UNDERSTANDING MEDIA ETHICS
MORAL JUDGEMENTS

Ethical practice in the media requires moral judgements. I will refer to these as ‘judgement calls’. Thinking and reasoning about ethical questions is a sterile pursuit if it does not lead to decisions and actions. And making such judgements is a key aspect of being a media professional (or indeed any other kind of professional). In this chapter we will look at making moral judgements and try to establish key elements in judging and choosing how to act morally. We will do this by considering some beliefs about moral judgements to the effect that they are either obvious or impossible! We will focus on moral scepticism: the belief that it is not possible to make valid, objective, moral judgements. This is closely related to another view that morality is simply a personal and private matter.

We will analyse four important claims about making moral judgements which are frequently invoked to support the sceptics’ arguments. These are: that people disagree about solutions to moral problems; that we are in no position to judge others; that ethics ultimately is a private matter; and that morality is simply a matter for individual societies or cultures to determine. If the claims of scepticism (see Box 1.1) are really sound, we will be hard-pressed to show the fundamental importance of morality to media practices. However, we will show that a thorough-going scepticism is unfounded and that we can in fact make valid and well-grounded moral judgements. The fact that people frequently disagree about moral issues provides no grounds for believing that we can never agree about moral issues or what might constitute sound, moral policies to underpin media practices. Similarly, we can show that there are standards and grounds on which sound moral judgements can be reached. The claim that ‘ethics is simply a private matter’ is logically incoherent and the allied claims of cultural relativism in moral matters are similarly flawed. Making moral judgements is more than having certain feelings of approval or
disapproval or of expressing those feelings. In the light of the discussion, we identify certain key elements in making moral judgements: for example, establishing the facts of the case; identifying appropriate moral principles; making reasonable, valid arguments; and, finally, exercising moral imagination in understanding the range of interests involved in moral situations.

The controversy sparked by the publication of drawings or cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad in the Danish press provides a good example of a situation where a moral judgement had to be made (see Box 1.2). The judgement call is whether or not it is morally right to go ahead and publish the cartoons. This is a genuine dilemma in the sense that whether you publish or don’t publish there are potential negative moral consequences. On one side of the argument is freedom of speech. Media freedom is a key value in liberal democratic societies. Such freedom is an important condition in maintaining individual autonomy, in the development of civic rights and in the promotion of the public interest. On the other side of the argument is the very high probability many Muslims will be offended at the blasphemy of the depiction of the Prophet and, at the same time, will be outraged by the implied association of Islam with terrorism. In the event, the publication of the drawings did in fact lead to a major campaign by Muslim groups against the newspaper, with demonstrations and threats of violence against the journalists involved. The case raised wider issues of the role of Muslims in Danish society (Lægaard, 2007). But the nub of this argument, from our point of view, is whether or not ‘giving offence’ to religious sensibilities provides sufficient grounds for suppressing or restraining freedom of speech. We will return to this clash between free speech and offence in Chapter 6.

1.1 DEFINITION
Moral scepticism

Moral scepticism is the belief that it is not possible to make objectively valid moral judgements. The practical upshot of such a belief must be that we must reject moral constraints for ourselves, but it also means that we are not in a position to criticize others for behaving badly because we have no grounds for such judgements.

1.2 A JUDGEMENT CALL
The Cartoon Controversy

Imagine yourself in the position of the editor of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. You have before you the twelve drawings of the Prophet Mohammad. The satirical cartoons arise from the fact that a Danish author claimed not to be able to find an illustrator for a
(Continued)

children’s book about Mohammad. One of the drawings depicts Mohammad in the desert; two combine Islamic symbols with Mohammad; one drawing depicts Mohammad as a boy writing on a blackboard ‘the editors of Jyllands-Posten are a bunch of reactionary provocateurs’. Other drawings clearly make the association between Islam, Muslims and the Prophet and terrorism. One cartoon depicts Mohammad with a turban shaped like a bomb that is about to go off with a verse from the Qur’an inscribed upon it. In another drawing the Prophet is shown to a line of suicide bombers; ‘Stop. Stop. We ran out of virgins.’ Two of the cartoons link the Prophet to the oppression of women. Finally, two of the drawings refer to fears of the cartoonists that the pictures themselves will trigger a campaign of revenge against themselves.

Would it be right to publish or would it be better not to publish?

OBSTACLES TO MORAL JUDGEMENTS

To make progress in understanding Media Ethics and the process of making judgements it is important to clear away a number of hindrances to the very idea of moral truth or independent standards of judgement. The obstacles are of a number of different kinds. Firstly, let’s consider the claim that the moral judgements are intuitively obvious and arise spontaneously from our particular upbringing, cultural background or religious persuasion. They are just a matter of common sense. This may be an obstacle in that it proclaims that no reasoning is required to come to moral judgements. Secondly, there is a fashionable but corrosive moral scepticism which purports to show that we can’t make moral judgements at all. Of course, if we were to say that we shouldn’t make moral judgements, that in itself would be a judgement of a kind! Thirdly, there is a view that moral judgement is inherently ‘subjective’, such that when I condemn some action, say the journalistic intrusion into the private life of a person, I am only describing a personal view, attitude or feeling much in the same way that I might prefer coffee to tea. Clearing away such hindrances will help to throw into stronger relief how we can deal with practical moral judgements in media contexts.

Moral Judgements are Intuitive and Obvious

First, let’s examine the popular response that it is just plain obvious what those judgements should be. No tutoring is required here! We just intuitively know what the right thing to do is whether we are a media professional or an ordinary person in the street. Intuitively, we are all aware, or at least pre-consciously aware, of our moral obligations, what right and wrong actions are and what moral goodness and moral evil are. This may be all right as far as it goes. It is clearly the case that at some basic level we can command and make use of the rich moral vocabulary built into our language, such that when confronted by some moral decision we don’t have to go about re-inventing the moral wheel.
1.3 A JUDGEMENT CALL
Press freedom and the Leveson dilemma

Lord Leveson’s Inquiry was charged with considering whether or not current arrangements for the self-regulation of the press in the UK were adequate. This was against the background of evidence of widespread phone hacking and intrusion into the privacy of celebrities, public figures and victims of crime.

a) The first horn of the dilemma is the assumption that the press ought to be free of state intervention and regulation in order to be able ‘to speak truth to power’. A free press is important in the defence of individual liberty and civic rights. The duty of the press must be to inform the public of what is in the public interest, particularly in the scrutiny of government policy and decision making. But unfettered media create the very conditions in which journalistic practice tends to develop in unethical ways.

b) The second horn of the dilemma is that a stringent framework of state control and regulation may prevent the development of systematic unethical culture and practice. But such a regime would put power in the hands of government and politicians to muzzle the press when their interests are threatened. Political control may prevent the media from performing their role as critics of powerful institutions and the state.

Can we escape this dilemma? Are their institutional ways of balancing the public interests and the interests of the press?

The problem with this straightforward approach becomes apparent the moment people begin to articulate conflicting moral views, for example, disagreement about whether or not a particular broadcast should have been made or a particular photograph published. Such disagreements frequently revolve around matters of principle rather than matters of fact. For example, central to the Leveson Inquiry is a fundamental disagreement as to the principles that should guide regulation of the press (see Box 1.3). On one side, strong arguments have been presented that anything other than self-regulation would compromise press freedom. In contrast, many of those who feel they have been traduced and intruded upon by the press argue that, as a matter of principle, regulation should be independent, tougher and more punitive. The resolution of these conflicting positions must be a matter of reasoning about fundamental principles and far from intuitively obvious (Cohen-Almagor, 2014).

Moral Scepticism

It is such disagreement and apparent insolvability, or the lack of agreement on moral questions, that are partly responsible for another significant obstacle: moral scepticism. The moral philosopher, Mary Midgley, has written extensively on the origins and diagnosis of this condition in Can’t We Make Moral Judgements? (1991). She differentiates between an ‘enquiring scepticism’, by which we pose
genuine questions in pursuit of answers, and ‘dogmatic scepticism’. This latter kind of scepticism rejects the view that answers are possible and that we are equipped to make soundly based judgements:

… moral questions are (as is often said) just a matter of everybody’s own subjective opinion, of their taste. In the terms of this hypothesis, people can no more ‘impose judgements’ on one another here than they can impose their own taste in clothes or in food. This seems to mean that moral judgements are not really in any ordinary sense judgements at all. ‘Making judgements’ in this sphere is not so much wrong as impossible. The veto on doing it is something like the veto on witchcraft: it forbids us to pretend to do something which in fact cannot be done. (Midgley, 1991, p. 2)

If this were truly how things stand, then the whole enterprise of Media Ethics would be a vain one. One of the reasons that Mary Midgley suggests that people adopt this view is the bogus notion that it is in the interests of the wider freedom of the individual that we should refrain from judging others even to the extent seeing criminal action not as a case for punishment but, at most, as a case for treatment. According to this view, we have no rational grounds for considering actions as either criminal or morally evil because there are no actions which are bad in themselves and no citizens are bad in themselves. The most that judgement can do is to reflect our personal preferences. There is, in this sense, no such thing as ‘moral truth’. This sceptical attitude is frequently informed by a kind of world-weary cynicism: ‘when we look at the big words – justice, equality, freedom, rights – we see only bids for power and clashes of power, or we see only hypocrisy, or see only our own opinions, unworthy to be foisted onto others’ (Blackburn, 2001, p. 9).

Four Beliefs Underlying Scepticism

Underlying scepticism are four related beliefs which I will summarize here. In the next section we will go on to refute these beliefs. In this way, we can begin to see the possibility and key elements of moral judgement. The first belief is that because people often disagree on solutions to moral issues, ultimately, there can be no resolutions. Disagreement is taken by sceptics to be an indication that, in the final analysis, disagreements are insoluble and thus the enterprise is futile. Anyone who has listened to the arguments presented on the UK’s radio show The Moral Maze will find ample evidence to support this view. The protagonists apparently never find a way out of the maze; they remain entrenched in their positions; no one ever appears to concede that they are wrong; no agreement is ever reached. There is a vertiginous, endless cycle of debate. However, from the fact that we sometimes disagree it doesn’t logically follow that we can never agree or that consensus cannot be reached on the resolution to a moral problem.

The second belief takes the form of self-doubt about making judgements at all: ‘Well, after all, who am I to judge others?’ Here, judging others is characterized as being ‘judgemental’ or ‘moralistic’ (see Midgley, 1991, pp. 1–9). Thirdly, there is a belief that morality is ‘simply’ a private matter. Our personal moral
attitudes can have no purchase on the public world. Finally, scepticism about ethical reasoning is often founded on the belief that morality, if not entirely a personal matter, is very much a local matter. In other words, the moral norms which shape our moral judgements are simply outcomes of the decisions of individual cultures. This position is often characterized as cultural or moral relativism.

Having briefly identified these symptoms of moral scepticism we may now proceed to examine the possible cures for the malady. If the claims of scepticism are really sound, we will be hard-pressed to show the fundamental importance of morality to media practices.

### 1.4 SUMMARY OF ARGUMENTS

#### Meeting the claims of scepticism

**Ethical diversity:** ‘People disagree on solutions to moral issues.’
- But there are many non-moral areas of human activity where experts disagree.
- But there is a high level of consensus about moral values both within and between cultures.
- But disagreements may often be resolved by reference to publicly available facts; not all disagreements are about principles.

**Moralism:** ‘Who am I to judge others?’
- But there is a difference between making a moral judgement based on evidence and moralizing.
- But to judge is to evaluate or discriminate by agreed standards, not simply to condemn.
- But in the course of social life we frequently must make informed judgements.

**Individual relativism:** ‘Morality is simply a private matter.’
- But like the idea of a ‘private language’, the idea of a private morality is conceptually incoherent.
- But there is an important distinction to be made between moral choices and personal preferences.
- But morality is a public institution represented in our commonly shared moral vocabulary.

**Cultural relativism:** ‘Morality is simply a matter for individual cultures to decide.’
- But this assumes that a system is moral simply because a majority in a culture decides it is moral.
- But this ignores the distinction between descriptive (‘is’) statements and normative claims (‘ought’).
- But this assumes that people can never reach agreement on some moral principles.

Adapted from Tavani (2011, p. 53)
RESPONDING TO MORAL SCEPTICISM

This section reviews the responses we can make to the moral sceptic. We can show that moral judgements can, and must, be made on rational grounds rather than on personal intuition or preference.

Shared Values and Facts

Firstly, how do we address the problem that people do indeed, as a matter of fact, disagree on solutions to moral issues? Beyond the media context, we need only consider questions such as euthanasia or abortion to encounter profound and deep clashes of moral views. Within a media context, equally, there are profound disagreements arising from diverging moral values, as we saw in the case of the Cartoon Controversy (see Box 1.2). For example, there are strong disagreements on media censorship between those who espouse libertarian and those who espouse conservative values. However, the simple fact of such disagreements, profound though they may be, doesn’t by itself provide grounds for thinking that no resolution or compromises are possible or that reasoned arguments are of no account. If that were really the case, then inquiries, such as that by Lord Justice Leveson, would be futile. Equally, experts in many areas of theoretical and practical endeavour may disagree on key problems in their fields. And this not confined to the humanities, social sciences or the professions. Think, for example, of the disagreements between cosmologists and theoretical physicists about the origins of the universe. The occurrence of such disagreements does not lead to the wholesale rejection of cosmology as a discipline that is not worth pursuing. On the contrary, the more difficult the problem the more worthwhile is the endeavour. And so it is with moral dilemmas.

Secondly, by concentrating on disagreement the sceptics also fail to acknowledge that there are many moral values and issues on which people do agree. Such agreements are often different cultural expressions of the same values. We might say that the clash of customs and, by extension, what is now referred to as ‘the clash of civilizations’, are a much over-egged pudding. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus provides us with a helpful illustration from his Histories (Book 111, chapter 38; see Box 1.5). Mary Midgley points out that there is a profound sense in which this story does not date. Our contemporary news media are constantly representing the collision of customs and habits. However, for our purposes, the story has a deeper lesson because beneath the strongly held funeral customs lays a shared value. What the Greeks and the Callatiae both demonstrate is a deep, shared value of respect for their dead parents.

1.5 EXAMPLE
A shared value

The following historical example illustrates the fact that beneath very different social practices there may yet be a common value. The story, as told by the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, concerns various practices by different communities with regard to the treatment
of the dead bodies of parents. Darius, the King of Persia, asked the Greeks who were attending his court what amount of money would be required to induce them to eat the dead bodies of their fathers. They responded, because this would have transgressed a major taboo, that they would not do it for any money in the world. Later, and in the presence of the Greeks, Darius posed a related question to Indians of the tribe of Callatiae. An interpreter was present so that everyone understood perfectly the question and the answer. Darius asked the Callatiae what amount of money would be required to induce them to burn the bodies of their dead parents. They reacted in horror and asked the King not mention such a dreadful thing. Callatiae clearly had a taboo that forbade them to burn the dead bodies of their parents. Thus the customs of the Greeks forbade them to eat dead bodies whereas for the Callatiae this was precisely what custom required. Herodotus draws the conclusion that custom is ‘king of all’.

However, we can also see that although these two groups had very different customs, they nevertheless shared a profound respect in their treatment of the dead.

Thirdly, one of the important lessons for the resolution of moral issues is the importance of distinguishing between disagreements about fundamental principles and disagreements about facts. Disagreement may often be resolved simply by paying attention to the facts. We may agree that, in principle, from a moral point of view, that harmful social actions are wrong and that society has a right to intervene to prevent harm. But do people tend to emulate what they see on screen? If that is true, we have a factual case for regulating or censoring material which may lead people to commit socially harmful acts. Of course, moral arguments about public policy are more complex than this might suggest. For example, the evidence may be more difficult to assess – violent films, for example, might not influence most people but may influence the behaviour of a small, vulnerable, but significant element of the population. Michael Moore’s controversial film Bowling for Columbine (2002) illustrates the point. However, it does highlight the possibility of making progress by examining the facts, undertaking research and finding areas of agreement in principle. The upshot, then, is that we must not fail to differentiate between disagreements about principles and disagreements about facts.

Finally, in analysing any moral question we need to unearth the sources of conflict. As we have seen, disagreements may arise over facts, but disagreements may also arise over the fact that we may not agree about interests affected by some moral rule. A remedy here, as the moral philosopher R.M. Hare suggests, lies not in the search for facts but in the use of the imagination: ‘For if my action is going to affect the interests of a number of people, and I ask myself what course of action I can prescribe universally for people in just this situation, then what I shall have to do, in order to answer this question, is to put myself imaginatively in the place of the other parties’ (Hare, 1963, p. 123). Conflict may arise or fail to be resolved because we lack the imaginative faculty not to imagine ourselves in the situation of the other but to imagine ourselves as the other. In the case of the Cartoon Controversy, as an editor, I may have to imagine what it would be like to be a member of a Muslim community exposed to blasphemous imagery.
Judgement Implies Standards

Let’s now turn to our second obstacle in the way of ethical reasoning: ‘Who am I to judge others?’ This seems partly to arise from a liberal, in the broad sense of the word, reluctance to risk diversity of views by openly condemning. But it also may arise from the failure to make another important distinction. There is a world of difference between the act of judging (which surely implies making a judgement in relationship to some established criteria or standards) and being a judgemental person. ‘Being judgemental’ has a much narrower meaning, ‘poking your nose into other people’s affairs or forming crude opinions about things that you don’t understand, and expressing them offensively’ (Midgley, 1991, pp. 1–2).

There is a fundamental difference between a narrow interpretation of judging, simply ‘finding fault’ and condemning, and judging as ‘evaluation’. There must inevitably be circumstances in which media professionals are called upon to make moral decisions based on judging what the right thing to do is in particular situations. Similarly, we must be concerned, where necessary, to evaluate the moral behaviour of journalists, TV producers, performers, script writers, network managers, and so on. Judgements of various kinds are unavoidable.

This distinction is also related to a further one; the distinction between ‘moralizing’ and making a moral judgement. Moralizing is judging dogmatically whereas making moral judgement ought to be a rational process in which the judgements we make and the actions we take are rooted in sound (evidential) reasons. In contrast to the dogmatic sceptic who professes that we can have no knowledge sufficient to make moral judgements, the moralist is dogmatic in another way in claiming to have all the answers in advance! Moralism is the attempt to instruct the audience in a particular, favoured set of moral rules and beliefs. Forms of moralism are rife in the editorial columns of daily newspapers, but we can, and do, distinguish editorializing from reporting, with the aspiration to be factual and accurate. Genuine ethical enquiry does not suppose that it has all the answers or, indeed, some infallible decision procedure for solving moral problems and dilemmas.

Morality is a Public Matter

The third obstacle to ethical reasoning is the claim that morality is simply a private matter. Enough has been said already to indicate what might be wrong with this claim. However, we must acknowledge that, of course, there is a sense in which the moral beliefs that I hold are personal in the banal sense that they are the beliefs that I hold. However, the moral language that we use and its meanings are essentially part of language as a public system or institution, as the linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin points out: ‘our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men [sic] have found worth drawing, and the connexions they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations’ (Austin, 1970, pp. 181–182).

There can be no private morality that is not derived from a public system. For moral vocabulary to have meaning it must (logically) be a public vocabulary. The reasons for this are to be found in the famous argument advanced by
Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) against the logical possibility of a private language at all. To simplify a complex argument: the gist of the matter is that the use of a language involves some idea of correct or incorrect usage. This in turn depends on the possibility of being able to check that you are using a word correctly. However, the very privateness of a private language means that there can be no such checking, thus rendering the very idea of a private language impossible: ‘Without some independent criterion, a third party so to speak, there is only my impression that I am following my private definition correctly’ (Sheehan, 2001, p. 49).

There is a clear difference between making a moral judgement and acting upon it and simply having a personal preference for some choice of action. The identification of moral choice with personal preference has been described as an ‘Individually Subjectivist Theory’ (Raphael, 1989, p. 24). To say that ‘producing and distributing pornographic images is wrong’ is not like saying ‘the pornographic images are colourful’, although the statements are grammatically similar. ‘Wrong’ does not describe a property of the images in the way that ‘colourful’ does. According to our ‘Individually Subjectivist Theory’, wrong simply means I feel disapproval for such images. This, of course, leaves the gate wide open for you to disagree, based on your personal reactions and feelings about the images.

1.6 DEFINITIONS
Contrasting moral subjectivism and objectivism

Subjectivism
This is roughly the view that moral value is not grounded in some independent (external) reality but in our beliefs or our emotional responses or our attitudes. In other words, various kinds of judgements refer only to ‘subjects’ (people). For example, ‘Ice-cream is delicious’ is a subjective claim. Its truth or falsity depends on what we may feel or think about it. Such claims may be said to be neither true nor false. Similarly, moral claims are neither true nor false. On this account, the value of telling the truth depends on our belief, our feeling about it or our attitude of approval or disapproval. Subjectivism is usually contrasted with objectivism.

Objectivism
This is the view that moral values, such as goodness, inhere in, or are intrinsic to, actions or persons. Such objective values are sometimes compared to properties of objects in that they exist independent of our apprehension of them. Objective moral judgements may therefore be true or false and are independent of what anyone happens to think or feel about them. For example, ‘Ice-cream is white’ is either true or false and can be shown to be so by observation. Similarly, telling the truth is always an objectively good action.
The theory claims essentially to tell us that the meaning of any sentence of the form ‘x action is right’ and ‘y action is wrong’ or ‘w is good person’ and ‘z is a bad person’ can be translated into statements of approval or disapproval. However, this subjectivist approach (see Box 1.6) soon runs into logical difficulties when we consider a difference of opinion over moral judgement. Suppose we are considering the control and regulation of pornography. David says ‘The production and distribution of pornography are always wrong’ whereas Bill’s opinion is that ‘The production and distribution of pornography are sometimes right’ (for example, it may be all right for consumption by consenting adults in private). Clearly there is a contradiction between the two statements. According the subjectivist theory, these translate as David says ‘I always disapprove of the production and distribution of pornography’ and Bill says ‘I sometimes approve of the production and distribution of pornography’. The effect of this translation is to remove the contradiction between the two statements. They in effect reduce the statements to autobiographical description (facts about what they approve or disapprove of). This is similar to statements of preference as when David says ‘I always like to eat burgers for lunch’ and Bill says ‘I never eat burgers for lunch or at any other time!’ But surely, in differences of belief over moral questions of this kind, the protagonists are engaging in something other than merely stating their preference?

In a debate about pornography they might go on to adduce reasons for and against their respective positions. David may be claiming that pornography is harmful, tending ‘to deprave or corrupt’, for example, whereas Bill might want to contest the ‘harmful’ claim. But whatever the nature of the reasons they are doing something more than simply describing their preferences. If subjectivism was a true account and morality was simply a private matter then David and Bill would not be contradicting each other – which they plainly are! (Raphael, 1989, p. 24)

The subjectivist theorist may be more tenacious and claim that David and Bill are simply deluded and are simply arguing about their feelings. However, the subjectivist theory claims to tell us what it really means to say ‘x action is right’ and ‘y action is wrong’ or ‘w is good person’ and ‘z is a bad person’. But what a sentence means is a function of the circumstances of its use and its logical character. It simply is the case that we do use statements such as ‘x is a wrong action’ and ‘y is a good action’ as contradictories. It just won’t do to say people are deluded: ‘The proper use of a sentence is its actual, normal use and the meaning of a sentence is to be gathered from its use. ‘X is right’ cannot mean the same as ‘I approve of X’. The Individually Subjectivist Theory is false. We have spent some time unpacking the subjectivist approach because, as we will see, the mode of argument it develops is an influential one and, in a modified form, plays an important role in the common claim that ‘morality is simply a matter for individual cultures to decide’ a popular view which is characterized as ‘cultural relativism’.
1.7 DEFINITIONS
Varieties of subjectivism

Individual subjectivism

This is the theory that moral judgements and choices are simply a function of private preferences. Morality is, and can only be, simply a private matter. In other words, I may choose to make my moral decisions only by reference to my own moral standards, which may be radically different from yours. Values are then relative to any particular person’s subjective beliefs, feelings or attitudes. In this case there can be no independently established standards of behaviour.

Social subjectivism

This is the theory that moral judgements and choices are a function of the specific moral codes and values prevailing in a particular society or community at a particular time. Morality is the consensual outcome of whatever the majority decide. As a consequence, the standards of morality which I must uphold are therefore those of the community to which I belong. Values are therefore relative to those which are determined by the consensus in the community. In this case there can be no possibility of independent moral criticism of the prevailing moral consensus.

Relativism is Incoherent

It is frequently asserted that moral codes and values represent the decisions of particular societies relative to particular times and places (see Box 1.7). The implication is that a system is moral because a majority of people hold the moral beliefs that they do, as a matter of fact, hold. This is a form of relativism – cultural relativism – but is also very similar to the subjectivist arguments above. Such a view is often associated with the idea of toleration (Blackburn, 2001, p. 19). If it is the case that moral values may be relative to different societies in different times and places, then this undercuts any claims to the universal or transcultural values of morality. In England in the eighteenth century, most people would have considered the publication of blasphemous writings morally wrong and worthy of punishment. In a predominantly God-fearing society, blaspheming would be a moral wrong and mark out a bad person. This situation is not unknown in some contemporary, theocratic societies. In liberal, democratic societies, the majority of people would no longer consider blasphemy a moral evil. An extrapolation of this view would be to suggest therefore that the ‘moral majority’ should hold sway.

The relativist view shares much in common with the Individual Subjectivist and is vulnerable to similar kinds of arguments. The theory described above and can usefully be described as a ‘Socially Subjectivist Theory’ (Raphael, 1991, p. 25). It rests on a similar view of what it means to say some action is right or wrong or
some person is good or bad. On this theory, ‘x is right’, for example, means ‘the majority of people in my society approve of x’. However, clearly, I might hold a moral view that is in the minority but still argue that my moral belief is founded on reasonable grounds. For example, ‘it is morally right that pornography should be available to those adults who choose to want to use it, even though the majority of people in society disapprove of it’. But the Socially Subjectivist Theory implies that this moral belief – ‘that it is right that pornography should be available to those adults who choose to want it’ – should be translated as ‘most people in my society approve of pornography for those who want it’. This is now clearly in contradiction with the original moral claim and is absurd. But the original statement is well formed and makes perfectly good sense.

Raphael concludes that: ‘Ethical predicates, then, do not describe the feelings of the speaker or the society at large. It seems clear that the meaning and the logical function of such expressions are not captured by saying that they describe feelings’ (Raphael, 1989, p. 25). There is a world of difference between describing the kinds of moral values and rules that a particular culture may have, as a matter of fact, and the justification of those values and rules. This refers back to our distinction in the Introduction between descriptive and normative ethics. Simply to say that these are the moral rules that some particular culture has developed cannot mean that these are the rules and values that it ought to adopt.

**Emotivism or Hurrah/Boo Ethics**

The cultural relativist position is also associated with the belief that people can never reach agreement on moral principles. This view is often sustained by another view of moral language, which is again related to feelings. In this case it is claimed that moral beliefs and moral claims do not describe feelings but rather express them. The Expressive Theory attempts to avoid the difficulties of our previous Subjectivist Theories by arguing that value judgements in general, and moral judgements in particular, evince or express our feelings. This view is also referred to as Emotivism or the Hurrah/Boo Theory (Ayer, 1967, pp. 102–120).

This theory is associated with a philosophical movement of the early to mid-twentieth century known as Logical Positivism. The Logical Positivists made much of the logical gap between statements of fact and statements of value. Moral beliefs about the world are very different from factual beliefs. Moral claims are more like expressions of pain, delight, anger, etc. They express or evince my feelings. They have no purchase on empirical facts (the truths of the sciences); in effect, they express an attitude or feeling about the world. So if I claim that ‘producing pornography is morally justifiable’, then I am not stating that I have a feeling of approval but I am just expressing that feeling. In the same way, if I was to hit my head on a low beam I might cry out in pain. However, if someone was to challenge me and say ‘producing pornography is morally unjustifiable’, again they would be giving expression to a contrary feeling (not simply describing their emotions). Hence the Expressive Theory has this Boo versus Hurrah characteristic.
1.8 DEFINITION
Emotivism or Boo/Hurrah Ethics

Emotivism

Broadly, this is a view of ethics that maintains that ethical judgements are expressions of a speaker’s emotional states rather than claims that such judgements are either true or false. This view makes a distinction between describing our feelings about things in the world and expressions of those feelings. Moral judgements are not descriptions or statements of our feelings about the world, but direct expressions of those feelings. In making moral judgements, in arriving at a moral decision when confronted by a moral dilemma, we are giving expression to an emotional response in favour, our approbation (hurrah), or against, our disapprobation (boo).

Boo/Hurrah

In other words, I cheer for my moral belief and you for yours. If we are simply expressing our feelings, then there apparently can be no question of discussing or agreeing on principles. On this basis, those celebrities who appeared at the Leveson Inquiry and argued that intrusion into their privacy was morally wrong were merely expressing a feeling they had. And similarly those journalists who argued that it was not immoral to report on the private doings of public persons were also expressing their feelings. On this account, there are no grounds for arguments about public interest or the interest of the public. However, when we do discuss these matters there clearly is a contradiction here and a contradiction which can be argued through by reasoned argument and by reference to facts and principles.

But the Expressive Theory has similar logical difficulties to the ones we have already discussed. When people adopt different moral positions they are doing more than cheering or booing. The language which they use cannot simply be translated as feelings. They are in effect expressing opinions and if I want to convert you to or persuade you of my moral belief, I would begin to state the reasons why I hold the particular views which I do in fact hold. Thus a simple equation between value judgements and feelings cannot be right. There are standards and criteria for applying value terms which I would reasonably refer to. If we think about choosing a camera for some particular photojournalistic job – one particular camera will satisfy some relevant standards or criteria appropriate for the job in a way another camera may not. I have grounds then to support my view that this is the camera for the job. Listing the qualities of a good camera is not like cheering! Similarly, when we come to discuss the moral qualities of a person we will invoke certain standards of behaviour to which this person matches up, or list the degree and extent of the person’s virtues or vices. The Expressive Theorist may try to claim that those standards themselves are but expressions of feelings. But the analogy with a spontaneous emission of pain is not tenable. Reasons are not like involuntary cries of pain.
Table 1.1  Elements of moral judgement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facts</td>
<td>In order to arrive at a reasonable judgement we need to know as far as we can the ‘facts of the case’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant ethical principles</td>
<td>To determine how we ought to act, or what policy should be adopted, we need to consider what relevant universal rules or principles bear on the situation and what are their relative weights; for example, does justice or fairness have priority over others such as benevolence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argument</td>
<td>In coming to a judgement we need, if called upon, to show we have reasonable grounds for believing what we do believe to be the right judgement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral imagination</td>
<td>We need to consider the relevant interests of all those involved or affected; this may not just be a question of imagining myself in someone else’s place, but imaging what it is like to be them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Hare (1963, pp. 86–111)

CHAPTER REVIEW

By removing these various subjectivist types of theories I hope to show that making moral judgements and choosing a course of action or developing a policy are not an arbitrary matter. Moral judgements involve the deployments of facts, developing a logical argument, identifying appropriate moral principles and the exercise of moral imagination. Although people may, and frequently do, argue about the solutions to ethical problems, it is because of these aspects that it is possible to do so in a reasoned way and with some expectation of reaching reasonable solutions.

However, there is a difference between the soundness of an argument and persuading someone to accept it. I might present Rupert Murdoch with a brilliantly argued case as to why he should dismember his media empire for the greater good of the media industry and society in general, and my premise may be impeccable and the logic of the argument valid, and yet he would, I suspect, remain unmoved. A good argument may not necessarily be persuasive, especially where specific interests are involved. But we have also shown that morality must mean making reference to some standard of behaviour which is over and above any such particular individual or collective interest. In the coming chapters we will examine a range of moral ideas and principles that have been proposed as the foundations of such moral standards and their implications for media practices.
FURTHER READING


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The argument of Chapter 1 has emphasized the need for and nature of moral judgement in media practice. This article by Tim Luckhurst and Lesley Phippen of the Centre for Journalism at the University of Kent may be used to underscore the importance of moral judgement in journalistic practice. They extend the discussion of the chapter by engaging with a long-standing debate about whether we can best promote morally driven professional behaviour through the (mechanical) rules or through education in fundamental principles. They argue that current ethical problems in the press, demonstrated by Leveson, will not be addressed by a rule-based approach. They believe that would-be media practitioners must have ethical values embedded in their learning. They identify four core principles: accuracy, sincerity, hospitality and the responsibility to bear witness. In addition,
this must be linked to what journalism is for in liberal democracies. They argue that good journalism is not a product of rule following, but of fundamental ethical commitments. Students should study and emulate the work of the great reporters and journalists of the past. They conclude that ‘the difference between ethics and rule-based regulation is that the latter promises much but delivers little, whereas ethical education promises only to encourage thought and frequently spawns outstanding journalism’. We might add that these stricures, which are directed at journalism, may equally well apply to media practitioners more generally.