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Elements in Ethics

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ETHICAL SUBJECTIVISM AND EXPRESSIVISM

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Ethical Subjectivism and Expressivism

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Abstract: Ethical subjectivists hold that moral judgements are descriptions of our attitudes. Expressivists hold that they are expressions of our attitudes. These views cook with the same ingredients – the natural world and our reactions to it – and have similar attractions. This Element assesses each of them by considering whether they can accommodate three central features of moral practice: the practicality of moral judgements, the phenomenon of moral disagreement, and the mind-independence of some moral truths. In the process, several different versions of subjectivism are distinguished (simple, communal, idealising, and normative) and key expressivist notions such as ‘moral attitudes’ and ‘expression’ are examined. Different meanings of ‘subjective’ and ‘relative’ are elucidated and it is considered whether subjectivism and expressivism make ethics ‘subjective’ or ‘relative’ in each of these senses.

Keywords: ethics, subjectivism, relativism, expressivism, moral disagreement

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Contents

Introduction	1
1 Motivations and Methodology	1
2 'Subjective' and 'Relative'	15
3 Simple Subjectivism	21
4 Complex Subjectivism	37
5 Expressivism	54
Glossary	71
References	73
Acknowledgments	77