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### Criticizing Rachels: An Emotivist's View of Moral Judgment

There are many different theories concerning the topic of moral judgments. Two opposing theories are emotivism and Rachels's theory of provable and reason-based moral judgments. Through the eyes of an emotivist, one can see the faults in Rachels's theory.

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In confronting the topic of moral judgment, James Rachels states that reason above all else is the deciding factor of what is right and wrong. He uses this catalyst to dispute the moral theory of emotivism. There are several points that Rachels uses to explain his approach to moral judgment and attack emotivism.

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Rachels brings up a possibility about moral truths. He argues that "Moral truths are truths of reason; that is, a moral judgment is true if it is backed by better reasons than the alternatives" (p. 41). It is important to understand that reason stands separate from feelings or opinions. Moral judgment does not depend on what we want to be good or what we feel should be good. It depends solely on where reason lies.

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Rachels also argues that moral judgments can be proven. Although the idea that moral judgments cannot be proven sounds appealing to many, Rachels says that it is easy to see where this theory falls through. For example, saying that a certain person is lazy can be proven true through reason. If the man sleeps all day, doesn't hold a job, and refuses to help anyone do anything, then this is ground enough to deem him lazy.

Through these reasons, we have given sufficient proof and support for our moral judgment. Rachels goes further to say that even if someone doesn't accept your proof or isn't persuaded by your argument then they are just being stubborn.

30 Besides providing reasons to accept his view of moral judgment, Rachels also attempts to show the weaknesses in the idea of emotivism. According to emotivism, there are two different purposes for the use of language. One purpose is to show a belief. The second purpose is to evoke feelings or emotions, or to give a command. It is this second purpose that emotivism uses as a means of interpreting moral judgments. The purpose of moral judgments is to change a person's feelings on a certain subject. When two people  
35 are arguing whether abortion is immoral, one is not only trying to let the other know of his particular stance but is also trying to get the other to change her point of view and agree with him. Emotivists see moral judgments as attempts to influence and modify others' views.

40 Emotivism describes an ethical judgment as a way to get someone to satisfy what another wants; or in these cases, get a person to believe what you believe. Emotivism would say that one is encouraging the other to follow the same moral guidelines when he makes an ethical statement. Emotivism acknowledges that speaking can be used to communicate certain ideas or facts, but it also shows that there is a deeper purpose behind our words.

45 There are several problems with Rachels's theories. The first problem lies in his connections between ethics and science. Rachels switches back and forth in his opinion about science. Sometimes he says that ethics parallels science and other times he says we can't compare the two. He does this when he addresses two major arguments against his

view of moral facts and proof in ethics. Rachels first say that often times too much proof  
50 is demanded to prove a moral judgment. He says people are thinking of observations and  
experiments in science, and they don't exist in ethics. Secondly, Rachels says that too  
much emphasis is put on the most difficult issues, such as abortion. Because of how  
complicated this issue is, ethical proof seems impossible. Rachels then parallels this to  
science and how many scientists can't agree on facts or proof in certain issues. Before,  
55 Rachels said that science and ethics are not comparable and that they contain completely  
different forms of reasoning. If this is so, then why is he allowed to compare ethical  
reasoning and scientific reasoning in his second argument?

Furthermore, Rachels never really has a clear answer to these two concerns with  
his theory of provable ethics. When confronted with the issue of complicated ethical  
60 questions, all he does is basically say, "If science can have problems, then my theory can,  
too." This is no way to defend a theory. Also, Rachels says that too much good proof is  
wanted to prove a judgment. This seems more like a complaint than an argument.  
Without solid proof, moral judgments seem whimsical or flimsy. Apparently, Rachels  
would settle for a flimsy moral judgment and say that it contained more reason than the  
65 other side. This contradicts his idea that moral judgments are always provable.

This isn't the only case where Rachels uses shaky arguments. In his chapter  
concerning homosexuality, Rachel uses text from the Bible to show how outrageous the  
law of the Bible can be. These scriptures he uses are all used out of context and were  
meant for an ancient Old Testament society. No Bible believers live by these standards,  
70 but rather live by standards written in the New Testament. If Rachels had looked, he

would have seen that none of the bizarre customs that he pointed out are found in the New Testament.

75 When Rachels describes the importance of reason in discovering morality, he states that when a person gives enough facts or reason, no one can ignore it. This allows certain moral judgments like “Saddam is evil” and “Lying is wrong” to be made. In this section of the book, he convinces us that reason allows for this. What he doesn’t realize is that his own book and that very section are practicing emotivism. Rachels isn’t simply letting us know that reason provides for moral judgment (which is a descriptive use of language); he wants us to follow the same belief or at least influence the opinion we have about moral judgment. This is also true when he tries to dispute emotivism. When 80 Rachels makes a statement like “Emotivism . . . seems to be flawed” (p. 40), he is influencing or modifying our interests, as emotivism claims.

Basic human desires and feelings are a large part of our beliefs. This is apparent in a philosophical or religious debate. Certainly when two or more people are conveying 85 their beliefs, the ultimate goal is to enlighten the others or help them understand or enable them to feel what you are feeling. This cannot be denied, for these certain feelings are in our nature. Finding reason that supports your moral judgment is only the beginning. Once you find that reason, surely you will use it to sway the feelings of others and show them why you are right. If you aren’t right, then another person will come along with better reasoning and change your feelings about the subject. This is a sort of survival-of-the- 90 fittest theory of moral judgment, and it fits perfectly with emotivism.

Rachels refuses to see the power and meaning in language. He decides that reason leads to moral judgments and then stops there. Emotivists ask why moral judgments are

important if there is no desire for others to follow those judgments. There is a suggestive  
95 power in ethics and moral judgments. This power causes us to disagree with or abide by  
moral rules, and it evokes certain feelings about ethical judgments. Reason, while very  
present, is only a catalyst in the attempt to influence another person.