Individual Subjectivism

Individual subjectivism in ethics is the theory that emphasizes individuals’ personal feelings, beliefs or opinions as the basis for morality. The term “subjectivism” refers to subjects in the sense used in psychology: as in the subject of a survey, or an experiment. What matters about subjects in this context is their opinions, or their reactions to objects or events in the environment of an experiment. The theory of individual subjectivism can be stated roughly as follows:

The correct moral principles are the ones that reflect the feelings or opinions of individual subjects; and they are correct for the individuals who believe them simply because of their feelings or opinions.

For this reason, morality can vary among individuals; different moral principles can be correct for different people.

Tautology. To clarify individual subjectivism it is helpful to explain a concept in logic. A “tautology” is a form of statement that is true in every context, but conveys no helpful information. Some examples are:

- Today is today.
- Difficult tasks are hard to accomplish.
- Whatever someone believes is his belief.

These statements are obviously true. No one who understands the meanings of the words can doubt them. But the truths they convey do not explain anything.

It is important not to turn individual subjectivism into a tautology. Subjectivism becomes a tautology when it is understood as follows: “Someone’s believing a moral principle is what makes it his moral belief.” That statement is obviously true, but not explanatory. Subjectivism must be understood instead like this: “Someone’s believing a moral principle is what makes it true, for him.”

Individual subjectivism thus suggests that, as far as moral principles are concerned, believing makes it so. And it adds that therefore, different people can have different moral truths.

Subjectivism and Moral Language

“Believing makes it so” is not accepted in any field of knowledge, certainly not in the sciences or in math. So how can we seriously accept this idea in ethics? One way this idea has seemed plausible for ethics involves the thought that moral language has a different meaning structure from language about other things. The idea is that when people use moral language, expressing judgments and principles, they are really expressing something about themselves. Most philosophers today do not think moral language works this way; but here is the explanation:

Non-moral language: When someone says, “The earth is flat,” he is referring to the earth, and it is the shape of the earth that makes what he says true or false.

Moral Language: When someone says, “Abortion is wrong,” he is expressing his feeling or opinion about abortion. When he says “Abortion is wrong,” what he means is something like, “I disapprove of abortion.”

“Believing makes it so” can seem to work for ethics, but not for other fields of knowledge, because moral language is thought to expresses the speaker’s beliefs. Someone’s being against abortion is what makes his statement true when he says “Abortion is wrong.”
Problems for Individual Subjectivism

After explaining the theory, and presenting it sympathetically, we can turn to examine some problems that seem to arise if the theory is used to explain the correctness of moral principles. Some of these problems are worth knowing, because they carry over to other theories also.

• **The Problem of Infallibility.** Someone who is infallible is unable to make a mistake. Not many people believe they are infallible; but individual subjectivism makes us all infallible about morality. We cannot be mistaken in our beliefs about moral principles; because our believing them makes them correct, at least for us.

• **The Problem of Moral Disagreement.** Because individual subjectivism gives moral language a different meaning structure, the theory makes it impossible for two people to disagree in expressing their beliefs.

  If Elliot says, “Abortion is wrong,” he means: “I, Elliot, disapprove of abortion.”

  If Sarah says, “Abortion is not wrong,” she means, “I, Sarah, do not disapprove of abortion.”

Notice that Elliot can agree with what Sarah says, and Sarah can agree with what Elliot says. Their statements are not contradictory. Sarah’s saying “Abortion is not wrong” expresses her belief. If Elliot thinks Sarah really feels that way, he would agree that what she says is true.

People using moral language are only talking about themselves, according to individual subjectivism. So two people can never talk about the same thing, as they can in non-moral language. But it is impossible to disagree with someone unless you both are talking about the same thing. So individual subjectivism makes it impossible for people to disagree in ethics.

• **The Problem of Self-Evaluation.** When you think of yourself as a good person, as most people do, you are making a moral judgment about yourself. You are evaluating yourself on the basis of your good qualities. You may think you are good because you are kind, and honest and respectful of others. Or you might have a different set of qualities that you believe make you good.

According to individual subjectivism, the qualities making a person good are entirely up to you. If you believe the moral principle that kindness is one of the qualities of a good person, then that is correct, for you. But you could also believe that selfishness is a good quality, and for you, that principle would be correct.

The problem of self-evaluation is that you really cannot be satisfied about being a good person if what it means to be a good person is wholly up to you.

*Individual subjectivism makes you the source of the correctness of moral principles, and it is not meaningful to make moral judgments about that source. You end up with nothing more than this: “I am good because I have good qualities; and they are good because I believe they are.”*

People usually think that being a good person means having qualities that are good apart from their beliefs. That is why people can be satisfied, if not proud, of being a good person.