

A Subjectivist Account of Evaluative Judgement

Each of the following is an example of an evaluative judgement a person might make:

Love is better than hate.

Godard's *Sauve qui peut* is a film of rare beauty.

It's wrong to tease children for the fun of it.

It's perfectly all right for a parent to favour her own child over other children.

That was a pretty funny joke.

Whenever freedom and equality conflict, the right thing to do is to honour equality.

What is one saying when one expresses an evaluative judgement sincerely?

According to subjectivism, one isn't saying anything at all. Instead, one is expressing a non-cognitive attitude such as an emotion or a desire (an affective or a conative state).

I

Subjectivism (or non-cognitivism) regarding evaluative judgement involves the claim that:

Evaluative judgements do not express propositions.

Evaluative judgements are without truth value (they are neither true nor false).

Evaluative predicates ("is right," "is wrong," "is good," "is bad") do not refer. (Value is not a property.)

If subjectivism is true, then no one can believe anything about right or wrong or good or bad, for there is nothing there to believe.

II

Two other positions regarding evaluative judgement:

a) Objectivism (realism, cognitivism)

Each evaluative judgement is either true or false.

True evaluative judgements are true in virtue of correctly describing things.

Goodness and badness are properties things can possess.

b) Relativism

Each evaluative judgement is either true or false.

An evaluative judgement is true only relative to the standards or norms of the culture to which the person making the judgement belongs (or to those of the person herself).

Subjectivism is a denial of both objectivism and relativism. (It is a mistake of the first order to confuse subjectivism with relativism. That confusing subjectivism with relativism is a common mistake makes it no less a serious mistake.)

III

A subjectivist account of evaluative judgement:

Suppose someone utters sincerely the indicative sentence “It is wrong to tease children for the fun of it.” What might she be saying? According to subjectivism, she is saying only one or more of the following:

a) “Oh no, not teasing children for the fun of it!” or “Boo! to teasing children for the fun of it.”

An expression of an emotion of disapproval or displeasure or loathing toward teasing children for the fun of it.

b) “Not to tease children for the fun of it: that is my commitment.”

An expression of one’s commitment not to tease children for the fun of it.

c) “Don’t tease children for the fun of it.” “Let no one tease children for the fun of it.”

An expression of a command or suggestion (perhaps directed to oneself) not to tease children for the fun of it.

d) “Would that children were not teased for the fun of it.”

An expression of a wish that children were not teased for the fun of it.

According to subjectivism, evaluative judgements, though they can be made using indicative sentences, do not express propositions and, for that reason, cannot express beliefs.

Instead, sincerely speaking an evaluative judgement is only to express:

an emotion, or
a commitment, or
a command or suggestion or recommendation or commendation, or
a preference or wish or desire.

IV

The psychological argument for subjectivism regarding evaluative judgement.

1. A belief by itself cannot motivate .
2. Judging that it is wrong to tease children for the fun of it can motivate one to do something.
Therefore: 3. One's judgement that it is wrong to tease children for the fun of it does not express any belief.

4. Only a conative or affective attitude can move one to action.
5. Judging that it is wrong to tease children for the fun of it can move one to action.
Therefore: 6. One's judgement that it is wrong to tease children for the fun of it expresses either a conative or an affective attitude.

Therefore: 7. One's judgement that it is wrong to tease children for the fun of it expresses only either a conative or an affective attitude. (From 3 and 6.)

V

The metaphysical argument for subjectivism regarding evaluative judgement.

1. If evaluative judgements were true or false, then, for any evaluative judgement, we could conceive of what would count as evidence for it and evidence against it.
2. For no evaluative judgement can we conceive of what would count as evidence for it or against it.
Therefore: 3. Evaluative judgements are neither true nor false.

Consider an instance of wilful murder.

Examine it carefully, from all angles. Note each property that appears to sense.

Do you see, hear, smell, touch, taste its wrongness?

—No.

Can anything you do see, hear, smell, touch, or taste be explained by positing its wrongness?

—No.

So: When you say of this instance of wilful murder that it is wrong, you are not describing the wilful murder.

Now turn your attention inward.

Notice your sentiment of disapprobation or disapproval or loathing.

When you say “That action was wrong” you are giving vent to your feeling of disapproval toward it.

VI

Objections:

- 1) Sincerely expressing an evaluative judgement certainly feels like expressing a belief. Entertaining in mind an evaluative sentence certainly feels like entertaining a proposition. These facts can be explained only by the contention that evaluative judgements do express propositions and, thus, can be believed.
- 2) Evaluative judgements both can function as premises in arguments and can be generated as conclusions through arguments. But only sentences that express propositions can figure in arguments. So evaluative judgements can express propositions.
- 3) The state of mind expressed in an evaluative judgement can be both cognitive and affective or conative at the same time. Thus, the fact that to hold an evaluative judgement is to be motivated to do something does not imply that to hold an evaluative judgement is not to believe it true.
- 4) We can conceive of what evidence would be like for and against particular ethical judgements. Perhaps such evidence can be given only in further evaluative judgements, but that implies only that goodness and badness are not reducible to other properties, not that values are not properties of things.
- 5) The metaphysical argument rests on a descriptivist account of being true or a correspondence theory of truth or a verificationist account of cognitive significance. Since each of these accounts or theories is false, the metaphysical argument is unsound.
- 6) My self-image, my commitment to justice, my sense that the world is not absurd and life is meaningful depends on my belief that my commitments are justified by facts about the intrinsic values of things. If subjectivism about value is true, my whole world crashes and burns. Therefore, subjectivism is false.