Chapter 2

Butting Heads: Is Ethics Just a Matter of Opinion?

*O*ne of the phrases we hear a lot when discussing ethics is that it's all just a matter of opinion, which is often a way of saying that it isn't possible to say anything useful about ethics. But of course, if there wasn't anything useful to say about ethics, you wouldn't be reading this book.

In fact, when people get into arguments about whether something is right or wrong, they often end up frustrated with each other. Sometimes that frustration gets so intense that it causes one person to blurt out, "But that's just your opinion!" And after that, it's difficult to know what to say, right? After all, everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion. How can my opinion be better than yours, especially when the subject is ethics?

In this chapter, we survey three theories (subjectivism, cultural relativism, and emotivism) that attempt to base ethics on some kind of opinion or feeling. Many philosophers have found these theories to be seriously flawed. We survey them here because they represent thoughts that everyone has about ethics from time to time, and it's important to see when they don't stand up to scrutiny.

like arguments about something more substantial (think religion and abortion). According to subjectivists, the following general statement must be true if ethics is just personal opinion:

"X is right" just means "X is right for me," and "X is wrong" just means "X is wrong for me."

Another way of stating that something feels "right to you" or "wrong to you" is to say "I like X." What subjectivists are saying is that "X is right" just means "I like X" and that there's nothing more to ethics.

You may have heard of *relativism,* a view of ethics that has everybody worried. Well this is it! Or at least one form of it. Subjectivism is a form of relativism because it says right and wrong are completely relative to our own subjective preferences. If you believe that something is ethically permissible, even that cold-blooded murder is perfectly permissible, it's true for me.

To illustrate how the subjectivist sees an issue, consider the following example with shoplifting, which is a bit more heated than which type of pizza is best. The subjectivist believes that when you say "Shoplifting is right," you really mean "I like shoplifting; it's okay for me to shoplift." And when your friend says "Shoplifting is wrong," she really means she dislikes shoplifting; it's wrong for her. But if this is what ethical statements mean, then you aren't contradicting one another. In fact, what both of you are saying can be correct. And of course, subjectivists don't just translate statements about shoplifting. They believe it about all ethical statements.

When subjectivists talk about ethics, they think that at no point are you ever talking about what's right and wrong for the other person. Rather, you're talking about yourself — namely your personal opinions, your likes and dislikes. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense that something like shoplifting could be both right and wrong for everyone. But if it's right for one person and wrong for the next, no one has to worry about it because there's no contradiction at all. Just like chocolate ice cream can taste best for Chris and vanilla can taste best for Adam, for a subjectivist something can be right for one person and wrong for another. It's like people have different ethical tastes.

Recognizing that subjectivism can't handle disagreement

Subjectivism, which says that ethics is just about personal opinion and ethical statements are personal preferences, is an interesting way of escaping lots of debates about ethics. But should you believe this view?

A (fun) pop quiz: Fact versus opinion

Some debates are about facts — the distance from the earth to the sun, for instance, and the fastest car made by Ford. Each of these inquiries eventually results in one side ending up right and the other ending up wrong. You can accomplish a lot in these debates. Other debates, however, just stay at the level of opinion — favorite colors or the funniest jokes, for example. Take a look at this list of debates; which do you think are about facts and which are about mere opinions?

✔ The St. Louis Cardinals are a much better baseball team than the Chicago Cubs.

✔ The Big Bang, not a divine being, created the universe as we see it today.

✔ The Mona Lisa is the greatest piece of art-work ever created.

✔ Mountains are more beautiful natural creations than beaches.

✔ Chess is more fun than checkers.

✔ In a battle between King Kong and Godzilla, Godzilla would win.

After you figure out which are fact-based debates and which are just about opinion, ask yourself what kinds of criteria should generally be used to make these sorts of decisions. You'll probably notice that the break between fact and opinion isn't always easy to draw. It's not as simple as distinguishing scientific questions from nonscientific ones. Many philosophers believe that science can't solve philosophical debates (like those about ethics), but they can still be productive debates. Do you think that this holds true of ethics, or is it mere opinion?

REMEMBER

One reason an ethical theory may be wrong is if it leads you to believe something about the world that isn't at all true. You can use this criterion for any ethical theory, not just subjectivism. But many philosophers believe that subjectivism entails a particularly long list of untrue things about the world. One near the top of the list is *ethical disagreement,* the (apparent) fact that people disagree about ethical issues. For example, people seem to disagree about ethical issues such as capital punishment, abortion, eating meat, how you're supposed to hold your hands when you pray, and many other issues.

Ethical disagreement looks like a general fact of life. You can look out into the world and see lots of ethical disagreement. In fact, one of the main reasons people resort to subjectivist views is that they find themselves in uncomfortable ethical disagreements with others. Say that you have a friend who's an ethical vegetarian. He constantly points out that eating meat causes lots of animal suffering, so you shouldn't eat it. If you do eat meat, and the guilt doesn't keep you up at night, you probably believe that eating meat isn't wrong for anyone — even your friend.

Describing this as a disagreement between friends isn't difficult. But remember that subjectivists think that "X is wrong" just means "X is wrong for me." So what your friend really believes, according to the subjectivist, is that eating meat is wrong for him — and you believe eating meat is right for you.

Thus, subjectivists think the argument between you and your vegetarian friend really isn't an argument at all. Your friend is simply stating his preference to not eat meat while you're stating your preference to eat meat. But if you're both stating your preferences, you aren't disagreeing about anything! You're talking about you (not what he should do) and he's talking about himself (not what you should do).

WARNING!

Be careful at this point. People often are tempted to respond that ethics is still just opinion but your friend is saying you should have a *different* opinion. But remember that this isn't what the subjectivist is saying. The subjectivist is saying that "X is wrong" means "I dislike X," not "I dislike X and your opinion should be that X is wrong too." If a subjectivist said that, he would have to admit that ethics is about more than personal preferences. It would be about preferences that others should act in certain ways too.

REMEMBER

The upshot is this: This world is full of ethical disagreement. But because subjectivists believe ethics is ultimately about personal opinions, they must believe that there is no ethical disagreement. That's just bizarre. It sure seems like people disagree about ethics — sometimes heatedly. As a result, you may have strong reason to believe that subjectivism isn't a good ethical theory.

They're always right: Subjectivists make bad houseguests

Subjectivism seems to entail that a person is completely infallible about ethics. What exactly does that mean? Basically it means that no one can be wrong about their ethical beliefs. The problem is that most people, at some point or another, think that they could be wrong about their ethical beliefs, and this isn't good for subjectivism.

So if ethics is just about personal opinions (according to subjectivism), and you can never be wrong about your own personal opinions (according to the way opinions work), it looks like subjectivism entails that you can never be wrong about ethics. That would mean that no one was ever wrong about slavery, sexism, racism, or anything really. It also would mean that every ethical belief everyone has now is correct and could never be wrong.

For instance, in the past many people held the belief that buying, selling, and trading human beings as slaves was just another part of society. Most people today can agree that these people had unethical beliefs. Owning and trading slaves is ethically wrong. But what would the subjectivist say about someone in the modern world who wanted to keep slaves? If it's a minimally decent ethical theory, it should tell her it's wrong.

But the modern day slave trader would think that slavery is permissible, and in subjectivist terms, slavery would be "right for her." Because slavery is one of the more awful things human beings can do to each other, most people would like to think that she's wrong about this. Can she be wrong about this? If subjectivists are right, she's only talking about her personal opinion. And it's doubtful she's wrong about that. After all, you're somewhat of an authority on your own personal opinion. It's as difficult to be wrong about them as it is to be wrong about being in pain. With regard to opinions, people are infallible.

REMEMBER

These conclusions seem seriously at odds with common sense and common decency. Surely in your own life you've had to correct an ethical belief or two. Because it's so implausible that what the subjectivist has to say is true, many philosophers consider the idea of ethical infallibility a devastating argument against it.

Determining what subjectivism gets right

If subjectivism is built on the view that ethics is just opinion — and that view is terribly flawed — why should we bother to study it? Can it teach us anything about ethical thinking? Actually, yes. Here are three good reasons to study this thought about ethics:

- ✔ **For some people, the theory is terribly flawed when they try to use it to win an ethical argument.** Popular thoughts are worth studying, especially when they're wrong. This way you know how to counter them when they come up.

- ✔ **Subjectivism reminds you that you shouldn't be too quick to judge others' opinions.** The fact that someone believes something different than you doesn't necessarily mean that he's wrong (or right). And after you're reminded of that, perhaps you can find a way to solve your actual disagreement by arguing about which standards themselves are right and wrong. (For more information on this type of argument, see Chapters 7, 8, and 9.)

- ✔ **Just because the theory is flawed doesn't mean that ethics has nothing at all to do with opinions.** To say that people don't have ethical opinions on issues is as inaccurate as saying ethical disagreement doesn't exist or that no one can ever be wrong about ethics. But even though people have opinions, perhaps not all of those opinions will turn out to be right.

Cultural Relativism: Grounding Ethics in the Group's Opinion

People often notice that ethical beliefs seem to differ from society to society. Anthropologist Ruth Benedict was one such observer. She noted, for instance, that in most cultures people are expected to mourn the dead themselves. But among the Kwakiutl people of the Pacific Northwest, killing a member of a neighboring tribe caused that tribe to mourn, displacing one's own grief. So which practice is right? Benedict suggested that neither was really right; she proposed that ethical beliefs are really no more than *customs,* or habits that people develop over centuries of living together and doing the same things. And when different cultures disagree about ethics, "custom is king." That is, you should (and often do) defer to your own culture's customs. This thought leads to the ethical theory of cultural relativism.

Cultural relativism (sometimes called *conventionalism*) is the ethical theory that says right and wrong are relative to one's culture. According to this theory, no one universal ethical standard transcends cultures. What should matter to individuals are the collective ethical opinions that their home cultures hold.

REMEMBER

Cultural relativism does something that subjectivism (which we describe in the earlier section "Subjectivism: Basing Ethics on Each Person's Opinion") doesn't: It asserts that an ethical standard transcends individual opinion. In other words, cultural relativism holds that no one overarching ethical truth exists and that right and wrong are relative to one's culture. Thus, a person can do something wrong if she goes against the norms of her home culture. But that's where the criticism has to stop, according to the cultural relativist. People can't criticize individuals in other cultures for not following their own culture's norms; that's because they have a different culture and a different set of norms to abide by.

The following sections take a closer look at cultural relativism. This approach is usually intended to promote tolerance of other cultures. But after looking at some other serious problems with the theory, we question whether it in fact does support tolerance.

Discovering what it means to be a cultural relativist

According to cultural relativism, there's no single, overriding standard for all cultures to follow. Essentially, each culture exists in its own little ethical bubble. For example, separate sets of ethical rules and norms exist for the American culture, for the British culture, for the Congolese culture, for the

Japanese culture, and so on. (Smaller bubbles may even exist for subcultures, but see the section "Living in many worlds: Some problems with cultural relativism" later in this chapter for some problems with that.)

The following two elements make up cultural relativism:

✔ **The diversity thesis:** Ethical standards differ from culture to culture. This observation, which was named by Louis Pojman, states, simply, that what counts as moral conduct differs from culture to culture. And it's true that ethical views do diverge on a good number of topics. Some cultures, for example, are more willing to ascribe rights to women than others. Cultures also have different views on gay rights, racism, blasphemy, and many other areas.

Of course, most cultures do share some qualities with each other. For instance, there just doesn't seem to be a culture out there that believes torturing innocent infants for fun is ethically permissible. Unprovoked murder and deception are similarly frowned upon in almost every culture. Just as we don't want to overstate how similar cultures are to one another, we don't want to overstate the differences either. The diversity thesis may be true, but that doesn't necessarily mean cultures all have completely different ethical beliefs.

✔ **The dependency thesis:** What individuals should do depends on their own culture's ethical standards. Unlike the diversity thesis, which just states an observable fact, the dependency thesis makes a claim about ethics and morality. One can look out into the world and see what people do, but not necessarily what they should do (for more information on this thought, see Chapter 1). The dependency thesis is the essence of cultural relativism. Ethicists have lots of different thoughts about what ethics depends on: making people happy, avoiding harm, respecting rights, developing virtue, and so on. But cultural relativism says none of these are as important as following one's own culture's standards — whatever those standards may be. This puts the theory at odds with a lot of ethical thinking.

Understanding why cultural relativism is always so popular

Of all the ethical theories we know about, none seems to get more attention nowadays than cultural relativism. Everyone seems fond of the idea that right and wrong are relative to one's culture and that no ethical standard transcends cultures. In fact, many people seem so obsessed with this kind of cultural sensitivity that cultural relativism becomes the default ethical position.

By and large people turn to cultural relativism to avoid a negative kind of thinking called *ethnocentrism,* or thinking that one's own culture is the most

important (or most central) culture in the world. Ethnocentrism has led to a lot of pain and suffering over the years, particularly in the historical period from roughly 1500–1950 that historians call *colonialism.* During colonialism, many of the large European nations and the United States ethnocentrically believed that "primitive" peoples around the world would be better off if they conducted themselves according to European and American cultural norms.

Colonialism may have had some beneficial effects on the developing world, but gradually and inevitably, the European colonies grew restless and demanded the right to make their own laws and live by their own cultures. In retrospect, many people believe that colonialism caused much more harm than good by forcing people to abandon established cultures for the "superior" culture of Europe and the United States. The ethnocentrism of the colonialist period should thus be discouraged in favor of respect for diverse cultures and the institutions of those cultures.

Many people see cultural relativism as the ethical theory that makes the most sense if you want to guard against the evils of ethnocentrism. Because it prescribes no overarching universal ethical standard, people think that it must be the only way of ethical thinking that supports tolerance of other cultures. However, as we describe in the next section on cultural relativism's lack of universal respect for tolerance, this probably isn't true.

REMEMBER

Although many people turn to cultural relativism because it seems to avoid ethnocentrism, it isn't the only ethical theory that does this. For instance, in Chapter 7, we talk about an ethical theory called *utilitarianism.* According to utilitarianism, people should always do what brings the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people. If you think about that for a second, you can see that this captures respect for cultures quite well. Being overly critical of other cultures, or worse, invading them to make sure they do things your way, is a great way of making lots of people very *unhappy.* So even though we urge you to avoid ethnocentrism, it doesn't necessarily mean we want you to be a cultural relativist.

Living in many worlds: Some problems with cultural relativism

WARNING!

Cultural relativism has some significant problems under the hood. Here are two that relate to the definition of a culture:

✔ **Defining cultural boundaries is easier said than done.** If cultural relativism says that ethics is relative to the culture in which one lives, everyone needs to know what culture he or she lives in. Hold on to your seats, ladies and gentlemen, you're about to enter the real world. Cultures don't naturally separate like oil and water. Although people in the United States are part of the American culture, people living in Saudi Arabia are

part of the Arabic culture, and so on, making the distinction is nowhere near that simple.

Drawing cultural lines around the borders of a country won't do the trick. True, people in the United States tend to be immersed in American culture. But many more cultural groups exist within American culture. Different ethnic groups have their own cultures, different religions have their own cultures, and different regions have their own cultures. They may overlap, but Massachusetts's culture is different from Alabama's culture. Heck, most professional sports teams have their very own sub-cultures. So if ethics is relative to one's culture, we have to ask: which one?

✔ **People belong to several different cultures and subcultures.** In all likelihood, most people belong to several different cultures and subcultures, and they manage to juggle them all pretty well. But when you look to your culture for ethical guidance, you may quickly notice that different cultures can give different advice. Think of the thorny issue of abortion, for example. If an American Catholic needs to decide whether abortion is ethically permissible, he can reflect on the legality of abortion in the United States and the fact that a majority of people think abortion should be legal. However the Catholic Church teaches that abortion is a grave moral sin that's on par with murder. Which culture should the American Catholic heed?

It looks doubtful that cultural relativism will be able to solve this problem by specifying some boundary lines for what counts as a culture without making some pretty arbitrary judgments. The best it could do would be to say that the American Catholic should follow the culture that he identifies with the most. But most people in his shoes would simply identify the most with the culture that allows them to do what they want to do. And that sounds a lot less like cultural relativism and a lot more like subjectivism, which has its own problems (check out the earlier section on subjectivism for more information).

Looking at cultural relativism's lack of respect for tolerance

One of the reasons people believe in cultural relativism is that people have been terrible at tolerating other cultures in the past. The central point a cultural relativist makes is that no ethical standard transcends cultures. You don't have to look too far back in any culture's history to find another culture it dislikes. The British weren't at all fond of the Irish, and that aversion lead to years of war. The Catholic and Protestant branches of Christianity each believe that the other is getting something seriously wrong about ethics and religion. The Japanese had anything but tolerance for the Chinese when they invaded China in World War II. And don't even get us started on sports team rivalries. It all gets to be a bit much.

What cultures are you a part of?

People can be members of many different cultures and subcultures at once. Take the time to look inside your own history and see which cultures you associate yourself with. In the process of figuring this out, think about where you fit in the following areas:

- ✔ Your race and ethnicity
- ✔ Your gender
- ✔ Your family heritage
- ✔ Your sexual orientation
- ✔ Your place of residence
- ✔ Your main passions in life
- ✔ Your career or place of work
- ✔ Your hobbies
- ✔ Your religion
- ✔ Your taste in music

Finding your place in the preceding categories (and the many others you may think of) gives you a clue about the different cultural groups in your life that offer you ethical guidance. For instance, one of this book's authors can classify himself as a white, Midwestern American professor of German ancestry, who's politically active and fond of literature and indie rock bands. That's a lot of groups that may offer ethical guidance! After you determine the various cultures you belong to, think about some central ethical beliefs that you have. With which cultures do you think they seem to be associated? Do any of the cultures that you belong to disagree with those ethical beliefs? If so, and if you're a cultural relativist, how do you figure out which culture is the one to follow?

What better way to put an end to all this intolerance than finding a theory that rules it out entirely? Many people turn to cultural relativism for precisely this reason. Because it says that no single overarching standard exists for all people, no one has a right to criticize other cultures. And if you have no right to criticize them, you should tolerate them. Basically, cultural relativism seems to tell everyone to get along. What could be simpler?

Unfortunately, the lack of a single, overarching standard doesn't lead to tolerance as well as some cultural relativists may hope. Reflecting briefly on what makes up a culture, it's entirely possible that part of being in one culture may entail intolerance of certain other cultures. Consider, for example, being a member of the Nazi party in Hitler's Germany. And yet according to cultural relativism, you can't criticize this intolerance. In fact, if cultural norms dictate being intolerant of another culture, then people in that culture may be *required* to be intolerant (because for cultural relativists, cultural norms set the standards). Far from supporting tolerance everywhere, then, cultural relativism seems to only encourage tolerance in cultures that are already tolerant. If cultural relativism were to encourage tolerance everywhere, it would suggest an ethical standard that transcended cultures — it would be breaking its own rule!

The preceding point can be expanded to make cultural relativism look really bad. It isn't just a problem that cultural relativists seem to want everyone (from every culture) to be tolerant. The deeper problem exists with the idea of cultural relativism itself. Cultural relativism seems to state that no universal ethical standard applies to everyone, everywhere. But if that's true, then what's cultural relativism? Is the theory itself not trying to get at something important about all cultures? If you admit that cultural relativism is true, then it would be true for all people from all cultures (and that sounds pretty universal to us). Yet cultural relativism specifically states that what's true about ethics varies from culture to culture. So, if cultural relativism is true, then it must also be false. In other words, it contains a self-defeating contradiction, and that's a bad flaw in an ethical theory.

Noting cultural relativism's successes

Cultural relativism isn't free of problems, and many of these problems you probably can't overcome. However, you can discover two important points from studying the connection between ethics and culture:

- ✔ **Just because something is unfamiliar or uncomfortable about another culture doesn't always mean it's unethical.** Don't make the mistake of thinking your own culture's beliefs are special or the best. It's theoretically possible that one culture has completely correct ethical beliefs, but in reality this idea is extremely unlikely to happen. In all likelihood, you can find insights into what is generally right and wrong in all cultures.

- ✔ **Whatever ethical theory you end up following, it should try to account for tolerance of other cultures as a good thing.** Tolerance of other cultures should be the default attitude; tolerance shouldn't be something you practice grudgingly to avoid discomfort. As with anything else, tolerance can be taken too far. But by and large, any good ethical theory should make its followers wary of hasty generalizations about other cultures. Fortunately, you don't need cultural relativism to make tolerance happen.

Emotivism: Seeing Ethics as a Tool of Expression

Emotivism isn't a view about what people should or shouldn't do. Instead, it's a view about what ethical words mean. Specifically, it's the view that ethical statements are really just expressions of emotions and not statements of fact. It captures some important truths about ethical motivation, but philosophers are still trying to work out how it explains other important truths about ethics.

Charles Stevenson and A.J. Ayer were philosophers who popularized the idea that ethical statements were ways of expressing emotional attitudes. Ayer and Stephenson believed that a big difference exists between scientific statements like "The earth is round." and ethical statements such as "Shoplifting is wrong." They argued that scientific statements were essentially about the parts of the world (or universe) people could detect with their five senses. Statements about the shape of the earth can be shown to be true or false simply by observing it.

But statements about ethics can't be shown to be true in the same way. It's difficult to imagine what anyone could see or hear about the world that would show that shoplifting is wrong. It's even more difficult to imagine what anyone can see or hear about the world that would show that shoplifting is wrong when it's done in order to feed your family (and the shopkeeper is an evil man who killed your father). Sometimes people think about this difficulty and simply throw up their hands, saying that the lack of proof shows that there's no such thing as ethics!

But Stephenson and Ayer saw a different way out. They suggested that despite ethical statements' resemblance to statements of fact in the English language, they really function quite differently. Instead of stating facts, Ayer and Stephenson thought they expressed emotions. So according to the emotivist, saying "Shoplifting is wrong." is a lot like shaking your fist at shoplifting. Similarly, saying "Donating to charity is right." is a lot like applauding for people who contribute to those who are less fortunate than themselves.

The following sections explain in further detail some of the characteristics of emotivism and discuss the main argument against it.

Expressing yourself: Booing and cheering in ethics

According to emotivists, when you say things are wrong, bad, or to be avoided, you're expressing negative emotions about these things. Similarly, when you say things are right, good, and should happen, you're expressing positive emotions about these things. However, the English language has a much purer form of expressing emotions. When you see something you really dislike — in a football game, for instance — you're liable to skip factual claims altogether and just yell "Boo!" Or, when you really like something, you may let out a rousing "Yay!" These cheers (and jeers) simply express emotions, nothing more.

Emotivists about ethics believe that ethical language simply amounts to booing or cheering for certain types of acts that people see in the world. For example, when you remark that shoplifting is wrong, you literally mean "Boo on shoplifting!"

WARNING!

Be careful though. Emotivists don't want to translate ethical statements into statements about people. They really do believe that ethical statements aren't statements, or cognitive judgments about emotion; in their eyes, these statements are expressions of emotion. To revisit our example, they don't mean that "Shoplifting is wrong." means "I despise shoplifting." (This would be the subjectivist view from earlier in this chapter.) Saying you despise something is, after all, a factual claim about your opinions or feelings. Lots of people think they despise ethics or classical music until they learn a little bit more about it.

This way of thinking may seem a little simplistic at first — and it's still a minority position among ethicists as a whole — but booing and cheering can be surprisingly complex. For instance, people rarely cheer for things if they don't want others to join in the cheering too. Applauding or booing by yourself doesn't usually last too long.

Emotivists also believe that their expressions of emotion are intended to alter the behavior of others or bring them on board with a certain emotion. Think about a basketball crowd. If the team keeps passing someone the ball, and that person messes up the shot every time, the crowd boos. This isn't just to express their displeasure that the team keeps passing to her. The crowd also is trying to urge the team not to pass her the ball.

REMEMBER

So, really, emotivists aren't just booing or cheering when they make ethical statements; they're also saying "Boo on shoplifting, and you should join me in booing shoplifting!" Statements about ethics are meant to bring others along for the ride, and emotivism wants to preserve that.

Arguing emotionally: A problem for emotivists

Emotivists can be very successful at drawing parallels between ethical statements and expressions of emotion. But it looks like there's more to ethics than simply making ethical statements. We also tend to use those statements a lot like we use statements of fact. One way in particular that we use them like facts is when we make ethical *arguments.* An argument is a set of statements advanced in support of a conclusion.

Unfortunately, cheering and booing aren't activities that make a great deal of sense in arguments. In fact, if you're arguing with someone and he or she ends up booing at you, that person has likely lost the argument. It's not considered a good, reasonable way to make your point.

Consider the following argument as an example:

1. If eating meat is wrong, then eating a bacon double cheeseburger is wrong.

2. Eating meat is wrong.

3. Therefore, eating a bacon double cheeseburger is wrong.

It's a perfectly commonsensical argument to everyone who sees it. And yet if emotivists are right, it effectively means the same thing as this:

1. If boo on eating meat, then boo on eating cheeseburgers!

2. Boo on eating meat!

3. Therefore, boo on eating cheeseburgers!

This argument is pretty odd. The first premise doesn't even look like it makes rational sense. It's a conditional statement. Have you ever heard somebody conditionally boo something? Arguments generally consist of statements and propositions, not expressions of emotion.

This funky argument gives emotivists a bit of a problem, because emotivists want to describe all of ethics as expressions of emotions. But doing so involves saying one of two things:

✔ Rational arguments about ethics don't make sense.

✔ Somehow, expressions of emotion can be parts of arguments.

Because people seem to make rational ethical arguments all the time, the first answer isn't acceptable. But it's also not at all clear how expressions of emotions can be parts of arguments. At the very least, emotivists owe people an account of how they're supposed to reinterpret such arguments. (And although they're too complex to go into here, many modern day emotivists — called *expressivists, prescriptivists,* or *quasi-realists* — have worked long and hard to provide such accounts.)

Getting motivation right: A victory for emotivism

Emotivists believe that ethical statements aren't factual but are instead expressions of emotion. This way of thinking does a good job of explaining why ethics seems to motivate people the way it does. In fact, emotivism seems to do a better job of accounting for the connection between ethics and motivation than the view that ethical statements are statements of fact.

Most facts don't move us to action all by themselves. Many hundreds of programs are airing on television as you read this paragraph. You know this fact, but you're probably not watching one of them. If your favorite program was on, especially one to which you had an emotional attachment and this was your only chance to watch it, odds are you would be watching it. The mere fact that a program is on doesn't motivate you to watch it. You also need the motivation that comes from liking the program.

One may think the same thing about ethics. In fact, lots of philosophers do think the same thing about ethics. If ethical statements were just statements of fact, you could, for instance, acknowledge that murder is wrong without having any feelings about stopping it from happening. But this seems a little crazy, doesn't it? If someone said, "I believe murder is wrong, but I really don't care if people kill one another," you'd have a hard time taking that person seriously.

Emotivists love this point because, on their theory, having an ethical position without caring about it in some way is impossible. After all, ethical statements are just expressions of emotion. You can't actually be cheering for your team while at the same time not caring whether they succeed. And for emotivists, you can't make ethical statements without having some kind of emotional investment in them.