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Introduction to Philosophy

Theory of Value 1

Theory of Value

- Theory of Value is about things which are good or bad, right or wrong, concerning issues related to how one **ought** to behave and to what makes life valuable
- Broadly, there are two types of issues we are going to discuss:
 1. Are statements of value, like 'You ought to do this', because 'it is good to do this' and 'This person is a good person' and 'Pleasure is good', true/false, or are they not the kind of things which can be true/false?
 - If **no**, you are **subjectivist**.
 - If **yes**, there is a next question: How are such statements true/false?
 - If **because of reality**, then you are a **realist**
 - If **because someone determined it so**, then you are a **conventionalist**
 - > God: **Divine Command Theory**
 - > Society: **Ethical Relativism**
 - > Individual: **cf. Existentialism**

Theory of Value II

2. What makes valuable/good actions good?
 - We are going to discuss three views:
 - a. **Utilitarianism**: an action is good if and only if it maximizes the amount of pleasure/absence of pain or distress in society.
 - b. **Kantianism**: an action is good if you could turn it into a rational law
 - c. **Aristotelianism**: an action is good if it contributes to or flows from your well-functioning as a human being

Subjectivism

- Statements of value are neither true nor false
- Perhaps they are more like **expressions** of liking/disliking? (emotivism)
- Some **initial** arguments for subjectivism:
 - There is a lot of disagreement on value - therefore value is subjective
 - What is true or false describes what **is** the case; but a value statement does not describe what **is** the case, but what **ought** to be the case – therefore value is subjective
- Only works if one assumes that only what is the case can be true/false – can be a fact
- What is true or false describes natural properties; but according to the meaning of value statements, they do not describe natural properties – therefore value is subjective
- Only works if one assumes that only natural (observable) properties can be described in true/false statements – only they appear in facts.

Some 'Stronger' Arguments for Subjectivism

1. There is no reasoning in ethics, while there is in science, because there is nothing really to reason about
 - But there is a lot of reasoning in ethics, at least to check consistency
2. There are no observations in ethics, while there are in science, because there is nothing really there to observe
 - But we do make ethical observations, at least of particular cases
3. Disagreement in ethics cannot really be solved, for there is no path towards agreement one can agree about, while in science there are ways of ultimately finding out (and if not, it does not matter)
 - Sober's criticism: one can fail to see the truth in ethics because of, say, self-interest or self-deception > so there might be truth, even if there is no path to agreement
 - But in ethics, failure to see 'the truth' can only have consequences if other people disagree, while in science failure to see the truth leads one to expect impossibilities. **So after this argument the burden is upon those who want to maintain that there is some truth/falsehood to ethical statements – they have to show how that can be.**

The Strongest Argument for Subjectivism

- In order to explain us having beliefs about matters of science, we need to postulate facts for our beliefs to be about.
- Ultimately, what facts there are determines our beliefs (even if our beliefs are partly mistaken)
- Do we need to postulate facts to explain our beliefs about matters of value, so that our beliefs are about these facts?
- It does not seem so: our value beliefs can be explained by appeal to our 'natural responses', our upbringing, our experience, but we do not need ethical facts.

[[Sober's criticism: we need to distinguish between two types of explanation for our ethical beliefs:
 a. Particular ethical facts are not needed to explain particular ethical beliefs about them.
 b. General ethical principles do explain the content of our particular ethical beliefs, and that theory of value is true which explains that content best.]]

Evaluation of Subjectivism

- The arguments in favor of subjectivism do seem to point to a real difference between truth/falsity in the case of 'normal' knowledge and what holds in the case of ethical beliefs.
- Still, the suggestion of subjectivism is that we may believe anything we like about matters of ethics – that seems false, however:
 - Despite disagreement, there is also a lot of agreement about value, also between societies
 - Ethical beliefs are crucially shared, and play an important role in our deliberations on social action; thus they cannot be merely subjective – they must at least be inter-subjective



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