because ethical judgments cannot be experimentally tested, they say there is no proof. But in ethics, rational thinking consists in giving reasons, analyzing arguments, setting out and justifying principles, and so on. The fact that ethical reasoning differs from scientific reasoning does not make it deficient.

Second, when we think about proving our ethical opinions, we tend to think of the most difficult issues. The question of abortion, for example, is enormously complicated. If we consider only issues like abortion, 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 simpler issues on which all physicists agree. Similarly, in ethics, there are many simple issues about which all reasonable people agree.

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

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

When your argument fails to persuade your audience, it is tempting to think, “Well, that argument didn’t work.” But the argument might have failed merely because your audience

was stubborn, or biased, or not really listening. As a proof, your argument might have been perfect.

3.7. The Question of Homosexuality

Let's return to the dispute about homosexuality. If we consider the relevant reasons, what do we find? The most pertinent fact is that gays are pursuing the only kind of life that can make them happy. Sex, after all, is a particularly strong urge, and few people can be happy without satisfying their sexual needs. But we should not focus solely on sex. Homosexuality is not merely about who you have sex with; it's about who you fall in love with. Gay people fall in love in the same way that straight people do. And, like straights, gays often want to be with, live with, and build a life with, the person they love. To say that homosexuals shouldn't act on their desires is thus to condemn them to frustrating lives. It should be added that gay people cannot avoid the frustration by choosing to become straight. Both homosexuals and heterosexuals discover who they are, once they reach a certain age; nobody decides which sex to be attracted to.

Why do people oppose gay rights? Some people think that homosexuals pose a danger to others. Often the charge, whether stated or not, is that gay men are likely to be child molesters. There have, for example, been several campaigns in America to get gay public schoolteachers fired, and the fear of pedophilia has always loomed large in these discussions. Congresswoman Bachmann exploited this fear when she said of gay marriage, "This is a very serious matter, because it is our children who are the prize for this community—[the gay community] are specifically targeting our children." Such a fear, however, has never had any basis in fact. It is a mere stereotype, like the idea that blacks are lazy or that Muslims are terrorists. There is no difference between gays and heterosexuals in their moral characters or in their contributions to society.

The most common objection to homosexuality may be that it is "unnatural." What should we make of this? To assess the argument, we need to know what "unnatural" means. There seem to be three possibilities.

First, "unnatural" might be taken as a statistical notion. In this sense, a human quality is unnatural if most people don't

have it. Being gay would be unnatural in this sense, but so would being left-handed, being tall, and even being immensely nice. Clearly, this is no reason to criticize homosexuality. 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 to procreate: 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, then a number of other, widely accepted practices would also have to be condemned: masturbation, oral sex, sex using condoms, and even sex by women during pregnancy or after menopause. These practices 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*. Why should we accept that assumption? The “purpose” of the eyes is to see; is it therefore wrong to use one’s eyes for flirting or for giving a signal? The “purpose” of the fingers may be to grasp and poke; is it therefore wrong to snap one’s fingers to get someone’s attention? The idea that things should be used only in “natural” ways cannot 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 homosexuality is wrong because it is unnatural would be vacuous. It would be like saying that homosexuality is wrong because it is wrong. That sort of empty remark provides no reason for condemning anything.

The idea that homosexuality is unnatural, and so it must be immoral, seems right to many people. Nevertheless, it is an unsound argument. It fails on every interpretation.

But what about the claim, often made, that homosexuality is “contrary to family values”? James Dobson, founder of

the conservative Christian group, Focus on the Family, told his followers: “For more than 40 years, the homosexual activist movement has sought to implement a master plan that has had as its centerpiece the utter destruction of the family.” But how, exactly, are homosexuals trying to destroy the family? Gay activists are actually trying to *expand* the family. They do not wish to take any rights away from heterosexual couples. Instead, they want to make it easier for gays to form families—they support same-sex marriage, domestic partner benefits, the right of gay couples to adopt children, and so on. Gays find it ironic that supporters of “the family” want to prevent them from having families.

Perhaps all this talk of “family values” really amounts to saying, “Let’s make sure we don’t have families *like that*.” But if so, then the question arises: What is wrong with a family in which the children are raised by two mothers, or two fathers? Common sense suggests that two parents are better than one: raising a child is a huge task, and two people can perform big tasks more easily than one. But even if the *number* of parents in a household matters, it is not clear why their gender should. The largest study of gay families is the U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study, which has followed a group of gay mothers since the 1980s. Their data suggest that the teenage children of lesbians actually do *better* than teenagers from traditional homes. Sometimes the children of gay parents are made fun of at school, and this is difficult for them. But, in general, these children have fewer behavioral problems, and they do better both socially and academically than their peers. There is no good reason to be against gay families.

Meanwhile, homosexuals in America continue to be disadvantaged. Sometimes the disadvantage is a matter of law. Legally, heterosexuals can tie the knot in any state, but gay marriage exists in only a half-dozen states. Moreover, the federal government does not recognize gay marriage as legitimate, and so it provides marital benefits to heterosexual couples only. There are hundreds of such benefits, including the social security benefits that a spouse may receive after the other spouse’s death. Finally, in Florida and Arkansas, gay people cannot legally adopt children, although, of course, heterosexuals can. The law in America certainly discriminates against gays. Yet, in many other places, the laws are even more extreme.

In 76 countries, gay sex is illegal. In some countries, the punishment is death.

Apart from the law, there are social drawbacks to being gay in America. It is tough to grow up in a place where four-tenths of your neighbors believe that something is wrong with you. Even worse, you find that some of your neighbors are hateful—they are repulsed by you and see you as less than human. It is especially sad when a young person who has been taught to despise homosexuality begins to realize that he or she is gay. Many gays, whether out of fear or shame, choose to live in the closet. But in the long run, it is almost impossible to hide one's sexuality from friends, family members, and co-workers. Gays in America lead stressful lives. Among American college students, gays are twice as likely to attempt suicide as their straight classmates. And *closeted* gays are *six times* more likely to try it.

One more argument must be discussed, namely, that homosexuality is condemned in the Bible. For example, 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 toward homosexuality; and they explain how each relevant passage (there seem to be nine of them) should be understood. But suppose we accept that the Bible condemns homosexuality. What may we infer from this? Are we supposed to believe what the Bible says, simply because it says it?

This question will offend some people. To question the Bible, they believe, is to challenge the word of God. And this, they think, is an act of arrogance coming from creatures who should be showing gratitude to the Almighty. Questioning the Bible can also make people feel uncomfortable, because it may seem to challenge their whole way of life. However, thoughts like these cannot hold us back. Philosophy *is* about questioning whole ways of life. When the argument is given that homosexuality must be wrong because the Bible says so, this argument must be assessed on its own terms.

The problem with the argument is that, if we look at *other* things the Bible says, it does not appear to be a reliable guide to morality. Leviticus condemns homosexuality, but it also forbids eating sheep's fat (7:23), letting a woman into the church's sanctuary who has recently given birth (12:2–5), and seeing your uncle naked. The latter, like homosexuality, is deemed

an abomination (18:14, 26). Even worse, Leviticus condemns to death those who curse their parents (20:9) and those who commit adultery (20:10). It says that a priest's daughter, if she "plays the whore," shall be burned alive (21:9), and it says that we may purchase slaves from nearby nations (25:44). In Exodus, it even says that it's okay to beat your slaves, so long as you don't kill them (21:20–21).

The point of all this is not to ridicule the Bible; the Bible, in fact, contains much that is true and wise. But we can conclude from examples like these that the Bible is not always right. And because it's not always right, we can't conclude that homosexuality is an abomination just because it says so in Leviticus.

At any rate, 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 then to get an answer. That answer will then give the real explanation of why the thing is wrong.

But the main point of this chapter 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.