

“Ethics is all just a matter of opinion.”

—What does the above statement mean?

Variations:

“Right and wrong is just a matter of opinion.”

“Everyone has their own opinion about right and wrong.”

“In ethics, no one’s views are any better than anyone else’s.”

“We have the ethical views we do because of our upbringing and our society.”

“What’s right for me is one thing, what’s right for you is another thing.”

“No one has the right to tell others what to think or how to act.”

People often say such things, but what do they mean by them? None of these statements is especially clear. The first task of the philosopher is to raise statements like these to a higher level of clarity. Only then can the philosopher begin the second task, that of evaluating them, of discovering what reasons exist for and against holding them, and where the balance of reasons lies.

Take the statement that ethics is all just a matter of opinion. What might someone who says this, and says it sincerely, mean by it?

Here are some suggestions by way of disambiguating and clarifying that sentence. Maybe:

1) Speaking the sentence “ethics is all just a matter of opinion” is a way of making the subjectivist’s points:

a) Ethical judgements are without truth value; they are neither true nor false

b) To say “It’s wrong to insult a person” or “sometimes it is all right to insult a person” is merely to express one’s disapproval or approval toward insulting people, or to express one’s preferences or wishes

c) No understanding of the facts regarding insults compels one to disapprove or approve of insulting people; one’s disapproval or approval is, rather, a matter of reacting to one’s understanding of the facts through one’s tastes

—This is a confused way of making these points, for to call a judgement an expression of an opinion is to imply that it is an opinion about something, ie., that it attempts to say that some action or practice actually has in itself some quality, and that it, the opinion, can get that quality right. But the idea here is that there are no ethical qualities in the first place, and thus none to inhere in actions or practices. The subjectivist view implies, that is, that there cannot be any opinions about what ethical qualities inhere in actions or practices.

2) Speaking the sentence “ethics is all just a matter of opinion” is a way of making the pessimistic realist’s points:

- a) Each ethical judgement is either true or false
- b) The true ones are true in virtue of getting right the ethical facts
- c) We cannot know of any ethical judgement whether it is true, either because we are limited by our mental capabilities and imprisoned by our biases and, thereby, unable to recognize or evaluate the evidence accurately, or because evidence pertaining to the ethical qualities of things is always slight, contradictory, or inconclusive
- d) Speaking this sentence first of all reminds people of their limited understanding of the ways of others and the presence of their own biases. Being reminded of this, people might acknowledge they could be wrong and the other right, and so become less likely to impose their values on others

—The optimistic realist denies point c), and says instead that we can, though maybe we only seldom do, rise above our prejudices and biases and self-interests and then collect and appraise objectively the evidence or reasons for and against particular ethical judgements. In many cases, says the optimist, our opinions on ethical matters are both true and founded on good reasons.

3) Speaking the sentence “ethics is all just a matter of opinion” is a way of making the cultural relativist’s points:

- a) Each ethical judgement is either true or false (not both, not neither)
- b) There are no objective ethical facts in virtue of which an ethical judgement is true or false
- c) Ethical facts are produced by the customs, standards, and mores within the folkways of the culture to which the person making the judgement belongs, so true ethical judgements are true only relative to specific folkways
- d) Most ethical judgements are true, for we all are most of the time in touch with our culture’s folkways (after all, we were trained into these folkways early in our childhood and we continue to participate in them)

4) Speaking the sentence “ethics is all just a matter of opinion” is a way of making the individual relativist’s points:

- a) Each ethical judgement is either true or false
- b) There are no objective ethical facts in virtue of which an ethical judgement is true or false
- c) Ethical facts are produced by the habits, standards, and mores of the individual person making the judgement, so true ethical judgements are true only relative to the values of the individual person
- d) All or almost all ethical judgements are true—those that are based on an accurate and complete account of the facts, that is—, for it’s impossible or difficult for an individual to be out of step with herself

5) Speaking the sentence “ethics is all just a matter of opinion” is a way of making the deflationary point:

The language of ethics is (is merely or is usually) a device by which people attempt to advance their self-interest. They disguise their pursuit of their own interests by dressing it in the clothes of impartiality and fairness and desert. Ethics is (is only or is often) a means by which the powerful attempt to manipulate the powerless and by which the powerless attempt to restrain the powerful

—In its “merely” form, this point can be combined with ethical subjectivism, and in its “usually” form it can be combined both with either variety of relativism and any variety of realism. But its “merely” form is incompatible with either realism or relativism

—In its “usually” form, it isn’t actually deflationary at all, but critical or cynical, for in that form it depends on the distinction between manipulative talk and sincere talk

6) Speaking the sentence “ethics is all just a matter of opinion” is a way of declining an invitation to enter into a serious discussion of ethics, motivated by the thought that:

- i) reasoning hard hurts the head, or
- ii) discussing ethics puts one at risk of hearing unpleasant things (“Don’t upset me by challenging my opinion!”), or
- iii) discussing ethics puts others at risk of hearing unpleasant things (“Don’t upset them by challenging their opinion! Concern for their self-esteem requires that we validate their opinion”), or
- iv) the chance that any one’s mind will be changed is so slight, or the frustrations of trying to change minds are so great, that it’s pointless to enter into any discussion of ethics, or
- v) one cannot discuss matters of ethics without sounding like a carping or divisive or dogmatic or scolding or censorious or chauvinistic or otherwise offensive moralist

When a person utters the phrase “ethics is all just a matter of opinion” as simply a way of declining an invitation to think about and discuss a matter of ethics, what the phrase he uttered means is entirely unimportant to him. He could just as well have said “No thanks” or “Get lost”

Have you ever said “ethics is all just a matter of opinion”?

What did you mean by saying it? (What did you intend to accomplish by saying it?)

Has your meaning been captured in one of the options presented above?

Or was your meaning or intention other than any of these options?

What was your meaning or intention?

What is the correct understanding of ethical judgements?