

## ETHICS – MORAL VALUES

- I. Speculative or theoretical philosophy ---> knowledge of reality  
it is *descriptive*
- II. Moral philosophy ---> what we are to seek in our lives; what we ought or ought not to do.  
it is *prescriptive*

### Is moral philosophy genuine knowledge?

Are they nothing but our personal preferences, our likes and dislikes?  
Are moral judgments just mere opinion, matters of taste or personal predilection?  
Is there nothing good or evil but only thinking that makes it so?

**hedonism:** the doctrine that pleasure or happiness is the sole or chief good of life.

One of the mistakes, the hedonistic error of identifying the good with pleasure, is ancient as well as modern.

Those among people who hold the view that moral values are subjective and relative are not acquainted with the philosophical mistakes that underlie their view.

Plato, in his dialogue *Philebus*, argued against the sophists' 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.

Aristotle states in his *Nicomachean Ethics*: “*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 simpleminded hedonists by affirming boldly that pleasure and the good are identical. But it soon became apparent that other things are desirable and even more desirable than pleasure. The pleasures of the intellect, in their view, are 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 modern times the leading self-avowed hedonist is **John Stuart Mill** who, in his *Utilitarianism*, acknowledges Epicurus and Epicureanism to be his precursor. But he, too, distinguishes between pleasures that are more or less desirable: “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”

That passage contains two words, “satisfied” and “dissatisfied,” which hold the key to the untenability of simpleminded hedonism. Hedonists ignore a distinction that changes the picture radically: **the distinction** between **sensual** pleasure as objects of desire and the pleasure we call **satisfaction** when any of our desires is fulfilled.

Sensual pleasures cannot be identified with the good, for sensual pleasures are certainly not the only things we desire, for there are things more desirable, for the procurement of which we are even willing to suffer pain.

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.

It was **Spinoza**, at the beginning of modern times, who advanced the view that whatever anyone desires *appears* good to that individual. 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 follows from identifying the good with that which is consciously desired by anyone.

While it is true that Spinoza, like Epicurus before him and Mill after him, propounded ethical theories in which certain goods are proclaimed to be higher or better than others, they do not have in their ethics or moral philosophy grounds adequate for establishing the truth of such views.

Adequate grounds can be found, but first lets face an even more serious attack on the validity of moral philosophy and on its legitimacy as genuine knowledge rather than mere opinion.

The origin of a more serious question is to be found in **David Hume's** *Treatise on Human Nature* in the eighteenth century. Hume calls 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 descriptive statements cannot provide us with adequate grounds for validly reaching a conclusion that consists of prescriptive statements. Hume is correct in holding that 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 moral (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. 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 today.

The skepticism of the twentieth century 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 only of opinions that express our preferences or predilections, our wishes or aversions. As Bertrand Russell once wittingly said,

“Ethics is the art of recommending to others what they must do to get along with ourselves.” In other words, ethics is 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 cannot by itself establish the truth of a single prescriptive judgment. It is in this line of thinking that a philosopher like **A.J. Ayer** says that, “sentences which 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.”

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 because the object deemed or called good is consciously desired by the individual.

And 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 point 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.

Here we have **the main philosophical mistakes** that lead to subjectivism and relativism in regard to moral values.

Regarding the mistake of **Spinoza**, it can be shown that it involves the distinction between two kinds of desire, with which modern philosophers from Spinoza to Mill and others do not seem to be acquainted.

With respect to the second point, we shall see that it is possible to combine a prescriptive with a descriptive premise in order to argue for the truth of a prescriptive conclusion.

That prescriptive premise must, of course, be a self-evident truth.

With regard to the third point, we shall see that there is a kind of truth other than the kind of truth that applies solely to descriptive statements.

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, leading to the philosophical mistakes of subjectivism and relativism.

Now let us address the three critical points that pose problems to be solved.

In Book VI of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, **Aristotle** states that what he called practical judgments (i.e., prescriptive or normative judgments with respect to action) had truth of a different sort: 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.

Two English words aptly express this distinction between natural and acquired desires. One is “needs”; the other, “wants.” Whatever we need is really good for us. There are no wrong needs. 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.

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.

We have biological needs, and if we are deprived of them, we feel hunger and thirst. In the case of other natural needs, such as the need for knowledge, the need exists whether or not we are conscious of it. Human beings **naturally** desire or need knowledge.

Some things appear good to us *because* we want them. In sharp contrast we ought to desire some things *because* we need them; and, *because* we need them, they are really good for us.

The two distinctions that we have now 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 is the impossibility to think the opposite. It is impossible for us to think that we ought to desire what is really bad for us. 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. With 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.

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.

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.

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.

Excerpted from:

Mortimer Adler, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*.