

Otherwise, Stuart, tell me why it is that you think that what Chloe said is ‘true for her’ but not, simply, true (for everyone)? Is it that you mean Chloe believes it – but we know that already, so you’ve not really helped the discussion here; or do you mean that there is no objective truth, no fact of the matter, that could establish whether Chloe is right or wrong? Then we are back to the argument about objective truth, so give us your reasons for rejecting the idea of objective truth here. Tell us why you think that there is no truth about morality, perception, stars, or whatever the subject matter is.

If Stuart is clever, he may yet say, ‘I don’t want to claim that there is no truth about morality; I want to claim that we cannot know what that truth is’. Stuart might be on firmer ground about morality than about stars at this point! But he nevertheless still owes us a reason for his scepticism; why should we think that we cannot know the truth here? If he’s got a good reason, one worth taking seriously, then in the context of a discussion, he then owes us an account of whether this means it is pointless to continuing talking about it. And what a good discussion that would make!

absolutely must show other people respect. Is it just their opinion that we should respect other people? Or is this objectively true?

So if Stuart wants to say that it is objectively true that what Chloe said is just her opinion, he needs to be prepared to defend his claim, i.e. he needs to be prepared to give reasons for thinking that there is no objective truth about what Chloe said. An interesting, though sometimes distracting, direction for discussion to take. Stuart, however, has not succeeded in getting away from the need to give reasons to support his view.

Stuart could say that it is just his opinion that what Chloe said was just her opinion. But what does Stuart think about this opinion? Did it just 'well up' in him, or does he have reasons for it? If it is 'just' his opinion, with nothing to support it, why should anyone else listen to his point of view or respond to it? He hasn't *challenged* Chloe's opinion, he's just stated his disagreement. Stuart isn't usually happy about this; he usually thinks that he has provided a reason for thinking that he doesn't need to think further about what Chloe said. But what if Stuart's opinion (that what Chloe said was just her opinion) is *wrong*? In that case, what Chloe said – being more than *just* her opinion – might be true!

Whichever route Stuart takes initially, at this point he says 'what Chloe said is true for her', implying perhaps that what is true for him is different, and certainly that there is nothing that is 'true for everybody'. But what does 'it's true for her' really mean? I've asked lots of students this, and what it usually means is nothing more than 'Chloe believes it'. But of course, it's supposed to mean 'there is no objective truth'. Here's an example: it was, I've been told, a theory among the ancient Greeks that stars were pinpricks in the fabric of heaven. But was it 'true for them' that stars are pinpricks in the fabric of heaven? Yes, Stuart usually says, 'they believed it was true that stars are pinpricks in the fabric of heaven'. But I know they *believed* it was true; the question is was it *true* 'for them'? And the answer seems obviously 'no'; stars were not, a few thousand years ago, pinpricks in the fabric of heaven, and somehow – miraculously! – have recently become huge balls of burning gas. It has never been true that stars are pinpricks; if the ancient Greeks believed this, they believed something false. The mere fact that someone *believes* something is true is (usually) completely irrelevant to whether it is true. So if 'true-for-them' just means 'they believe it', that doesn't settle the question of whether the belief is true. Likewise, something could be 'true-for-me', meaning 'I believe it', and yet it is *not true* – I have made a mistake in believing it.

A brief aside: Stuart is probably unhappy with how things are going; it can seem to him that he is being bullied into accepting either that he has a false belief or that he has an unsupported belief. He is being intellectually manipulated, he feels (perhaps by someone cleverer) and so he may say that he has a right to his beliefs. I think this means that, morally speaking, he has the freedom to believe what he chooses; and that it is morally wrong for people to seek to change his mind (even by rational means) against his will. This might well be true; there is a sense in which people have a right to believe what they want (even if they don't have the right to do what they want). But rather than make such a complaint, the honest, and both intellectually and morally respectable, thing for Stuart to say is 'I don't agree with what you say, but I can't give you a reason'. He could either continue 'I'll think about it more' or 'I don't want to think about it more, and I won't'. Either way openly declares his resistance to being 'manipulated' rather than persuaded, his autonomy in making up his mind.

‘That’s just your opinion’: one way to deal with subjectivism

In almost every discussion of philosophy in schools, it seems to me, some student at some point says to another ‘that’s just your opinion’. Or if the argument of a philosopher is being presented, ‘that’s just their opinion’. Let’s call the student ‘Stuart’ and the person challenged ‘Chloe’. Often this happens when Stuart disagrees with what has just been said by Chloe, but can’t find an argument to support his disagreement; in which case, it looks like the argumentative equivalent of throwing sand in someone’s eyes. It’s meant to stop the discussion continuing productively. Or, it seems, it is a claim that the whole area under discussion is ‘subjective’, ‘it’s all just opinion’, so there is no right or wrong, so there’s no need to find a reasoned, argued response to what has been said. The response isn’t limited to students; teachers can be just as prone to it!

Now it could be that ‘it’ *is* all just opinion. If you’re discussing a moral issue, this seems more likely than if you’re discussing perception. Perhaps it is true that there is no moral truth, but surely there are facts, whether we know them or not, about how we perceive the world around us. But if we’re going to believe that there is no truth about whatever we are discussing, we need more than a (usually frustrated) declaration. We’ll need an argument, a reason, to believe it. But ‘that’s just your opinion’, whether it is intended to or not, undermines the giving of reasons: if it is *just* opinion, then there is nothing more to be said, we can stop thinking, stop talking, pack up and go home.

The implications of this reduction of all difficult matters in philosophy to ‘just opinion’, this subjectivism, are rarely understood by those who declare it. It usually turns out to be not at all what they *want* to mean. Here’s how, together with some ideas of how to keep the discussion going and move it on in the face of such a refusal to think.

Of course, what Chloe said, if she said it sincerely, is her opinion; that much is obvious. But is it ‘just’ her opinion? To say this is to declare, roughly, either that her opinion is not true, either because it is false, or because there is no truth at all to be had; or that her opinion is unsupported. Which does Stuart mean? I don’t think, usually, he knows! But if pressed, he might say that there is no objective truth, at least that we can know, which we are disagreeing about. We each have our own opinions, and neither of us is right nor wrong.

But is this true? Is it *true* that what Chloe said is ‘just her opinion’ or is it *just Stuart’s opinion* that what Chloe said is ‘just her opinion’? Stuart is in a sticky situation either way. If he says that it is *true*, then he is claiming it is objectively true that there is no objective truth (about whatever Chloe said). But this can be debated; suppose Chloe said ‘euthanasia is morally wrong’ – is there objective moral truth in general? What a debate that’s been in the history of philosophy! Is it really so obviously clear that the answer is no? Can we live the consequences of such an answer? Suppose, in response to ‘that’s just your opinion’, Chloe slapped Stuart across the face. Would it be *just* a matter of Stuart’s opinion *and nothing more*, that Chloe had wronged him? Students (and teachers) seem curiously willing to assert that morality is subjective while also claiming that we