



ADLER ON MORAL SKEPTICISM

Skepticism about value judgments—about the validity of our attribution of goodness to objects and about the truth of any statement that contains the words “ought” or “ought not”—begins in the modern world. Without having been confronted with that brand of skepticism, the ancients provided us with clues enabling us to separate that aspect of the good that has the objectivity of truth from that aspect that is entirely subjective and relative to the individual.

At the dawn of modern thought, Thomas Hobbes and Benedict Spinoza advanced the view that “good” was merely the name we gave to those things that in fact we happened to desire or like. Goodness is not a discoverable property of the things themselves. We simply call them good because we desire them. If we had an aversion to them instead, we would call them bad.

Since desires and aversions are matters of individual temperament, nurture, and predilection, there is nothing that all human beings agree upon as deserving to be called good or bad. Just as the skeptic concerning truth says that what is true for me may not be true for you, so here the skeptic says that what is good for you may not be good for me.

A century or more later, David Hume, as we have seen, added another arrow to the quiver of skepticism about values. He pointed out that from our knowledge of the facts about nature or reality (as complete as one might wish it to be), we cannot validate a single value judgment that ascribes to the object a goodness that makes it true to say that all men ought to desire it. Those who, before or after Hume, identify the good with pleasure or the pleasing, do not avoid the thrust of his skeptical challenge. Rather, they reinforce it, for what pleases one individual may not please another; and, in any case, the goodness that is identified with pleasure does not reside in the object but in the emotional experience of the individual.

Hume's challenge is further reinforced in our own century by a group of thinkers whose names are associated with a doctrine that has come to be called "noncognitive ethics." They use the word "ethics" to refer to the whole sphere of moral judgments about good and bad, or right and wrong, especially in the form of prescriptions about what ought and ought not to be sought or what ought and ought not to be done. Their dismissal of ethics as "noncognitive" is their way of saying that statements that assert an ought or an ought-not cannot be either true or false.

Not capable of being either true or false, such assertions are noncognitive. They do not belong to the sphere of knowledge, even in the weaker sense of that term, which connotes verifiable or supportable opinion. Thrown out of the sphere of truth, they are relegated to the sphere of taste. They are at best expressions of personal predilection or prejudice, entirely relative to the feelings, impulses, whims, or wishes of the individual. If we ask why judgments about what ought to be desired or done are totally incapable of being either true or false, the answer appeals to an understanding of what truth and falsity consist in—an understanding first formulated in antiquity and one that these twentieth-century exponents of a noncognitive ethics adopt. Once we conceive the truth of a statement as residing in its correspondence with the facts of the matter under consideration, with the way things really are, we are led to the conclusion that only statements that assert that something is or is not the case can be either true or false—true if they assert that which is in fact the way things are, false if they assert the opposite.

All such statements can be characterized as descriptions of reality. Statements that contain the words "ought" or "ought not" are prescriptions or injunctions, not descriptions of any thing. If our understanding of truth and falsity conceives them as properties that

can be found only in descriptions, then we cannot avoid the skeptical conclusion that prescriptive statements cannot be either true or false.

A moment's reflection will lead us to see that the only way that this skeptical conclusion can be avoided is by expanding our understanding of truth. Can we find another mode of truth, one that is appropriate to prescriptions or injunctions, just as the more familiar mode of truth is appropriate to descriptions, or statements of fact? How can oughts and ought-nots be true?

For the answer to this question, we must go back to antiquity—to the thought of Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle, following Plato, formulated the conception of truth that has been generally adopted in Western thought—the one that is appealed to by the exponents of noncognitive ethics when they maintain that only descriptive statements can be either true or false. However, he did not stop there. Recognizing that that mode of truth did not apply to prescriptive statements or injunctions (which he called “practical” because they are regulative of human action), he proposed another mode of truth appropriate to practical judgments.

That mode of truth, he said, consists in the conformity of such judgments with right desire, as the other mode of truth consists in the correspondence of our descriptions of reality with the reality that they claim to describe.

Unfortunately, Aristotle did not explain what he meant by right desire. We are, therefore, on our own in pushing the inquiry farther.

What is right desire? It would appear that the answer must be that right desire consists in desiring what we ought to desire, as wrong desire consists in desiring what we ought not to desire.

What ought one to desire? The answer cannot be—simply and without qualification—that we ought to desire what is good. We have already seen that the good is always and only the desirable and the desirable is always and only the good. As Plato's Socrates repeatedly pointed out, we never desire any thing that we do not, at the moment of desiring it, deem to be good. Hence we must somehow find a way of distinguishing between the goods that we rightly desire and the goods that we wrongly desire.

We are helped to do this by the distinction that Socrates makes between the real and the apparent good. He repeatedly reminds us that our regarding something as good because we in fact desire it

does not make it really good in fact. It may, and often does, turn out to be the very opposite. What appears to be good at the time we desire it may prove to be bad for us at some later time or in the long run. The fact that we happen to desire something may make it appear good to us at the time, but it does not make it really good for us.

If the good were always and only that which appears good to us because we consciously desire it, it would be impossible to distinguish between right and wrong desire. Aristotle's conception of practical or prescriptive truth would then become null and void. It can be given content only if we can distinguish between the apparent good (that which we call good simply because we consciously desire it at a given moment) and the real good (that which we ought to desire whether we do in fact desire it or not).

Up to this point we seem to be running around in circles. We have identified the real good with that which we ought to desire. We have interpreted right desire as consisting in desiring what one ought to desire, which amounts to saying that it consists in desiring what is really good. To say that the truth of a prescriptive or practical judgment, which tells us what we ought to desire, consists in conformity with right desire amounts to saying that a prescription is true if it tells us that we ought to desire what we ought to desire. And that is saying nothing at all.

The only way to get out of this circle is to find some way of identifying what is really good for us that does not equate it merely with what we ought to desire. How can that be done? Aristotle provides us with the answer by calling our attention to a fundamental distinction in the realm of desire.

On the one hand, there are the desires inherent in our human nature, rooted in potentialities or capacities that drive or tend toward fulfillment. These are our natural desires, desires with which we are innately endowed. Because they are inherent in human nature, as all truly specific properties are, they are present in all human beings, just as human facial characteristics, human skeletal structure, or human blood types are. Not only are they present in all human beings, as inherent properties of human nature, but they are always operative tendentially or appetitively (that is, they always tend toward or seek fulfillment), whether or not at a given moment we are conscious of such tendencies or drives.

On the other hand, there are the desires that each individual acquires in the course of his or her life, each as the result of his or her

own individual experience, conditioned by his or her individual temperament and by the circumstances of his or her individual life. Consequently, unlike natural desires, which are the same in all human beings, acquired desires differ from individual to individual, as individuals differ in their temperaments, experiences, and the circumstances of their lives. Also, unlike our natural desires, of which we may not be conscious at a given moment, we are always conscious of our acquired desires at the time they are motivating us in one direction or another.

The quickest and easiest way to become aware of the validity of this distinction between natural and acquired desires is to employ two words that are in everyone's vocabulary and are in daily use. Let us use the word "needs" for our natural desires, and the word "wants" for the desires we acquire. Translated into these familiar terms, what we have said so far boils down to this: that all human beings have the same specifically human needs, whereas individuals differ from one another with regard to the things they want.

The use of the words "need" and "want" enables us to go further. Our common understanding of needs provides us at once with the insight that there are no wrong or misguided needs. That is just another way of saying that we never need anything that is really bad for us—something we ought to avoid. We recognize that we can have wrong or misguided wants. That which we want may appear to be good to us at the time, but it may not be really good for us. Our needs are never excessive, as our wants often are. We can want too much of a good thing, but we can never need too much of whatever it is we need. We can certainly want more than we need.

One thing more, and most important of all: We cannot ever say that we ought or ought not to need something. The words "ought" and "ought not" apply only to wants, never to needs. This means that the natural desires that are our inborn needs enter into the sphere of our voluntary conduct only through the operation of our acquired desires or wants. In other words, we may or may not in fact want what we need. Almost all of us want things that we do not need and fail to want things that we do need.

In the statement just made lies the crux of the matter. We ought to want the things we need. We ought not to want the things we do not need if wanting them interferes with our wanting—and acquiring—the things we do need.

The distinction between needs and wants enables us to draw the line between real goods and apparent goods. Those things that sat-

isfy or fulfill our needs or natural desires are things that are really good for us. Those that satisfy our wants or acquired desires are things that appear good to us when we consciously desire them. If we need them as well as want them, they are also really good for us.


However, if we only want them and do not need them, they will nevertheless appear good to us because we want them. Beyond that, they may either turn out to be harmless or innocuous (in that they do not impede or prevent our acquiring the real goods we need) or they may turn out to be the very opposite (quite harmful or really bad for us because they somehow deprive us of one or another of the real goods we need).

We cannot ever be mistaken about our wants. No one can be incorrect in saying that he wants something. But it is quite possible for individuals to be mistaken about their needs. Children are frequently given to thinking or saying that they need something when they should have said that they want it. Adults are prone to making the same mistake.

If we can be mistaken about our needs, does not that weaken the underpinning of our argument so far? To avoid this, we must be able to determine with substantial accuracy the needs inherent in human nature. Since their gratification often requires the presence of certain favorable environmental circumstances, we must also be able to determine the indispensable external conditions that function instrumentally in the satisfaction of needs (e.g., a healthy environment is instrumentally needed to safeguard the health of its members).

Success in these efforts depends on the adequacy of our knowledge and understanding of human nature in itself and in its relation to the environment.

It is by reference to our common human needs that we claim to know what is really good for all human beings. Knowing this, we are also justified in claiming that we can determine the truth or falsity of prescriptions or injunctions. As Aristotle said, prescriptions are true if they conform to right desire.

All our needs are right desires because those things that satisfy our natural desires are things that are really good for us. When we want what we need, our wants are also right desires. 

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