



MORAL VALUES

Mortimer Adler

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The origin of that more serious attack is to be found in David Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature* in the eighteenth century. In a famous passage, Hume points out that, in his reading of works dealing with questions of morality, he is often surprised to find that their authors shift from saying what is or is not the case in reality to making assertions about what ought or ought not to be done in the conduct of human life. He then goes on to say:

As this ought or ought not expresses some new relation of affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded that this small attention would subvert all the vulgar systems of morality.

Let me explicate the important point that Hume is here making, about which he is not entirely incorrect. Calling attention to the distinction between descriptive statements (involving assertions of what is or is not) and prescriptive statements (involving assertions of what ought or ought not to be done), Hume rightly declares that the former type of statement cannot provide us with adequate grounds for validly and cogently reaching a conclusion that consists of the latter type of statement.

Even if the premises we were to employ consisted of complete knowledge of matters of fact and real existence (the whole set of true “is” statements about reality), we could not validly argue from those premises to a single prescriptive or normative conclusion. In pointing this out, Hume is entirely correct. A prescriptive conclusion cannot be validly drawn from premises that are entirely descriptive.

Is there any way out of this? Can we find grounds for affirming the truth of prescriptive conclusions? The answer is yes if we can find a way of combining a prescriptive with a descriptive premise as the basis of our reasoning to a conclusion. Hume did not, could not, find that way of solving the problem and, because of that failure, he is responsible for the skepticism about the objective truth of moral philosophy that is prevalent in the twentieth century.

The skepticism that I have in mind goes by the name of “noncognitive ethics.” That is an elegant way of saying that ethics or moral philosophy does not have the status of genuine knowledge. It consists solely of opinions that express our likes and dislikes, our preferences or predilections, our wishes or aversions, and even the commands we give to others. As Bertrand Russell once wittily said, “Ethics is the art of recommending to others what they must do to get along with ourselves.”

The content of noncognitive ethics, consisting of mere opinions of this sort, is neither true nor false. What holds for mere opinions of any kind holds for mere opinions about moral values and about oughts. They are entirely subjective and relative to time and to changing circumstances.

One argument in favor of noncognitive ethics stems from Hume’s critical point that our knowledge of reality, no matter how much of it we have and no matter how sound it is, cannot by itself establish the truth of a single prescriptive judgment. However, that is not the only argument. There is another critical point that tends to remove

prescriptive judgments from the sphere of truth and put them in the realm of mere opinions that are neither true nor false.

This point is made by a twentieth-century English philosopher, A. J. Ayer, as well as by others in his circle. It appeals to the correspondence theory of truth. We have truth in our minds when what we think agrees with the way things are. The ancient formulation of this theory declared that we have a hold on truth when we assert that that which is, is, and that which is not, is not; and we suffer falsehood when we assert that that which is, is not, or when we assert that that which is not, is.

This correspondence theory of truth, of the agreement of the mind with reality, obviously applies only to descriptive statements—statements that involve assertions about what is or is not. Just as obviously it does not apply to prescriptive statements. When we say that something ought or ought not to be done, what in reality can that correspond to? Clearly nothing; and so if the only kind of truth is the kind defined by the correspondence theory of truth, then prescriptive statements cannot be either true or false.

It is with this in mind that A. J. Ayer writes:

If a sentence makes no statement at all, there is obviously no sense in asking whether what it says is either true or false. And as we have seen, sentences which simply express moral judgments do not say anything. They are purely expressions of feeling and as such do not come under the category of truth and falsehood. They are unverifiable for the same reasons that a cry of pain or a word of command is unverifiable—because they do not express genuine propositions.

Ayer goes further than he needs to go in order to support his thesis that ethics is noncognitive. There is no ground for saying that the sentence “Human beings ought to seek knowledge” asserts nothing at all. The fact that the sentence is prescriptive (an “ought” sentence) rather than descriptive (an “is” sentence) does not justify Ayer in dismissing the sentence as making no statement or assertion at all.

However, Ayer is justified in dismissing the prescriptive or “ought” statement as neither true nor false if the only kind of truth consists in the agreement of the mind with reality, for there are no matters of fact or real existence with which a prescriptive judgment can agree.

We have now pinpointed the three main supports for the widely prevalent view, among philosophers as well as among people generally, that moral values and prescriptive judgments are entirely subjective and relative.

One is Spinoza's identification of the good with that which appears good to the individual or that which the individual deems to be good or calls good simply and wholly *because* the object deemed or called good is consciously desired by the individual.

A second is Hume's criticism of anyone who tries to argue for a prescriptive conclusion on the basis solely of his knowledge of matters of fact or real existence. That cannot be done, as Hume correctly points out.

The third is the point made by the twentieth-century exponents of noncognitive ethics. If the only kind of truth is to be found in descriptive statements that conform to the way things really are, they are then correct in excluding prescriptive or "ought" statements from the realm of what is either true or false.

With regard to the first point, we shall see that the error it involves can be removed by calling attention to another relation between the good and desire than the one considered by Spinoza. This involves a distinction between two kinds of desire, with which modern philosophers from Spinoza to Mill and others do not seem to be acquainted.

With regard to the second point, we shall see that it is possible to combine a prescriptive with a descriptive premise in order cogently to argue for the truth of a prescriptive conclusion. That prescriptive premise must, of course, be a self-evident truth; for otherwise we would have to argue for it and would be unable to do so.

With regard to the third point, we shall see that there is another kind of truth other than the kind of truth that applies solely to descriptive statements—a kind of truth that does not involve the agreement of the mind with reality. It was only in antiquity and in the Middle Ages that this distinction between two kinds of truth—one, descriptive truth; the other, prescriptive truth—was recognized and understood. Almost all modern philosophers are totally unaware of it.

In the following section I will explain how the problems raised by the three foregoing points are to be solved, thus correcting the philosophical mistakes that lead to subjectivism and relativism in re-

gard to moral values and prescriptive judgments. But before I do so, I wish to spend a moment on Kant's attempt to avoid such subjectivism and relativism, an attempt which, in my judgment, fails because it goes too far in the opposite direction.

Admittedly, an error with regard to the relation between the good and the desirable is, in part, responsible for subjectivism and relativism. We acknowledge that an error with regard to the relation between value judgments and judgments about matters of fact is also in part responsible for this. One other thing that is in part responsible is a failure to answer the question about how prescriptive judgments can be true.

Kant's solution of these problems goes too far in the opposite direction because Kant tries to make moral duty or obligation, expressed in prescriptive or "ought judgments," totally independent of our desires and totally devoid of any reference to matters of fact, especially the facts about human nature. His categorical imperative is a prescriptive statement that he regards as a moral law by which our reason must be bound because it is self-evidently true.

In the first place, it is not self-evidently true. In the second place, it boils down to the golden rule which, however revered, is an empty recommendation. To say that one should do unto others what one wishes them to do unto oneself leaves totally unanswered the pivotal question: *What ought one rightly to wish others to do unto one's self?* That question cannot be answered without reference to our desires and the facts of human nature, which Kant excludes entirely from consideration.

Finally, Kant's assertion that the only thing that is really good is a good will, a will that obeys the categorical imperative and discharges its moral obligations accordingly, flies in the face of the facts. To identify the good with a good will violates facts with which we are all acquainted, as much as to identify the good with sensuous pleasure.

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I will now address myself to the three critical points that pose problems to be solved. But I will not proceed in the same order in which those points were set forth in the preceding section.

Instead, I will deal first with the special kind of truth that is appropriate to prescriptive judgments. I will then introduce a distinction between two types of desires that relates to a distinction between

the real and the apparent good. This will lay the ground for the formulation of the one and only prescriptive judgment that has self-evident truth. It serves as the requisite first principle of moral philosophy and enables us to draw prescriptive conclusions from premises that combine prescriptive and descriptive truths.

In Book VI of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle, clearly cognizant of what he himself had said about the character of descriptive truth, declared that what he called practical judgments (i.e., prescriptive or normative judgments with respect to action) had truth of a different sort. Later philosophers, except for Aristotle's mediaeval disciples, have shown no awareness whatsoever of this brief but crucially important passage in his writings.

In the case of practical or prescriptive judgments, the requisite conformity that makes them true is conformity with right desire, not with the way things are, as is the case with descriptive truth. But what is right desire? Clearly, the answer must be that right desire consists in seeking what we ought to desire or seek. What ought we to desire? The answer cannot simply be the good, for whatever we desire has the aspect of the good whether or not our desires are right or wrong.

This brings us to the distinction between two kinds of desire—natural, on the one hand, and acquired, on the other hand. Our natural desires are those inherent in our nature and consequently are the same in all members of the human species, all of whom have the same nature. In contrast, our acquired desires differ from individual to individual, according to their individual differences in temperament and according to the different circumstances of their upbringing and the different conditions that affect their development.

Two English words aptly express this distinction between natural and acquired desires. One is “needs”; the other, “wants.” The introduction of these words carries connotations that everyone will recognize as involved in our use of them.

Whatever we need is really good for us. There are no wrong needs. We never need anything to an excess that is really bad for us. The needs that are inherent in our nature are all right desires. We can say, therefore, that a prescriptive judgment has practical truth if it expresses a desire for a good that we need.

In contrast to our natural needs, our individual wants lead us sometimes to seek what may appear to be good for us at the time but

may turn out to be really bad for us. We all know that some of our acquired wants may be wrong desires and that we often want to excess something that is really good for us. The good that corresponds to our wants is, as wanted, only an apparent good that may turn out either to be really good for us or really bad for us, depending on whether we happen to want what we need or want something that interferes with or frustrates getting what we need.

Spinoza, it will be recalled, said that “good” is the name we give to the things we consciously desire. Those objects *appear* good to us simply *because* we actually desire them. Since the acquired desires or wants of one individual tend to differ from the wants of another, what *appears* good to different individuals will differ.

In contrast to such apparent goods, real goods are the things all of us by nature need, whether or not we consciously desire them as the objects of our acquired wants. Sometimes, as in the case of our biological needs, such as hunger and thirst, our deprivation of the goods needed carries with it pains that drive us consciously to want the food and drink we need. But in the case of other natural needs, such as the need for knowledge, deprivation of the good needed does not carry with it a pain that generates a conscious want for the object of our need. The need exists whether or not we are conscious of it and actually want what we need.

Some things appear good to us *because* we want them, and they have the aspect of the good only at the time that we want them and only to the extent that we want them. In sharp contrast we ought to desire some things *because* we need them, whether we want them or not; and, *because* we need them, they are really good for us.

The two distinctions that we now have before us, distinctions generally neglected in modern thought—the distinction between natural and acquired desires, or needs and wants, and the distinction between real and merely apparent goods—enable us to state a self-evident truth that serves as the first principle of moral philosophy. *We ought to desire whatever is really good for us and nothing else.*

The criterion of self-evidence, it will be recalled, is the impossibility of thinking the opposite. It is impossible for us to think that we ought to desire what is really bad for us, or ought not to desire what is really good for us. The very understanding of the “really good” carries with it the prescriptive note that we “ought to desire” it. We cannot understand “ought” and “really good” as related in any other way.

With this self-evident truth as a first principle, we can solve the problem posed by David Hume. By employing this first principle as a major premise and adding to it one or more descriptive truths about matters of fact (in this case, descriptive truths about human nature), we can validly reach a conclusion that is a further descriptive truth.

One example of such reasoning should suffice. Starting with the self-evident truth that we ought to desire whatever is really good for us, and adding the descriptive truth that all human beings naturally desire or need knowledge (which is tantamount to saying that knowledge is really good for us), we reach the conclusion that we ought to seek or desire knowledge. This conclusion has prescriptive truth, based on the criterion that what it prescribes conforms to right desire, desire for something that we by nature need.

The reasoning exemplified above can be carried through for all our natural desires or needs and produce a whole set of true prescriptive judgments. For the elaboration of a moral philosophy at the heart of which such reasoning lies, it is, of course, necessary to produce evidence or reasons that support an enumeration of all human needs, and also to deal with the various complications that arise with a closer examination of needs and wants. But what has been said so far suffices to solve all the problems that modern thought has posed. Failing to solve them, modern thought has denied to moral philosophy the status of genuine knowledge.


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All real goods are not equally good. Some rank higher than others in the scale of desirables. The lesser goods are limited goods, such as sensual pleasure and wealth, things that are good only in moderation, not without limit. The greater goods are unlimited, such as knowledge, of which we cannot have too much.

But, lower or higher, all real goods are things to which we have a natural right. Our natural needs are the basis of our natural rights—rights to the things we need in order to discharge our moral obligation to seek everything that is really good for us in order to lead good human lives.

If natural needs were not the same for all human beings everywhere, at all times and under all circumstances, we would have no basis for a global doctrine that calls for the protection of human rights by all the nations of the earth.

If all goods were merely apparent, having the aspect of the good only because this or that individual happens to want them, we could not avoid the relativism and subjectivism that would reduce moral judgments to mere opinion. Having no hold on any truth about what is right and wrong, we would be left exposed to the harsh doctrine that might makes right.

Nothing more needs to be said to underline the practical importance of correcting the mistakes that reduce moral judgments to mere opinion, thereby establishing the objectivity and universality of moral values and giving moral philosophy the status of knowledge. 

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

published weekly for its members by the

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Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

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