



IS AND OUGHT

Mortimer Adler

The judgment that something is good or bad—or that it is better or worse than something else—is one we make every day, often many times a day. It is implicit in every choice we make. It is expressed every time we appraise anything or estimate its value for us. That is why judgments that attribute goodness or some degree of goodness to things have come to be called “value judgments.”

We see at once a fundamental difference between truth and goodness. We do not usually speak of things as being true or false. In exceptional cases, such as that of counterfeit money, we may think of the counterfeit as false and of the genuine article as true, but when we do so, we are using the words “true” and “false” in a metaphorical sense, borrowing the words from their proper application to the verbal statements we make or the judgments of our mind.

“Good” and “bad,” on the other hand, are terms we normally apply to the things of this world, not to our thoughts or statements about them. Included among the items we appraise as good or bad are human beings themselves, as well as their intentions and actions,

their institutions and productions, and the lives they lead. In every case, it is the object we are considering, not our thought about it, that we call good or bad.

Traditional wisdom places the difference between truth and goodness in the different relationships they involve. Truth resides in the relation between the thinking mind and the objects it thinks about. Our thoughts are true when they stand in a relation of agreement with the state of the objects we are thinking about. Goodness resides in the relation between objects of every sort and the state of our desires. Objects are good when they satisfy our desires.

When we talk about the pursuit of truth, we are regarding truth as an object of desire and, in doing so, we are in effect attributing goodness to truth. Having possession of the truth in some measure is a good of the mind, a good we seek when we pursue the truth. If we seek to overcome ignorance and to avoid error, we regard them as evils to be avoided; and in their place, we desire knowledge, which consists in having some hold on the truth about the way things are.

Now let us turn in the opposite direction and ask whether there is any truth in our value judgments—our judgments about things as good or bad. When such judgments are challenged, most people find it difficult to defend them by giving reasons calculated to persuade others to agree with them. Since individuals obviously differ from one another in their desires, what one person regards as good may not be so regarded by another.

Unless I am lying, my statement that I regard something as good (which is tantamount to saying that I desire it) is a true statement about me, but that would seem to be as far as it goes. The judgment that the object in question is good would not appear to be true in a sense that commands universal assent—good not just for me but for everyone else as well.

We are thus brought face to face with the much disputed question about the objectivity or subjectivity of value judgments. In the contemporary world, skepticism about value judgments prevails on all sides. Value judgments, it is generally thought, express nothing more than individual likes or dislikes, desires or aversions. They are entirely subjective and relative to the individual who makes them. If they have any truth at all, it is only the truth that is contained in a statement about the individual who is making the judgment—the truth that he regards a certain object as good because he, in fact, desires it.

Only if there could be truth in judgments that asserted that certain objects are good for all human beings, not just for this individual or that, would value judgments have objectivity. They would then cease to be entirely relative to individual idiosyncrasies. At least some value judgments would then belong in the sphere of truth and be subject to argument. Others might remain in the sphere of taste and be beyond the reach of argument. We might expect men to try to achieve agreement about the former, but not about the latter. Instead of saying that good and bad are entirely subjective values, we would then be maintaining that they are partly objective and partly subjective.

However, this is precisely what is denied by skepticism concerning value judgments, at least those that appraise objects as good and bad, which is just another way of saying desirable and undesirable. In the skeptic's view, the identification of the good with the desirable makes it impossible to avoid the subjectivity of judgments about what is good and bad, relative as they must be to the differing desires of different individuals.

That the good is the desirable and the desirable is the good cannot be denied. But we can note a certain duplicity in the meaning of "desirable." When we speak of something as desirable, we may mean, on the one hand, that it is in fact desired and, on the other hand, that it ought to be desired, whether or not it is. Certainly, when we say that something is admirable, we can either be reporting the fact that it is admired or be laying down the injunction that it ought to be admired, whether or not it is. The same duplicity would seem to be present in the meaning of desirable.

With this duplicity in mind, we can ask the following critical question: Do we regard something as good simply because we in fact desire it, or ought we to desire something because it is in fact good? In both cases, the good remains the desirable, but in one case the goodness is attributed to the object only because it is desired, while in the other the object ought to be desired only because it is good.

The alternatives here presented are not exclusive. We can affirm that some of an individual's value judgments attribute goodness to an object on the basis of the fact that he or she desires it. We can also affirm that some of an individual's value judgments recognize a goodness in the object that makes it an object that ought to be desired.

The skeptical view of value judgments holds that they are all of the same sort. All consist in an individual's calling an object good on the basis of his actual desires. That which he in fact desires appears good to him insofar as he desires it. The object that appears good to him may not appear good to someone else whose desires are different. One man's meat is another man's poison.

Against the skeptic, are we able to defend the opposite view that, while some objects appear good to an individual simply because he or she in fact desires them, there are other objects that he or she ought to desire because they are good—really good, not just apparently good?

To do this, we must manage to get across another hurdle. The obstacle that now stands in our way is a difficulty that has been raised about prescriptive as opposed to descriptive statements.

A prescriptive statement or judgment is one that asserts what ought or ought not to be done. A statement about what ought or ought not to be desired imposes a prescription that may or may not be obeyed. In contradistinction, a descriptive statement or judgment is one that asserts the way things are, not how they ought to be. A statement about what is desired by a given individual simply describes his condition as a matter of fact.

How, it is asked, can prescriptive injunctions be true or false? Have we not adopted the view that the truth of statements or judgments consists in their conformity with the ways things are—with the facts that they try to describe? If a statement is true when it asserts that that which is, is, and false when it asserts that which is, is not, how then can there be truth or falsity in a statement that asserts what ought or ought not to be?


Even if we possessed all the descriptive truth that is attainable, how could our knowledge of reality, our knowledge of the way things are, lead us to any valid conclusion about what ought to be done or about what ought to be desired?

It was long ago quite correctly pointed out by the skeptical philosopher David Hume that no prescriptive conclusion (in the form of an "ought" statement) can be validly inferred from a set of premises, no matter how complete, that consists solely of descriptive statements about the way things are. Even if we had perfect knowledge of all the properties that enter into the description of an object, we could not infer the goodness of the object or that it ought to be desired.

We are thus confronted with two obstacles, not one. The first is the difficulty raised by the question, How can prescriptive statements be either true or false, if truth consists in the correspondence between what is asserted and the way things are? The second is the objection raised by David Hume, to the effect that truths about matters of fact do not enable us to reach by reasoning a single valid prescriptive conclusion—a true judgment about what ought or ought not to be done or desired.

Unless we can surmount these difficulties, no prescriptive statement or judgment can be true or false. If we cannot truly say what ought to be desired, then the good is the desirable only in the sense that it appears good to the individual who in fact desires it. Acquiescing in the rejection of the alternative sense of the desirable as that which ought to be desired, we also must give up the notion that some objects are really good as distinguished from other objects that only appear to be good and may not be really so.

To refute the skeptical view, which makes all value judgments subjective and relative to individual desires, we must be able to show how prescriptive statements can be objectively true. An understanding of truth as including more than the kind of truth that can be found in descriptive statements thus becomes the turning point in our attempt to establish a certain measure of objectivity in our judgments about what is good and bad.

Only through such understanding will we be able to show that some value judgments belong to the sphere of truth, instead of all being relegated to the sphere of taste and thus reduced to matters about which reasonable men should not argue with one another or expect to reach agreement. 

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