

Common arguments: Three

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It's all a matter of opinion!

Sometimes people suggest that morality is a matter of personal opinion.

i.e. judging that abortion is wrong is comparable to deciding that sardines are tasty

In this podcast we'll consider this claim.

Statements of personal preference (like 'sardines are tasty') are usually thought to be:

- made true (or false) by some fact about the individual who makes them;**
- made true (or false) by some fact about which the individual is an authority;**
- infallible – such that the person who makes them cannot get them wrong**

So if moral statements are comparable to statements of personal preference Sam's belief 'it is morally acceptable to rob elderly ladies' is also:

- **made true or false by some fact about Sam;**
- **made true or false by some fact about which Sam is an authority;**
- **infallible, so Sam *can't* be wrong about it.**

This is nonsense isn't it?

**Moral statements are nothing like
statements of personal preference.**

So why do so many people make this mistake?

The explanation lies in the fact that people confuse:

- **beliefs about the world (first order beliefs)**
- **beliefs about beliefs (second order beliefs)**

**Consider the fact the following sentence
in ambiguous:**

**Robbing elderly ladies is morally acceptable
for Sam**

Robbing elderly ladies is morally acceptable for Sam

The two possible interpretations of this sentence are:

- **Sam *believes* that robbing elderly ladies is morally acceptable**
- **Robbing elderly ladies *is* morally acceptable *for Sam*.**

Let's look at these in turn

We have reason to believe Sam *believes* that robbing elderly ladies is morally acceptable whenever Sam gives us reason to believe that he believes robbing elderly ladies is morally acceptable.

It is an unfortunate fact about the way some human beings are brought up that they do form such beliefs.

We have reason to believe robbing elderly ladies *is* morally acceptable *for Sam* only when we have reason to believe that it is morally acceptable for Sam (even if for no-one else) that it is morally acceptable for him to rob elderly ladies.

It is difficult to imagine a situation in which we would have reason to believe this.

To believe this would be to have no reason to interfere with Sam's robbing an elderly lady, no reason to stop him from doing it.

The two meanings of

'Robbing elderly ladies is morally acceptable' is true for Sam

are quite different

Yet confusing the two leads to the belief that morality is like personal preference

Consider the sentence:

Mike believes Marianne is wearing green

Now consider:

Sam believes robbing elderly ladies is morally acceptable

[Sam believes [robbing elderly ladies is morally acceptable]]

The embedding sentence ('Sam believes that robbing elderly ladies is morally acceptable') is made true by a fact about *Sam*

The embedded sentence ('robbing elderly ladies is morally acceptable') is made true by a fact about *robbing elderly ladies*.

Sam may be an authority about his own beliefs, about the sort of fact that makes the *embedding* sentence true or false.

But there is no reason to think he is an authority on morality, on the sort of fact that makes the *embedded* sentence true or false.

To the extent we think Sam is an authority on whether or not he has a certain belief, we might accept that his beliefs about his own beliefs are infallible.

But this does not mean that his beliefs about the moral acceptability of robbing elderly ladies are infallible.

About robbing elderly ladies Sam might be – indeed is - quite wrong.

It is simply not the case that a belief to the effect that robbing elderly ladies is morally acceptable is made true by a fact about a given individual, far less a fact about this individual on which he has authority.

If you listened to the podcasts about ethical theories you will know that there are many ideas about what makes a moral belief true or false.

Any ethical theory stating that simply having a moral belief is sufficient to make it true would not be a very good moral theory.

It would make moral error impossible.

We should reject the claim that morality is a matter of personal opinion.

This isn't surprising:

- **morality matters much more to us than personal preference**
- **there is good reason for morality's mattering much more than personal preference**
- **we do – and should – argue about morality**

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