

## Lesson 4

### Ethical Subjectivism

The youngest serial killer in the United States is Craig Price, also known as the "The Slasher of Warwick." Between the ages of 13 and 15, he committed four murders: a mother, her two daughters, and another woman. In 1987, at 13, he broke into a house just two houses away from his and stabbed a 27-year-old woman 58 times. Two years later, at the age of 15, he broke into another neighbor's house, stabbed a 39-year-old mother 57 times, stabbed her 10-year-old daughter 62 times, crushed the skull of her 7-year-old daughter, and stabbed her 30 times. These stabbings were so brutal that the handles broke off the knives he used, with the blades staying inside the victims' bodies. Think about this statement made by Craig Price, "Morality is a private choice." Is our morality a private choice? Is it subjective? Is it up to each individual to decide what personally feels good or right to them? This lesson will look at an ethical framework known as Ethical Subjectivism. We will also look at the harmful implications of this "to each his own" philosophy when making real-life moral decisions and policies.

So, what is ethical subjectivism, or so-called individual relativism, which claims that morality is relative to each person? To expand on that, people can never be mistaken about what is morally right or wrong. There are no objective or universal moral standards or truths, and there are only opinions. An opinion is a statement based only on a feeling rather than on fact. So, what is right or wrong for one particular person is a matter of personal taste. What is right for you may be wrong for another person, depending on each person's feelings or opinions. My opinion is that snakes are bad, but another person may believe snakes are beautiful creatures.

So what is the problem with ethical subjectivism is that we all have different opinions. Just like snakes, snakes have a non-moral value to them. So, where morality is concerned, there are no "facts," and no one is "right." We all feel different about things, and that is all there is. Ethical subjectivism is about the sincerity of belief that makes an item right or true for that person.

For example, no one could rightfully accuse former Louisiana state senator and white supremacist David Duke of being insincere. As a defender of Nazi ideology, Duke has expressed admiration for Nazi war criminals Rudolf Hess and Dr. Josef Mengele, who performed experiments on twins at Auschwitz. Duke is also a member of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Duke also believes that blacks have "inherited tendencies...to act in anti-social ways." Not surprisingly, Duke opposed Obama's presidential candidacy, referring to Obama as an anti-white, black racist. It is irrelevant whether Duke can support his claim. What is important to an ethical subjectivist is that he personally believes something to be true. Political analyst George Will writes that, as a true believer, "his reputation is supposedly redeemed, at least a little bit, by 'sincerity,' considered inherently virtuous in an age so committed to subjectivism that it firmly believes only in believing."<sup>1</sup>

The great majority of moral philosophers disagree with ethical subjectivism, and they maintain that there are fundamental moral standards by which we can judge people like Duke.

To understand ethical subjectivism a little more, let us know what moral subjectivism is not.

While ethical subjectivism is a pretty straightforward framework and its simplistic view, it can be confused with other positions, especially today. Today, many people will use the ideas of ethical subjectivism as an "invincible suit of armor" to prevent dialogue and thought. As we discussed in Lesson 3, in ethics, we need to be critical thinkers who are open to dialogue and

---

<sup>1</sup> Judith Boss, *Ethics for Life*, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. Pg. 116

discussion even with those we disagree with. We do not want "an invincible suit of armor" to be an immature defense mechanism or resistance. Let us look at three areas that ethical subjectivism is not: tolerance, ethical skepticism, and emotivism.

**Tolerance** is respect for others' lifestyles. Many people confuse ethical subjectivism with tolerance. Some will use the phrase, "live and let live." It has been incorrectly applied to the notion that we should tolerate others' feelings and lifestyles. Remember that ethics is about what ought to be in a situation. On the other hand, tolerance deals with moral permissibility (Lesson 2) and cultural ideas, as we will discuss in Lesson 6.

**Ethical skepticism** states that it is impossible to know whether or not moral truths exist. Rather than denying all moral truths, skepticism takes the position that there may be moral truths or there may not be; that is, the person decides and maintains that the existence of moral truths cannot be proved.

**Emotivism** claims that all moral statements are neither true nor false but express feelings. In Lesson 2, we discussed emotivism like a toddler acting out because they did not get the candy bar at the check-out aisle.

We started this lesson by looking at Craig Price, but let us take time to look at one of the most prolific serial killers in US history, Ted Bundy. Ted Bundy, like Craig Price, is what we refer to as a sociopath. Sociopaths feel no guilt at killing and may even feel pleasure in the control that comes from killing another person. During the 1970s, serial killer and one-time law student Ted Bundy brutally raped and murdered an estimated thirty to one hundred women, including several college students, before he was finally caught and put to death by Florida in 1989. In the following statement purportedly made by Bundy to one of his surviving victims, Bundy uses ethical subjectivism to justify his actions.

"...then I learned that all moral judgments are "value judgments," that all value judgments are subjective, and that none can be proved to be either "right" or "wrong"... Nor is there any "reason" to obey the law for anyone, like myself, who has the boldness and daring-the strength of character-to throw off its shackles...I discovered that to become truly free, truly unfettered, I had to become truly uninhibited. And I quickly discovered that the greatest obstacle to my freedom, the greatest block and limitation to it, consists in the insupportable "value judgment" that I was bound to respect the rights of others. I asked myself, who were these "others"? Other human beings, with human rights? Why is it more wrong to kill a human animal than any other animal, a pig or a sheep or a steer? Is your life more to you than a hog's life to a hog? Why should I be willing to sacrifice my pleasure more for the one than the other? Surely, you would not, in this age of scientific enlightenment, declare that God or nature has marked some pleasures as "moral" or "good" and others as "immoral" or "bad"? In any case, let me assure you, my dear young lady, that there is absolutely no comparison between the pleasure I might take in eating ham and the pleasure I anticipate in raping and murdering you. That is the honest conclusion to which my education has led me after the most conscientious examination of my spontaneous and uninhibited self.

Ethical subjectivism, by its definition, cannot provide or even acknowledge universal moral standards, even those based on so-called natural moral sentiments, because they deny that universal standards exist.

Can our personal feelings alone be a reliable moral guide? The answer should be no. When discussing ethical frameworks, we are not dealing in an abstract world. Ethics should inform us and motivate us in real-life decisions and actions. They shape the way we define ourselves and

our community, and our ideas of responsibility. Ethical subjectivism romanticizes the idea of value clarification. Values clarification is based on a nonjudgmental discussion of moral values. That is, values are considered something we clarify rather than discover. Moral truths are based on inner feelings rather than a shared objective reality. So, any opinion is just as valid as any other. Ted Bundy's opinion on rape and murder is just as valid as yours. This popular approach to moral discussion can slow the moral development of our society. The growth of ethical subjectivism in our society may contribute to what has come to be known as the "Kitty Genovese syndrome." The Kitty Genovese syndrome is characterized by an attitude of moral indifference to another person's distress. In 1964, 28-year-old Kitty Genovese was murdered outside her New York apartment building. Her killer left twice when other people in the building turned on their lights. Yet, during the half-hour that elapsed during the attack, none of Kitty's neighbors, who heard her repeated cries for help, even bothered to call the police. The third time the killer returned to the scene, he finished her off. In 1995, 33-year-old Deletha Wood jumped to her death from the Belle Isle Bridge in Detroit to escape her attacker, a 19-year-old man who savagely beat her after a fender-bender accident. Dozens of spectators stood by and watched, some even cheering on the attacker. One man, who arrived at the scene just after Wood had gone off the bridge, jumped into the river and tried, unsuccessfully, to save her. He later told a reporter that the crowd was "standing around like people taking an interest in sports."<sup>2</sup>

How would ethical subjectivists respond to these two events? They would reply that if the people in the crowds watching Genovese and Wood be bludgeoned to death felt like simply standing around, that was the right thing for them to do. It is only personal feelings that matter to ethical subjectivists. And if Wood's attacker felt that it was morally acceptable to beat another motorist

---

<sup>2</sup> Myron Stokes and David Zeman, "The Shame of a City," *Newsweek*, September 4, 1995, pg. 26

to death, he was morally right and even obligated to do so. There are no objective values or standards with ethical subjectivism, only individual opinions or feelings on the issue.

### Critiques

There are four critiques to consider on ethical subjectivism:

1. **There are no objective moral facts:** according to ethical subjectivism, it makes no more sense to try to convince someone who enjoys torturing children that what they are doing is wrong than to convince a donutholic that they don't like donuts. But those two situations are not comparable. First, how many donuts I eat is a non-moral value, but the life that someone takes has a moral value. So Craig Price's quote on whether or not morality is a private choice helps us understand that when our moral choices interact with or affect others, it is no longer a private choice. Those who follow the ideas of ethical subjectivism may make a statement like, "what I do does not affect others." Tend not to understand the severity of their actions on the greater society.
2. **Ethical subjectivism is disastrous for the weak and defenseless:** No moral framework should allow this. If moral right and wrong are simply a matter of personal opinion, then there is nothing that makes genocide objectively wrong. If we accept ethical subjectivism, there is no such thing as a victim because there is no universal moral principle that says we must respect other people's rights. We would be encouraged to accept acts like slavery, rape, child abuse, and genocide, all under ethical subjectivism.
3. **Ethical subjectivism cannot explain genuine disagreement:** Jon believes murder is good, and Frank believes murder is bad. According to ethical subjectivism, when Jon says murder is good, he merely expresses his moral opinion. Therefore, Frank should not disagree with him because all that is expressed is his opinion. At the same time, when Frank says murder is bad, Jon should agree with him because Frank is merely expressing

his moral opinion. Why should there be any disagreement if the two understand that the other is expressing their moral opinion? Disagreement emerges because Jon does believe murder is not merely his opinion. If taken seriously, ethical subjectivism is a dangerous framework. It isolates the individual and permits people to exploit and hurt others without even having to justify their actions or stand in judgment.

4. **Ethical subjectivism leads to self-contradiction:** To relate to critique three, John and Frank cannot both be right. If we create a logical statement to show this, it might look like this, where X is murder:

Person 1 says X is right.

Person 2 says X is wrong.

Murder cannot be both right and wrong simultaneously, and it is either right or wrong, but not both.

Moral thinking and moral conduct are 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 opt out of moral thinking altogether. This is why Ethical Subjectivism seems to be going in the wrong direction in focusing on attitudes and feelings.