



MORTIMER ADLER ON MORAL VALUES

Part 1 of 2

1

The question we face here is whether there is another kind of knowledge, such as moral philosophy, that does not claim to be knowledge of reality but rather is concerned with moral values—with good and evil, right and wrong, with what we ought to seek in our lives, and what we ought or ought not to do.

Clearly there is a chasm between judgments about what does or does not exist, or about what are or are not the characteristics of some existent thing, and judgments about what ought or ought not to be sought or what ought or ought not to be done. The first type of judgment, involving assertions that are existential or characterizing, let us call descriptive. The second type, involving *oughts* or *ought nots*, let us call prescriptive. Sometimes, the latter are also called normative because they lay down standards or norms of conduct.

The chasm referred to above is the chasm between matters of fact on the one hand, and questions of value on the other hand, especially such values as good and evil, right and wrong. Judgments about these matters are intimately related to the type of judgment that I have just called prescriptive or normative. If one thinks that something is really good, that is tantamount to saying that it ought to be sought. So, too, if one thinks that something is really right to do, that is tantamount to saying that it ought to be done.

If people generally were asked where they stand on the question whether moral philosophy is genuine knowledge that has a hold on truth about moral values, we would find, I think, that they divide into two groups. I would not hazard a guess about which group represents a clear majority, but my guess is that neither one greatly outweighs the other.

One group consists of those who think that when we are dealing with reality, with matters of fact and real existence, we do have genuine knowledge and have some hold on truth, even though that truth may be subject to doubt and correction. But in their view, our judgments of value about good and evil, right and wrong, or our prescriptive judgments about what ought or ought not to be done, are neither true nor false. They express nothing but our personal preferences, our likes and dislikes.

For this group moral philosophy is not a body of genuine knowledge. Moral judgments are just mere opinion, concerning which there is no point in arguing, as there is no point in arguing about any matters of taste or personal predilection. When confronting disputes about moral values, this group dismisses them as pointless, repeating the oft-repeated remark that one man's meat is another man's poison. They may even quote Montaigne or Shakespeare to the effect that there is nothing good or evil but thinking makes it so.

The other group takes the diametrically opposite view. For them there are absolute and universal standards of right and wrong, of what ought to be done or ought not to be done. They do not engage in argument about such matters, for they feel secure in their dogmatic assertion that the existence of objective moral values and standards is incontrovertible. They sometimes call themselves the moral majority, but whether they are majority or minority, they are a considerable part of the population.

There is little if any genuine debate or dispute between these two groups. Each, for its own reasons, would regard any attempt to re-

solve the issue between them as utterly futile. To that extent, both are equally dogmatic. The first group would be unable to defend its subjectivistic and relativistic attitude toward moral values, if that view were critically challenged. The second group would be unable to support the opposite view by rational arguments. It might appeal to articles of religious faith, but that is as far as it could go.

Before I proceed, let me make sure that all of us understand as clearly as possible the meaning of such terms as *subjective* and *relative*, on the one hand, and such terms as *objective* and *absolute*, on the other hand.

The subjective is that which differs for you, for me, and for everyone else. In contrast, the objective is that which is the same for you, for me, and for everyone else.

The relative is that which varies from time to time and alters with alterations in the circumstances. In contrast, the absolute is that which does not vary from time to time and does not alter with alterations in the circumstances.

On one side of the issue about moral values and prescriptive judgments are those persons who hold that they are subjective and relative. On the other side of the issue are those persons who hold that they are objective and absolute.

Not just people generally, but philosophers have been divided on this issue. The philosophical mistakes with which this chapter is concerned assert, for different reasons, that moral values and prescriptive judgments are subjective and relative. One of these mistakes, the hedonist error of identifying the good with pleasure, is ancient as well as modern. The rest are distinctively modern in origin.

Those among people generally who hold the view that moral values and prescriptive judgments are subjective and relative are not acquainted with the philosophical mistakes that underlie their view. These mistakes have filtered down to them and have penetrated their minds without their being explicitly aware of them.

Those among people generally who so dogmatically hold the opposite view are equally unaware of the insights, distinctions, and arguments by which the view they hold can be rationally defended and supported. They do not know how, by reason and argument, they can correct the errors made by their opponents.

With all this in mind, I propose to proceed as follows. I will, first, attempt to state the hedonist error, which is both ancient and modern; and then turn to the more fundamental mistake that modern thought has inherited from David Hume, a mistake that Immanuel Kant tried to correct but failed to do so because he went too far in the opposite direction.

Having done that, I will, in a succeeding section, attempt to expose what lies at the root of these mistakes, particularly those of modern origin. Finally, I will briefly and in summary fashion state what I think are the serious consequences of subjectivism and relativism with regard to moral values, and the importance of correcting the philosophical mistakes that cause them.

2

The popular and vulgar version of hedonism leads its exponents to be subjectivists and relativists about moral values. Identifying the good with pleasure, it is an easy step to conclude that what is deemed good by one individual because it gives pleasure may not be deemed good by another. The pleasures human beings experience vary from individual to individual, from time to time, and with variations in the circumstances.

But once critical questions are asked and distinctions are made, the hedonist position as popularly held ceases to be tenable. To say that the *only* good is pleasure is to say that wealth, health, friends, knowledge, and wisdom are not good. This, in turn, means that they are neither desirable nor in fact desired by anyone, for certainly whatever is desirable or desired is in some sense good. The facts of everyday life thus make it impossible to maintain that the *only* thing everyone in fact desires or regards as desirable is pleasure.

It was in this way that Plato, in his dialogue *Philebus*, argued against the sophistical view that pleasure and good are the same. If a life that includes both pleasure and wisdom is more desirable than one that includes pleasure alone, then pleasure is not the *only* good.

In a similar manner Aristotle, in the tenth book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, argued against Eudoxus. Pleasure accompanies our activities, he wrote, but “the pleasure proper to a worthy activity is good and that proper to an unworthy activity is bad.”

In antiquity, Epicurus and his followers started out being simple-minded hedonists by affirming boldly that pleasure and the good

are identical, but as they proceeded to delineate the features of a good life, it soon became apparent that other things are desirable and even more desirable than pleasure. They distinguished between lower and higher pleasures, the pleasures of the intellect being, in their view, more desirable than the pleasures of the senses. But in order to maintain such a distinction the Epicureans must have had some standard of goodness other than pleasure in and of itself.

In the modern world the leading self-avowed hedonist is John Stuart Mill who, in his *Utilitarianism*, acknowledges Epicurus and Epicureanism to be his precursor. But, like Epicurus, Mill cannot long maintain the simpleminded view that the only good is pleasure. He, too, distinguishes between pleasures that are more or less desirable.

“There is no known Epicurean theory of life,” Mill writes, “which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and the imagination and of moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasures than those of mere sensation.” And, in one very famous passage, he adds:

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.

That passage contains two words, “satisfied” and “dissatisfied,” which hold the key to the untenability of simpleminded hedonism. People in general who are hedonists and also philosophers such as Epicurus and Mill who claim to be hedonists ignore a distinction that changes the picture radically. It is the distinction between sensual pleasures as objects of desire and the pleasure we call satisfaction when any of our desires are fulfilled.

Sensual pleasures cannot be identified with the good, for sensual pleasures are certainly not the only things we desire, nor do we always find them more desirable than other things, for the procurement of which we are even willing to suffer pain. On the other hand, the pleasure we experience whenever any of our desires is satisfied—the pleasure that is identical with the satisfaction of desire—is an accompaniment of the good, but not identical with it.

Let the good be wealth, health, friends, knowledge, or wisdom, or let it be sensual pleasure. When this or that good is desired by us

and we succeed in obtaining the object of our desire, we experience the pleasure that consists in having our desire satisfied.

When Epicurus or Mill talk about lower and higher pleasures, they are in fact talking about lower and higher goods—about wisdom as a higher good than sensual pleasure, for example. The pleasure or satisfaction that we experience in obtaining a higher rather than a lower good is thus itself a higher pleasure or greater satisfaction.

The distinction between the two senses of the word “pleasure”—referring to sensual pleasures, on the one hand, and to the satisfaction of any desire, on the other hand—makes simpleminded hedonism untenable. But it does not solve the problem of moral values: whether they are objective and universal, or subjective and relative.

In the first place, we cannot find in Epicurus or Mill the basis for ordering goods as higher and lower, or for showing that what some individuals deem to be higher goods should be deemed so by everyone else at all times and places and under all circumstances.

Mill condemns individuals “who pursue sensual indulgences to the injury of health, though perfectly aware that health is the greater good.” But does this include all individuals, or just some? What about those who seek sensual pleasures at the sacrifice of their health, regarding the former not the latter as the greater good? How do we advance rational arguments to persuade them that they are wrong—that everyone *ought* to prefer health to sensual pleasure because it is the greater good? And is this *ought*—the prescriptive statement—objectively and universally true?

These are questions to which we cannot find a satisfactory answer in Epicurus or Mill. While they may have been forced by their own common sense to abandon their initial simpleminded hedonism, they are not out of the woods. Identifying the good with the desirable rather than with pleasure in either of its two senses still leaves them unprotected against subjectivism and relativism.

Why? Because individuals differ in their desires, and so what is desired by one individual may not be desired by another, what is desired at one time or under certain circumstances may not be desired at another time and under other circumstances. What is good or evil thus shifts from one individual to another, from one time to another, from one set of circumstances to another.

It was Spinoza, at the beginning of modern times, who advanced the view that whatever anyone desires *appears* good to that individual as a consequence of his desiring it. Whatever in fact we desire we call good. Good, Spinoza maintained, is nothing but the name attached to whatever objects we happen to desire. We deem them good *because* we desire them, not the other way around—desiring them *because* they are in fact good.

Unless Spinoza can be shown to be wrong, there is no way of escaping the subjectivism and relativism that inexorably follows from identifying the good with that which is consciously desired by anyone or explicitly thought to be desirable by them. As actual desires or opinions about the desirable shift from person to person and from time to time, the judgment that anything is or is not good remains a subjective, personal predilection, and is relative to time and circumstances.

While it is true that Spinoza, like Epicurus before him and Mill after him, propounded ethical theories in which certain goods are stoutly proclaimed to be higher or better than others, not just for this or that individual but for every human being and under all circumstances, they do not have in their ethics or moral philosophy grounds adequate for establishing the truth of such views, as against the subjectivism and relativism that they cannot overcome because of other things they either say or fail to say.

Adequate grounds can be found, but I will postpone stating them until we have faced an even more serious attack on the validity of moral philosophy and on its legitimacy as genuine knowledge rather than mere opinion.

We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.

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