

Philosophy 3100: Ethical Theory

Topic 3 - Constructivism:

- I. Individual Subjectivism
 - a. Belief Subjectivism
 - b. Humean Subjectivism
- II. Moore's No-Disagreement Argument
 - a. Against Humean Subjectivism
 - b. Against Other Constructivisms
- III. Christine Korsgaard's Constructivism
- IV. The Arbitrariness Problem

How G.E. Moore puts the issue:

“The two ideas, then, with regard to which I want to raise a question, are first the moral idea of ‘moral obligation’ or ‘duty,’ and secondly the non-moral idea of ‘good’ in this special sense.

And the question with regard to them, which I want to raise, is this. With regard to both ideas many philosophers have thought and still think ...



G.E. Moore
pioneer of 20th-
century metaethics

— “The Nature of Moral Philosophy” (1922),
pp. 328-29

How G.E. Moore puts the issue:

... [that] when we assert of any action that it ought not to have been done, or of any state of things that it was or would be good or better than another, then it *must* be the case that *all* that we are asserting of the thing or things in question is simply and solely that some person or set of persons actually does have, or has a tendency to have a certain sort of feeling towards the thing or things in question : that there is absolutely no more in it than this.

— “The Nature of Moral Philosophy” (1922),
pp. 328-29



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Individual Subjectivism

One way to think of Individual Subjectivism:

Hamlet's thought:

there is nothing
either good or bad,
but thinking makes it so



Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2

Belief Subjectivism

One way to think of Individual Subjectivism:

In other words, roughly:

Belief Subjectivism (an incomplete version):

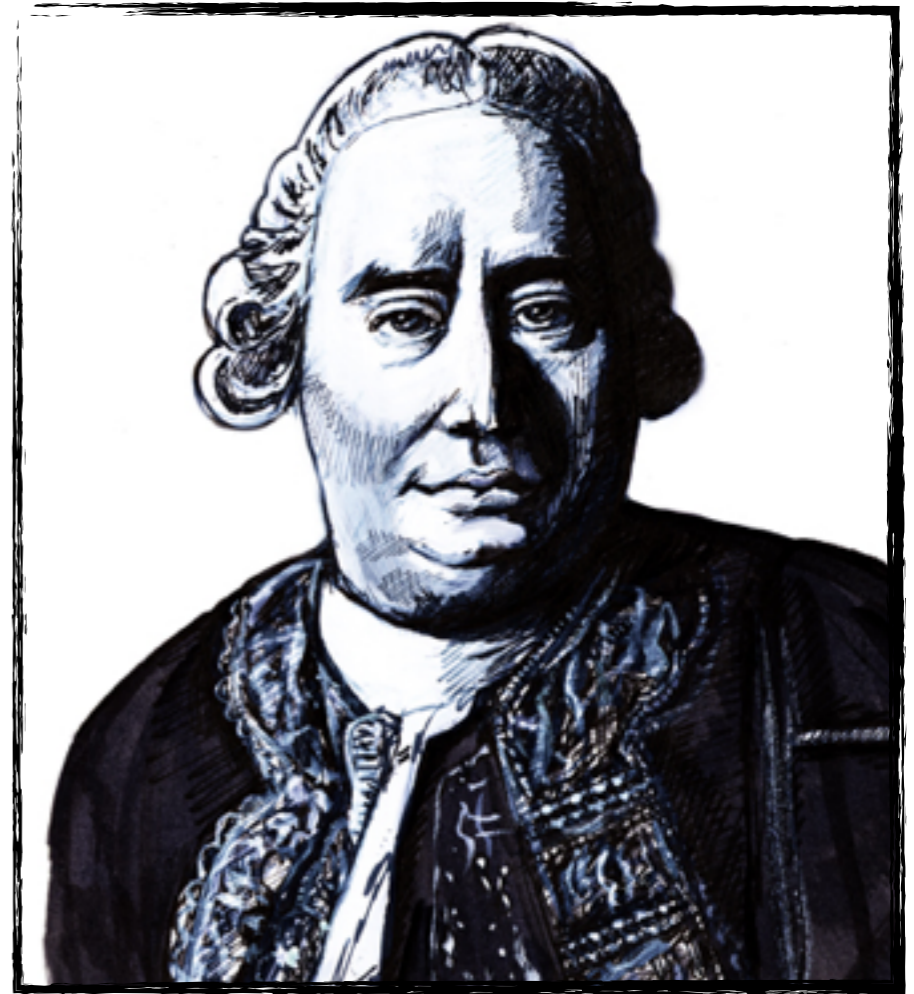
The expression “ x is wrong” means the same as “I believe that x is wrong.”

But this view has certain technical problems:

- circularity
- infinite regress

Individual Subjectivism

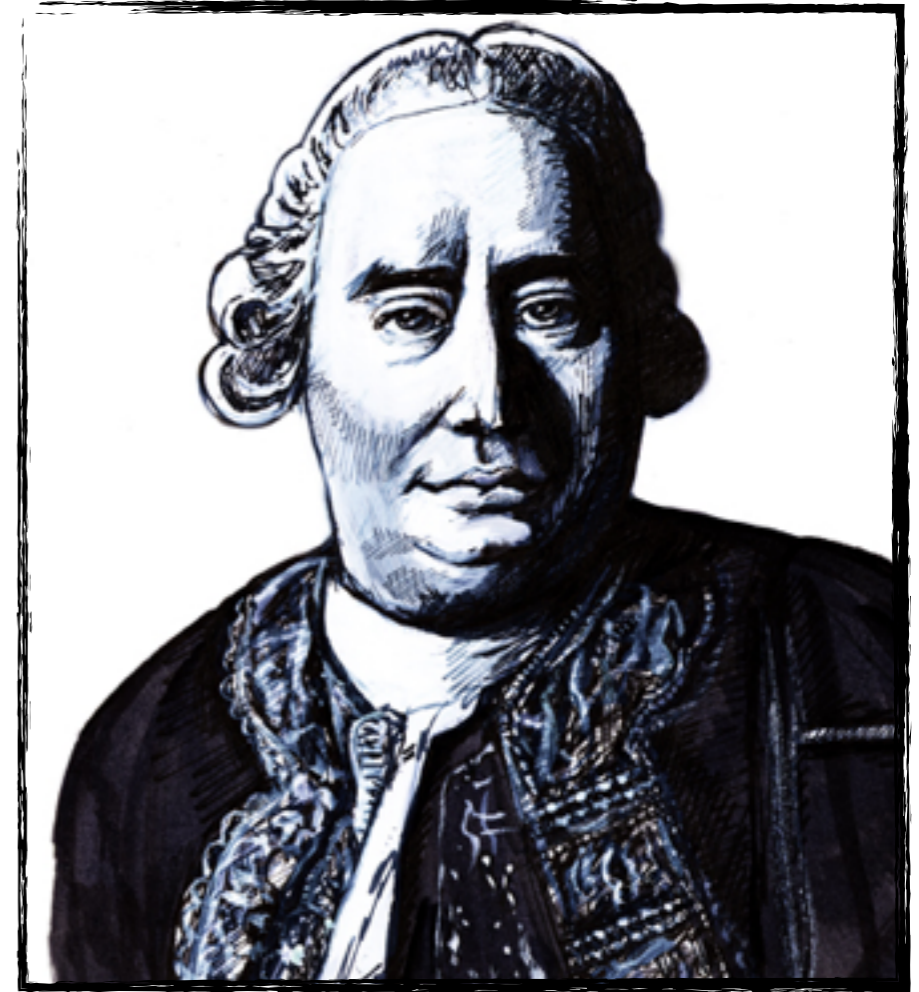
“Take any action allow’d to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call *vice*. ... The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. ... It lies in yourself, not in the object. ...



— David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1738)

Individual Subjectivism

... 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. Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar'd to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind.”



— David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1738)

Humean Subjectivism

Humean Subjectivism:

- (i) The expression “x is wrong” means the same as “from the constitution of my nature I have a sentiment of disapprobation from the contemplation of x.”

Humean Subjectivism

Humean Subjectivism:

- (i) The expression “x is wrong” means the same as “I disapprove of x.”
(and similarly for other terms of evaluation) Semantic
← Thesis
- (ii) There is no *property* of wrongness; wrongness is fundamentally a *relation*:
a relation between a subject and an action (the relation of disapproval). Metaphysical
← Thesis
- (iii) We know about morality by knowing our own psychology. Epistemological
← Thesis

Avoid this confusion!

Subjectivism is NOT Non-Cognitivism!

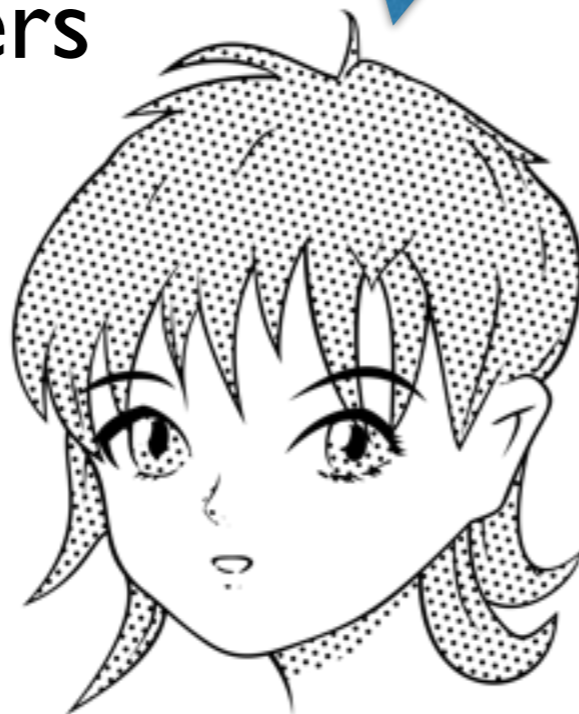


“I disapprove of what the teenagers are doing.”



asserts that one disapproves

“What the teenagers are doing is wrong.”



“BOO! what the teenagers are doing”



expresses one's disapproval (without asserting anything)

Humean Subjectivism

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← Thesis
- (iii) We know about morality by knowing our own psychology. Epistemological
← Thesis

Moore's No-Disagreement Argument

More Moore:

“But there is one very serious objection to such a view If this view be true, then when I judge an action to be wrong, I am merely making a judgment about my own feelings towards it; and when you judge it to be wrong, you are merely making a judgment about yours. And hence the word ‘wrong’ in my mouth, means something entirely different from what it does in yours; just as the word ‘I’ in my mouth stands for an entirely different person from what it does in yours



G.E. Moore

— “The Nature of Moral Philosophy” (1922), pp. 333-34

Moore's No-Disagreement Argument

... That is to say when I judge of a given action that it is wrong, and you perhaps of the very same action that it was not, we are not in fact differing in opinion about it at all When I say 'That was wrong' I am merely saying 'That sort of action excites indignation in me, when I see it'; and when you say 'No; it was not wrong' you are merely saying 'It does not excite indignation in me, when I see it.' And obviously both judgments may perfectly well be true together



G.E. Moore

— "The Nature of Moral Philosophy" (1922), pp. 333-34

Moore's No-Disagreement Argument

... if this view be true, then there is absolutely no such thing as a difference of opinion upon moral questions. ... this seems to me to be a very serious objection to the view. Don't people, in fact, sometimes really differ in opinion on a moral question? Certainly all appearances are in favour of the view that they do: and yet, if they do, that can only be if when I think a thing to be wrong, and you think it not to be wrong, I mean by 'wrong' the very same characteristic which you mean”



G.E. Moore

—“The Nature of Moral Philosophy” (1922), pp. 333-34

Arguing Against a Theory

A very common way to argue against a theory in philosophy (and also in science):

P1. If theory T is true, then _____ .

P2. But it's not the case that _____ .

C. Therefore, theory T is not true.

[*modus
tollens*]

The first premise draws out a certain implication of the theory.

The second premise asserts that this implication is mistaken.

Arguing Against a Theory

A very common way to argue against a theory in philosophy (and also in science):

P1. If theory T is true, then _____ .

P2. But it's not the case that _____ .

C. Therefore, theory T is not true.

[modus
tollens]

Pro tip: when a philosopher is arguing in this way against some theory, see if you can isolate exactly what the philosopher thinks is the implausible implication of theory; see if you can put that into a single sentence.

Moore's No-Disagreement Argument

Moore's No-Disagreement Argument as Applied to Humean Subjectivism

P1. If Humean Subjectivism is true, then

_____.

P2. But it's not the case that _____.

C. Therefore, Humean Subjectivism is not true.

How would you fill in the blank?

Moore's No-Disagreement Argument

Moore's No-Disagreement Argument as Applied to Humean Subjectivism

P1. If Humean Subjectivism is true, then there is no such thing as a difference of opinion on moral questions.

P2. But obviously there are differences of opinion on moral questions.

C. Therefore, Humean Subjectivism is not true.

IMPORTANT:

For any argument that we discuss, in addition to knowing the premises and conclusion of the argument, be sure that you can give the *rationale* for *each premise* of the argument.

The **rationale** of a premise is the reason that it is supposed to be true. It is the reason that a proponent of the argument would give for thinking that the premise is true. It is in fact a little sub-argument that premise.

Moore's No-Disagreement Argument

Moore's No-Disagreement Argument as Applied to Humean Subjectivism

P1. If Humean Subjectivism is true, then there is no such thing as a difference of opinion on moral questions.

P2. But obviously there are differences of opinion on moral questions.

C. Therefore, Humean Subjectivism is not true.

Moore's No-Disagreement Argument

More Moore (p. 335):

“For these reasons it seems to me extremely difficult to believe that when we judge things to be wrong, each of us is merely making a judgment about *his own* psychology. But if not about our own, then about whose?”

Some possibilities: (only the first two are discussed by Moore)

- all mankind
- an impartial spectator from the society in which I belong
- God
- a hypothetical “ideal observer”



G.E. Moore

Some Other Forms of Constructivism

Human Relativism:

“x is wrong” = “all mankind would disapprove of x”

Cultural Relativism:

“x is wrong” = “my society’s moral code prohibits x”

Divine Command Theory:

“x is wrong” = “God prohibits x”

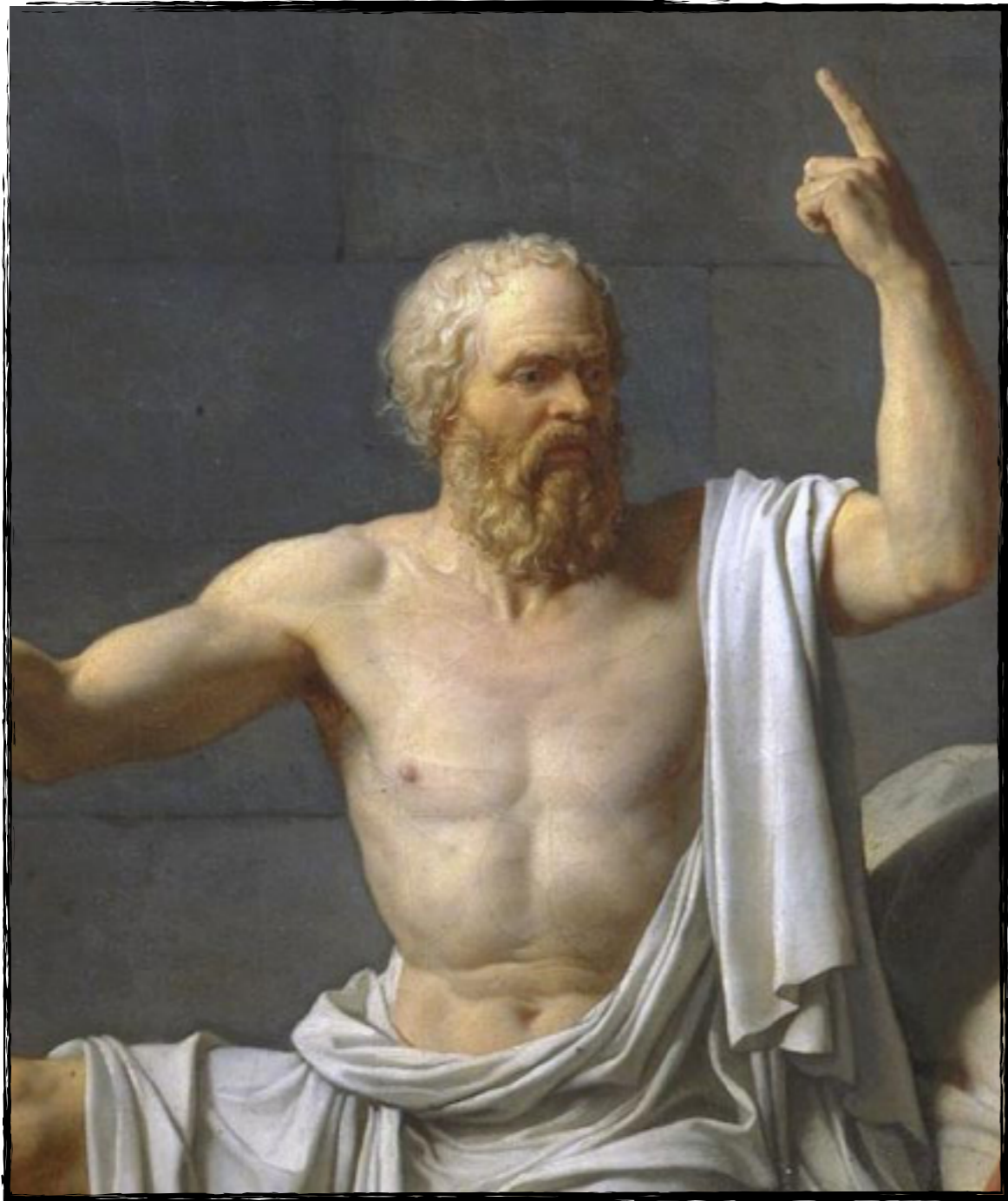
Ideal Observer Theory:

“x is wrong” = “an ideal observer would disapprove of x”

where an **ideal observer** is a being with features like these:
knows all the non-moral facts; has a perfectly vivid imagination;
is perfectly rational; is disinterested.

The Arbitrariness Problem

(a.k.a. The Euthyphro Problem)



Socrates

“The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods.”

The Arbitrariness Problem

as applied to the
Ideal Observer
Theory

(1) Assume for *reductio*: that the Ideal Observer Theory is true.

————— *It follows that:* —————

(2) There are no moral facts prior to an ideal observer approving or disapproving of things. [from (1) and def. of IOT]

It follows that:

(3) An ideal observer's approvals and disapprovals are arbitrary. [(2)]

It follows that:

(4) We have no reason to follow the approvals and disapprovals of an ideal observer. [(3)]

It follows that:

(5) We have no reason to follow or to care about morality. [(1), (4)]

But:

(6) We *do* have reason to follow morality and care about it. [premise]

————— *Therefore:* —————

(7) The Ideal Observer Theory is not true. [(5), (6), *reductio ad absurdum*]

The Arbitrariness Problem

as applied to
Societal Constructivism
a.k.a. Cultural Relativism

Huemer (p. 52):

“ ... why should we obey social customs? Either there are *good reasons* for the customs—that is, reasons that show the customs or the behavior they endorse to be good in some way—or there are no such reasons. If there are such reasons, then at least some evaluative facts exist prior to the customs. If there are no such reasons, then the customs are merely arbitrary rules, and why should we obey arbitrary rules?”

The Arbitrariness Problem

as applied to any
constructivist
theory

(1) Assume for *reductio*: that some constructivist theory is true.

————— *It follows that:* —————

(2) There are no moral facts prior to a certain specified observer (or observers) taking up attitudes towards things. [from (1)]

It follows that:

(3) This observer's attitudes are arbitrary. [(2)]

It follows that:

(4) We have no reason to conform to the observer's attitudes. [(3)]

It follows that:

(5) We have no reason to conform to or to care about morality.
[(1), (4)]

But:

(6) We *do* have reason to conform to and care about morality. [premise]

————— *Therefore:* —————

(7) Constructivism is not true. [(5), (6), *reductio ad absurdum*]