

ETHICAL NATURALISM ONCE AGAIN

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Like the ghost of Christmas past ethical naturalism keeps returning. I shall try to urge it gently back to its grave. Ethical naturalists have argued that (1) statements asserting one's approval of some attitude, action or state of affairs are at one and the same time normative and factual, and (2) claims that so and so is good or ought to be done are grounded on these statements of approbation. I shall attack (1).

'x is good' certainly does not mean 'People approve of x' or even 'I approve of x', or anything of the sort. Yet it would not be correct to say 'George is a good father, but I don't approve of him as a father'. If we were using 'good father' to mean what people call a good father, then we could say this without logical oddness, but if we were using 'good father' in its most paradigmatic way we could not say this without conceptual impropriety. This makes it apparent that the connection between something's being good and its being approved of is non-contingent. Just what this relation is, is hard to say, but it is not a causal relation.

Considerations of this sort have led some philosophers to re-open the question of ethical naturalism. 'x is good' doesn't mean 'x is approved of', but an honest assertion that so and so is good implies that the utterer approves of it. To assert 'x is good' is to commit oneself to the assertion, 'I approve of x' or, in the appropriate non-moral contexts, 'I want x', or 'I wish to have x', and the like.¹ 'x is good' does not in *all* contexts imply 'I approve of x' (one need not approve of the soda one calls good); but, inverted comma contexts apart, to say 'x is good' does imply something like one of the following: 'I approve of it', 'I wish to have it', 'I want it', or 'I will strive for it'. But, so it is argued, these latter utterances are typically used to make descriptive statements which are factual and verifiable.

Furthermore, to approve of something involves making a judgment of value. 'I approve of Sunday Blue Laws' or 'This meets our approval' are themselves sentences used to make value judgments. In fact it has been claimed with some plausibility that they are the primary value-judgments upon which more complex value-judgments (e.g., 'Sunday Blue Laws are worthy of being upheld' and 'This is good') are built.

¹ See Gilbert Ryle, "On Forgetting the Difference Between Right and Wrong", *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, A. I. Melden (ed.), p. 152.

These primary statements of value are themselves factual statements. Thus there are some normative statements that are both factual and normative.

Involved in this claim is the assumption that first person present tense avowals are themselves factual and autobiographical statements that are confirmable or disconfirmable. It is just this assumption that needs challenging. It seems to me that in typical cases such utterances do not function as descriptive reports concerning our feelings or attitudes. They have a very different logical force, much more in line with what philosophers like Nowell-Smith and Hare have taken as most typical of sentences involving the full assertion that something is good, right, obligatory and the like. Above all they are not to be considered as factual statements asserting that so and so is the case. Let us see how this is so.

'I approve of . . .', 'I want . . .', 'I feel . . .', 'I wish . . .', and the like are not schemata for autobiographic reports of forces (occult or otherwise) that move us. Consider the following first person present tense sentences:

- (1) I want to go home.
- (2) I'll take tea.
- (3) My attitude about Communists in schools is that there aren't enough of them.
- (4) I wish you wouldn't say that.
- (5) I want you to leave.
- (6) I approve of their marrying in June.

Such utterances do not ordinarily report states of affairs observable by only one person, but they function practically to intervene in the world in various ways. (1), (4) and (5) express or evince feelings. (2) announces a decision. (3) and (6) serve to make clear to others the speaker's attitudes about certain things. (These different activities are of course closely related.) (3), for example, does not give an introspective report on the speaker's inner life but announces his attitude and allegiance on a given matter of policy. He may or may not have certain characteristic emotions or volitions when he seriously asserts (3), but whether he does or not has nothing to do with the meaning of the sentence.

It may be objected, 'Still he must know what his attitudes really are in order to truthfully or honestly assert (3)'. But what would it *mean* for *him* to doubt, discover, investigate, observe or disconfirm (3)? He might doubt, etc. others' attitudes, but about his own he cannot *in that sense* be unsure.

'But surely,' it will in turn be countered, 'we do correctly speak of "not knowing our own minds on this matter", or "being in doubt about how we feel or what our attitude is about this".'

Sometimes we are harassed and don't know what we want, don't know what our attitude is on certain bothersome matters. I might be quite ambivalent about communists as teachers. But then we would say I have an *ambivalent attitude*, and this involves saying that I can't definitely say that I'm for or against communists as teachers. I haven't a definite attitude on such matters. I've not made a definite commitment or decision. Facts about communism, teaching, etc., are certainly relevant to whatever decision I *will* make, but they do not entail it. I must deliberate and decide what attitude I shall take on this matter. Sometimes I do deliberate and I still can't definitely decide, for I still have those sharply conflicting and competing attitudes. But where I properly assert (3) without qualification, I cannot doubt my assertion and the notion of verifying it or giving evidence for it is out of place. (3) might be said to be a "primary valuation", but where this is plausible it cannot be said to be used to make a factual, verifiable statement. Whether I am able to come to a decision or not, 'My attitude about communists is . . .' or 'I don't know what position to take,' are not reports of what I discover after a kind of elusive and essentially private "peering within" or spying inner but hidden attitudes. We need no para-mechanical model here. Talk of introspection is quite inappropriate.

My preceding remark could be misleading. Indeed (3) is not like 'Oh, how my back itches'. An attitude is not the same sort of thing as an itch, tickle or ache. It isn't a kind of sensation. (3) is even different in important respects from expressions of anger (e.g. 'You bitch!'). But they are alike in an important respect, namely that in normal contexts there is no question of verifying claims like 'My head aches', 'I hate her' or 'My attitude toward communists is . . .'. It is true that someone might say 'I don't believe you really hate her. After all, you are pleasant to her, you seem to enjoy her company and I've never heard you attack her before', but if the utterer of 'I hate her' were to persist in insisting that all the same he hated her, and if we had good reason to believe that he understood the correct use of 'hate', that he was sane, and that he had a general mastery of English, we would finally accept his avowal. 'I hate her', 'Oh, how I itch' and 'My attitude toward communists is that there aren't enough of them' are not hypotheses or factual statements open to confirmation or disconfirmation. They can be questioned, but—granted an understanding of the language in question—the speaker's honest avowal

settles the matter. And in making such avowals the speaker does not first introspect and then report on his introspection. 'I'm bored here' and 'My attitude toward the whole matter is one of detachment' is standard English, but 'I *seem* to be bored here', 'My attitude toward the whole matter *seems* to be one of detachment' make us baulk, for they are deviations from linguistic regularities—they are logically odd. Special contexts apart, we do not know what to do with them. There is no room for 'seems' in such first person present tense utterances. The speaker cannot so doubt his avowal. This being so, it does not function to report a fact that he has discovered about himself.

A sentence like (3) expresses a settled disposition concerning matters of this sort on the part of the utterer of (3). If I honestly avowed (3), I would be announcing my stand—evincing an attitude toward a controversial issue. I would not be setting forth a hypothesis to be verified, and I would not, typically at least, be making an autobiographical report of something that I alone had discovered.

Consider a context in which we might use (1). Let us say I have been to the theatre with a friend, and after the performance he asks me if I want to go to the Plaza for a drink. I deliberate a second. I recall that I have an eight-o'clock class the next morning and I reply, 'I guess not to-night. I want to go home. I've got to be up early in the morning.' I convey my wishes to my friend so that he will know what I want to do. But I don't investigate, discover, make a thought-experiment to find out what my feelings are, or "peer inside myself" to find out what "the forces" are that drive me in one direction or another, or set me on one path or another. My sentence does not announce such an occult discovery, but expresses my wishes so someone else can know what they are. I don't *know* what my wishes or attitudes are in the way I may know or fail to know another's wishes or attitudes. There is no distinction here between knowing what I want and *seeming* to know what I want, although again I may be ambivalent or have half-aimless wishes, and only in that sense do I sometimes merely seem to know what I want.² *To make sure here only comes to making a definite decision concerning what to do or seek.* I have certain attitudes and may, if I choose, express them, or I may

² I take my analysis to be perfectly compatible with B. F. McGuinness's fine analysis of "I know what I want". It seems to me to be correct to claim, as McGuinness does, that in the primary sense of 'want', "I know what I want" expresses an *a priori* truth, and that there is 'an essential connexion between consciousness and wanting'. The cases in which we correctly say, "I don't know what I want" are cases of indecision or half-aimlessness; they involve secondary uses of 'want'. See B. F. McGuinness, "I Know What I Want", *Aristotelian Society Proceedings*, vol. LXII (1956-7), pp. 305-20.

decide to take a certain attitude about a certain matter, and again I may, if I choose, announce my decision. But in making a first person present tense statement of the form, 'I approve of . . .', 'I want . . .', 'I wish . . .', or 'I desire . . .', I am not characteristically reporting something I have introspected, or something I discover or even postulate on the basis of my attending to my sensations, emotions or attitudes. These sentences typically function to announce a decision or to express a wish to do (not to do) or to have done (not to have done) so and so or such and such. They are bits of practical rather than theoretical discourse. They are not factual, publicly verifiable or even "privately verifiable" statements. They announce a decision to make so and so the case, express a wish or desire that such and such be the case, or proclaim an attitude toward something that is or probably will be the case. Such utterances usually have more than one non-theoretical function. But the important point here is that they do function non-theoretically and not just (if at all) as utterances used to make descriptive-explanatory statements.

The new style ethical naturalist I have in mind tries to make his case with essentially two points: (1) 'x is good' and 'x ought to be' in some sense imply that the person honestly asserting these utterances must also be prepared to assert honestly that he approves of x; and (2) such expressions of approval are themselves normative utterances. Though such claims may well be true, if what I have argued in the preceding paragraphs is correct, such considerations cannot establish a case for ethical naturalism.³ They can be true without its being the case that these "primary valuations", these expressions of approbation and desire, are being used to make descriptive-explanatory, fact-stating statements. But if ethical naturalism is to be supported *via* this link between what people call good and what people approve, the latter utterances must be descriptive-explanatory (theoretical) utterances. Yet this is not one of their standard functions. Thus ethical naturalism cannot be supported in this manner, if at all.

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³ Even if what I have argued above is not the case, such an argument for ethical naturalism would need bolstering in some way, for after all, 'If x is good then x is approved of, and x is approved of, thus x is good' is not a valid argument.