



CHAPTER 9

Relativism

ETHICAL RELATIVISM is widespread. It is, unfortunately, the ruling moral philosophy of our age. The term “value” is generally employed now as something merely subjective. In speaking of values, one usually takes it for granted that there is general admission of their relative and subjective nature.

The preceding analysis concerning the nature of the important-in-itself should suffice to unmask the impossibility of any value relativism. He who has understood our statements and arguments will also understand that every attempt to interpret as an illusion the notion of an importance-in-itself or of an objective value collapses as soon as we examine more minutely the nature of value. Nevertheless, because ethical relativism is so ubiquitous, it seems necessary to discuss it in a separate chapter and to refute it in detail.

The first type of ethical relativism is no more than a subdivision of general relativism or skepticism. As soon as someone denies that we are able to have any objectively valid knowledge, as soon as he argues that there exists no objective truth, he necessarily also denies the existence of any objective value. The nature of a general relativism is such that it affects everything. We must observe, however, that even though this type

of ethical relativism is a logical consequence of general relativism, nevertheless the unconscious motive for general relativism is very often the desire to do away with an absolute ethical norm. At least deep unconscious resistance against the objectivity of truth frequently has its source in a type of pride that revolts primarily against objective values.

General relativism or skepticism, however, has been overwhelmingly refuted many times, beginning with Plato's *Gorgias* through St. Augustine's *Contra Academicos* (and most especially in his famous *Si fallor, sum*—"If I am mistaken, I am"¹), through all the many classical *reducciones ad absurdum*, and last but not least in Edmund Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen*.²

Whatever the formulation of the thesis denying the possibility of any objective knowledge or of attaining any objective truth, it is inevitably self-contradictory, because in one and the same breath it denies that which it necessarily implies. In claiming to make an objectively true statement by declaring that we are unable to attain any objective truth, this position clearly contradicts itself. Or in other words, it claims to attain an objective truth in the statement that we can never attain an objective truth.

If every general relativism is untenable because of its intrinsically self-contradictory character, so too is any ethical relativism, which is merely a subdivision of the former and is supported by no other arguments than those offered by general skepticism. But we are here interested in refuting those arguments of an ethical relativism that are not derived from the arguments of general relativism. And there exist many such arguments that are not necessarily derivations of a general value relativism.

To be sure, the ethical relativists are, for the most part at least, value relativists, since theoretically they will deny any importance-in-itself. But their arguments often refer exclusively to the morally good and evil, to moral norms, to any value that imposes on us a moral obligation. Certain other values, for example, aesthetic values, they believe to be so obviously

1. *De Trinitate*, XV, 12-21; also *De Civitate Dei*, XI, 26.

2. (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1900), "Critique of specific relativism," pt. 1, chap. 7, §36, pp. 116ff.

relative, or subjective and deprived even of any pretention to objectivity, that they no longer argue against their objectivity; again, other values, such as life, health, and democracy, they tacitly accept as objective, even though they will not theoretically admit them to be so. Thus, the real stress is laid on the denial of an objective good and evil in the moral sense, or at least in the sense that implies a moral obligation.

The first well-known argument for ethical relativism appeals to the diversity of moral judgments that can be found in different peoples, cultural realms, and historical epochs. What is considered as morally good or morally evil, this view contends, differs according to peoples and historical ages. A Mohammedan considers polygamy morally justifiable. It does not occur to him to have any pangs of conscience in this respect. With an entirely good conscience he has different wives simultaneously. To a Christian this would seem immoral and impure. Of such diversity in judgments on what is morally good and what is evil, innumerable examples can be offered. Moreover, this diversity of opinion concerning the moral color of something is to be found not only in comparing different peoples and epochs, but also in looking at the same epoch and even at the same individual at different times of his life.

Now this first argument for the relativity of moral values is based on an invalid syllogism. From the diversity of many moral judgments, from the fact that certain people hold a thing to be morally evil while other people believe the same thing to be morally correct, it is inferred that moral values are relative, that there exists no moral good and evil, and that the entire moral question is tantamount to a superstition or a mere illusion. In truth, a difference of opinion in no way proves that the object to which the opinion refers does not exist, or that it is in reality a mere semblance, changing for each individual or at least for different peoples. The fact that the Ptolemaic system was for centuries considered correct but is now superseded by our present scientific opinion is no justification for denying that the stars exist or even that our present opinion has only a relative validity.

There exist a great many fields in which can be found a diversity of opinion, among different peoples and in different epochs, and also

among philosophers. Does this then confute the existence of objective truth? Not at all. The truth of a proposition does not depend upon how many people agree to it, but solely upon whether or not it is in conformity with reality.

Even if all men shared a certain opinion, it could still be wrong, and the fact that very few grasp a truth does not therefore alter or lessen its objective validity. Even the evidence of a truth is not equivalent to the fact that every man grasps and accepts it immediately. In like manner, it is erroneous to conclude that there exists no objective moral norm, that moral good and evil are in reality illusions or fictions, or that at least their pretention to objective validity is an illusion, only because we find many different opinions concerning what is considered to be morally good and evil.

What matters is to see that in all these diversities the notion of an objective value, of a moral good and evil, is always presupposed, even if there exist contradictory positions concerning the moral goodness of a certain attitude or action. And just as the meaning of objective truth is not touched by the fact that two persons hold opposite positions and each one claims his proposition to be true, so too the notion of moral good and evil, of something objectively valid that calls for obedience and appeals to our conscience, is always untouched, even if one man says that polygamy is evil and another that polygamy is morally permissible.

The distinction between something merely subjectively satisfying and advantageous for an egoistic interest, on the one hand, and the morally good, on the other hand, is always in some way implied.

Thus conflicting opinions concerning the moral illicitness of something, instead of dethroning the general notions of moral good and moral evil, clearly attest their objectivity. As the diversity of opinions reveals that objective truth as such is always presupposed and is consequently beyond all possibility of the collapse to which the truth of a single fact may be exposed, so the indispensable presupposition of an objective moral norm reveals itself majestically in all diversities of opinions concerning the moral goodness or badness of a single attitude.

On the other hand, the fact that there have existed many more con-

flicting opinions concerning moral values, for instance, the moral character of polygamy or of blood revenge, than concerning colors or the size of corporeal things, can easily be understood as soon as we realize the moral requirements for a sound and integral value-perception.³

Without any doubt the perception of moral values differs in many respects from knowledge in any other field. In order to grasp the real value or disvalue of an attitude, in order to see, for example, the disvalue of revenge or polygamy, more moral presuppositions are required than for any other type of knowledge. Reverence, a sincere thirst for truth, intellectual patience, and a spiritual *souplesse* are required in varying degrees for every adequate knowledge of any kind. But in the case of the moral value-perception much more is required: not only another degree of reverence and of opening our mind to the voice of being, a higher degree of "conspiring" with the object, but also a *readiness of our will* to conform to the call of values, whatever it may be.⁴ The influence of the environment, of the milieu, of the traditions of a community, in short the entire interpersonal atmosphere in which man grows up and lives, has a much greater influence on this type of knowledge than on any other. In the ethos of a community, moral convictions are present in another way than are convictions concerning other spheres. They are embodied not only in the laws and customs but above all in the common ideal that forms an ever-present pattern for judging our fellow men and ourselves. The entire atmosphere is so saturated with this moral pattern that the conscious and unconscious influence on the individual is a tremendous one.

And this influence may cripple the capacity for value-perception. Thus it is not difficult to see how errors in this field are more widespread, expressing themselves in conflicting value judgments in different tribes, peoples, cultural realms, and epochs.

But this only shows why errors and inadequacies in this field are

3. The problem of value blindness has been discussed systematically in my former work *Sittlichkeit und ethische Werterkenntnis* (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1921), 24ff.

4. In his work on St. Augustine, C. N. Cochrane stresses this fact in saying, "Intellectually, this bad will finds expression in an effort 'to make one's own truth,' i.e., to justify one's conduct by rationalizations which are blindly and stubbornly adhered to for the very reason that they cannot stand the light of day." *Christianity and Classical Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 449.

more widespread. It shows us how the tradition of a community may in many cases hamper the moral value-perception, and in other cases facilitate an adequate value-perception. But in no way does it show that without any such influence of a community there would exist no moral good and evil, or that the morally good is nothing but a convention or a custom of a certain community.

How, moreover, will the moral relativists explain the fact that we often find great moral personalities piercing through the screen laid over morality by the customs and convictions of the environment and discovering parts at least of the true world of values? How do they account for the moral views of Socrates, of Zoroaster, and many others?

Once we have grasped the roots of moral value-blindness, it will no longer be astonishing that there exist such diversities of value-judgments; rather, we shall be astonished at how many agreements nevertheless exist among all tribes, epochs, and individuals. We must now cautiously examine the origin of this diversity in moral judgments.

In many cases the fact that one tribe in a certain historical age considered as morally evil the same thing that another tribe considered as morally good is due to a difference of opinion or belief concerning the *nature* of a thing, and not its value. If for a tribe certain animals are considered sacred (as, for example, the Egyptians considered the ox Apis to be holy), then to kill this animal assumes the character of something sacrilegious; whereas for one who is aware of the true nature of this animal, to kill it is not at all sacrilegious. Innumerable examples could be given of such diversities that manifest in no way a contradiction concerning moral values but only a difference of opinion concerning the nature of certain objects. A sacrilegious action is in both cases considered to be morally evil. There is no diversity concerning the disvalue of a sacrilegious action, but only concerning the fact as to whether something is believed to be sacred or not.

There exist no doubt tremendous differences among peoples and epochs concerning the interpretation of nature and the world surrounding us. The interpretation of the universe by a superstitious primitive tribe naturally differs enormously from the universe as it is understood by

science in our age. Thus one and the same action necessarily has a completely different moral significance according to the conception that the agent has of the things that he is dealing with. This difference implies no diversity in the moral judgment *as such*. Precisely because the moral judgment as such is the same, because there is agreement concerning the value, the judgment of this concrete action must differ as soon as one set of factual presuppositions has been replaced by another.

One of the most widespread forms of ethical relativism is the thesis of what is called the French sociological school. According to this theory the notion of moral good and evil is in reality only the objectivation of the beliefs and will of a community. As Anatole France puts it, murder is not punished because it is evil, but we call it evil because it is punished by the state. The "objectivity" of the moral norm, its undeniable difference from our arbitrary mood or our subjective desires, is explained according to this theory by the fact that it is the beliefs of a community that the individual finds as something pre-given, imposed on him by tradition.

Moral good and evil are identified with mere convention, with something that has no other basis than the pseudo-objectivity of Bacon's *idola tribus*, the idols of the tribe or collective erroneous beliefs, as opposed to the *idola specus*, the idols of the cave or individual prejudices. We do indeed find such a pseudo-objectivity of ideas, as when in a particular epoch certain ideas are, as it were, in the air. The individual experiences ideas as if they were possessed of objective power and reality, because instead of arising in his mind they have an interpersonal reality and are considered as common knowledge. The individual experiences them as things that come from "outside" his mind and thus confuses their mere interpersonal reality with objective truth. In order to see the confusion and fallacy at its basis, we need only concentrate on the thesis of the ethical relativists whereby moral values are identified with their being commanded by a community.

Even though we contended that all our convictions are fallacious, mere *idola tribus*, due to our confusing the pseudo-objectivity of the interpersonal reality of an idea with its truth, the notion of truth as such would still remain untouched. There is a clear and unassailable oppo-

sition between objective truth and the relativity of all those concrete convictions that have no basis other than a collective belief. When these beliefs and opinions are denounced and belittled as merely relative, then the notion of objective truth, far from being invalidated and reduced to a mere illusion, reveals itself in its full majesty and undethronable reality. Objective truth forms the tacit presupposition of this thesis, for plainly it is only *because* there exists an objective truth that the propositions that have no other worth than to be *idola tribus* are declared relative. Now if we interpret this position as tacitly presupposing objective truth, it becomes tantamount to the thesis that we are unable to attain truth, a skeptical position that is contradictory in itself, as we saw before. If, on the contrary, we interpret the thesis as considering that truth is in reality constituted by nothing more than the preagreement of a community, we are confronted with one of those nonsensical statements that are so often presented in the formula: "It is in reality nothing but..." We have already spoken of the impossibility of these "discoveries" in philosophy, because as far as true essences or necessary, intelligible unities are concerned the reduction of one to the other is inherently nonsensical. If someone tells us that in reality 3 is 4, or green is red, further discussion would be a waste of time. The same applies to every attempt that declares ultimate, necessary, and intelligible entities to be mere illusions.

Besides the simple impossibility of identifying truth as such with the fact that something is held to be true by a community, the very *nature* of conviction also forbids such identification. For whether a conviction is true or false in its content, it nevertheless attempts to aim at something transcendent. The statement itself claims to be not merely the belief of a community but a truth. Therefore as such it presupposes the possibility of knowing an objective truth.

In much the same way the thesis of the ethical relativist that declares that what we call good is in reality nothing but the result of social convention means that every particular statement in which we say something is morally good or evil is therefore on the same level as mere rules of convention, such as those that fix the manner in which one person is to greet another. Now this thesis leaves untouched the notion of moral

good and evil as such in its objectivity. For it amounts to the thesis: the things that we believe to be morally good and evil are not so in reality, since we are unable to distinguish whether something is objectively so or whether it only appears to be good or evil because of the tradition of a community.

As far-reaching and disastrous as is the denial of the objective validity of every value-judgment concerning any type of human attitude, the objective validity of the notion of moral good or evil would still not be touched by this ethical agnosticism. It would mean: though there exists a moral good and evil, every concrete statement (for example, "Murder is morally bad," or "Faithfulness is morally good") is the mere result of a community convention.

Later on we shall discuss the arbitrary and unfounded character of this ethical agnosticism.

Of course, the French sociological school would not accept this interpretation. They want to say that the notion of moral good and evil is nothing but a superstition, and that just as totemism ascribes to certain animals a magical power and significance that they do not have in reality, so mankind in general imagines such a thing as importance-in-itself, and even such things as moral goodness and moral wickedness. As superstition consists not only in ascribing magical power to a being but also in the very notion of magical power, so too not only the predication of moral good or evil to a human act but the very notion of moral good itself is pure illusion.

This statement may assume two different forms: First, moral goodness and evil are mere illusions, and we are therefore on the same level with the notion of magic power. In reality, things are neutral. The second formula would run: What people call morally good and evil is in reality only mere convention, the social perspective of a certain community.

This latter formula does not lead to the same consequences as does the former. The idea of moral good and evil is not declared to be a superstition that should be eliminated as in the former case, but rather it is seen as a normal part of man's communal life. All we have to do is simply to understand its true nature, and this consists precisely in its being the

expression of a community belief. Both formulas are equally nonsensical.

The first position that declares the notion of good and evil to be mere superstition, a fiction to be explained by psychoanalysis, tries thereby to deny a necessary, ultimate, intelligible quiddity. This is a nonsensical procedure, as we have shown before.⁵ Just as it is indeed possible to discover that some contingent idea is a mere illusion or fiction (for example, that a centaur does not exist, or that the phoenix is a mere illusion), so it is absurd to say of any intelligible, necessary entity (for example, the number two, or truth, or justice) that it is a mere fiction or illusion.

The very nature of these necessary, intelligible entities is such that they are beyond all invention and fiction, and possess a radical autonomy and independence of the act in which we grasp them. To ignore the essential difference between merely contingent facts and these entities, which have essences so potent as to exclude any possibility of denying them objectivity, and to place them on the same level with any contingent quiddity, thus betrays a degree of philosophical incapacity and superficiality which from the start dooms every theory touched by this blindness.

If we think of all the innumerable attempts in philosophy to reduce one thing to another despite the fact that the two things obviously differ in their very nature—whether it be to explain the meaning of a word by saying that it is nothing but association of an image with the sound of the word, or to explain the respect for a moral value as nothing but a specific form of inhibition, or to describe joy as nothing but the experience of a certain *Organempfindung* associated with a certain representation of an object, or whatever the particular form may be—we are at a loss to understand whence this idle and even nonsensical procedure derives its attractiveness. Not only value in general but, more important, moral value is, as we saw before, such an ultimate datum that in order to grasp the evident datum of value, in spite of all theoretical denials a person constantly presupposes, it suffices that he become fully aware of his lived contact with reality.

5. Cf. prolegomena, 5ff.

Adherents of the French sociological school were full of indignation about Hitler's atrocities and racism, notwithstanding the fact that according to their theory there could be no basis for any indignation. Even if, in order to be consistent with their theories, they should deny that they were indignant, nevertheless at the first occasion in which for a moment they forgot their theory, they would be sincerely indignant. Every day offers many situations in which their immediate responses give the lie to their theory.

But we need only think of the attitude that ordinarily accompanies this theory. The "dogmatism" of the moral objectivists is looked upon with contempt. Whether it is looked upon as superstition or reactionary obscurantism or "mystical" phantasy, it is always fought against as something evil, and never as something merely erroneous, as is the case when one or another scientific theory is attacked. Obviously in attacking objectivism as evil the relativists admit what they theoretically deny.

Sometimes we find that those who are in rage against the notion of any objective norm and any objective value nevertheless strive against them in the name of "freedom," or "democracy"; and thereby they fully admit the character of the value of freedom or democracy. They do not speak of freedom as if it were something merely agreeable or as if they wanted it for personal reasons, but they speak of it as an "ideal" that itself implies the notion of value and even of morally relevant value. The entire ethos of those who fight against any objective norm belies the content of their theory. The pathos with which they condemn the attitude of the "dogmatists" is weighted with the pretention of fighting for the nobler cause. Whatever may be the point in which they tacitly admit an objective value and even a moral significance, whatever may be the "ideal" that they presuppose unawares, somewhere the notion of value and even of moral value must inevitably enter. Would they not look with contempt on a colleague who, eager to prove a theory, paid people for giving false testimony or lied about the results of his experiments? Would they not blame a medical charlatan who foists fake medicines and cures on his unfortunate patients? Lewis brilliantly points to this inconsistency in saying:

In actual fact Gaius and Titius will be found to hold, with complete uncritical dogmatism, the whole system of values which happened to be in vogue among moderately educated young men of the professional classes during the period between the two wars. Their skepticism about values is on the surface; it is for us on other people's values: about the values current in their own set they are not nearly skeptical enough. And this phenomenon is very usual. A great many of those who "debunk" traditional or (as they would say) "sentimental" values have in the background values of their own which they believe to be immune from the debunking process. They claim to be cutting away the parasitic growth of emotion, religious sanction, and inherited taboos, in order that "real" or "basic" values may emerge.⁶

Why indeed should they write books at all proposing their relativistic theory, if they did not think that it is better to know truth than to err?⁷

There may be people who in their lives ignore their moral obligations and become disinterested in the world of moral values and who, like a certain type of criminal or a complete egoist, aspire only to satisfy their pride or concupiscence. But no one who is a sincere theoretical relativist can completely avoid presupposing the datum of moral value.

We repeat: As soon as one of these relativists should, in abstracting from his theories, become aware of his immediate contact with being, he could not fail to discover the datum of moral value in its undeniable reality. Only the relativist who could sincerely answer "yes," when asked whether he would prefer objective moral values, would be capable of reaching this deeper stratum and of gaining awareness of the value.

But some may object: As soon as a person in his search would rejoice in finding one possibility confirmed by reality rather than another, he is no longer unprejudiced and hence in analyzing reality he may become a prey to wishful thinking.

But this does not apply here. What we mean is simply this: The man

6. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1947), 18-19.

7. "For the whole purpose of their book is so to condition the young reader that he will share their approval, and this would be either a fool's or a villain's undertaking unless they held that their approval was in some way valid or correct." *Ibid.*, 18.

who wants to commit suicide because he despairs of objective truth or objective values is sincere in his conviction, even though he errs in his attitude. But the one who denies objective truth and objective values and, far from finding such a world tragic, prefers it, completely reveals the psychological and moral reasons that are at the basis of his denial.

The distinction between the notion of moral good and evil, on the one hand, and a mere convention or a mere "being forbidden by the state," on the other, is obvious. To consider moral good and evil as in reality nothing but the result of a positive commandment springing from the self-defense of society against the individual is a typical example of an attempt to dissolve necessary, intelligible entities into contingent fictions and constructs. We might just as well say that in reality a triangle is a square. Such a consideration has sense only if it means that things are often presented under the title of moral laws, or as having a moral value, even though in actual fact those things are prescribed only because they are in the interest of society. This would amount to a judgment analogous to the one wherein we accuse somebody of being a hypocrite and of speaking of God when he really means money. But what must we think of the intellectual capacity of a man who would conclude from the fact of hypocrisy that in reality moral good and evil are only other names for selfish interest? Such a man would deny the hypocritical character of the person whose hypocrisy was the starting point of his disappointment! In the very premise, namely, the hypocrisy of this man, he clearly distinguished between the *Tartuffe* and the morally good man, between what the man pretends to be and what he really is.

Another form of ethical relativism is one that bases itself on a value-subjectivism, and that is in common vogue as a theory concerning values. This theory contends that whenever we attribute a value to something (for example, in saying that a quartet of Beethoven is beautiful, a dialogue of Plato deep and luminous, or in praising Joseph's noble forgiveness of his brothers), in reality we mean a certain feeling that we experience in connection with those objects. Though we attribute beauty, goodness, or depth to an object, these are in reality nothing but mere states of soul that we objectify, erroneously attributing them to an object.

The adherents of this theory seek support for their contention in the fact that such erroneous projections are often found in everyday experience. We call some food healthy because it contributes to our health. But in the sense in which we say that we are healthy or in which we say that meat comes from a healthy animal, we cannot attribute health as such to a certain food. According to this theory, the same would apply to value-judgments: for instance, we call music beautiful or an action morally good because they cause certain feelings in us, or because we associate certain feelings with the thought of certain objects.

Of course, so the theory continues, when we say “beautiful,” “sublime,” “good,” or “noble,” we are not speaking of mere illusions or fictions. We indicate by these terms something that is very real; but in fact this something is not a property of objects, acts, or persons, but a “feeling” that for one or another reason we connect with an object. Thus, too, the moral qualifications that we predicate of human actions or attitudes are in reality only feelings, connected for one reason or another with the object. So, too, what we call moral obligation is really a specific type of coercive feeling. The experience of a “must” can be found in various forms in man’s inner life, ranging from an *idée fixe* to all kinds of inhibitions. Moral obligation appealing to our conscience is thus nothing but a form of coercive feeling. It can thus easily be explained by psychology. To ascribe to this obligation an objective reality, an existence independent of our consciousness, is again the mere result of a psychological tendency, in this case the tendency for objectivizing.

Since values in general and moral values in particular are mere subjective feelings and not properties of things, and since moral obligation is also just a specific kind of feeling, it is accordingly impossible to ascribe to moral values or to moral obligation an objective validity. They are subjective and thus relative. If certain individuals, tribes, or cultural realms differ in their moral value-judgments, this is quite natural, for we can hardly expect everyone to have the same feelings in the face of certain objects. As one person likes very hot food and another dislikes it; as one prefers salty food and another unsalty; as one and the same thing may cause pleasure in one man and displeasure in another; how much more

understandable then is it that we have different “value-feelings” with regard to the same thing, since the connection with the object seems to be even looser here than in these cases of certain bodily effects.

The main thesis of this value-subjectivism is, as we can see, one of those unfortunate discoveries⁸ fabricated on the pattern that two obviously different essences are in reality one and the same; for instance, that in reality red is green, and that in reality the number two and the number three are identical. An unprejudiced analysis of the datum of values will inevitably reveal that this theory is not only a pure construction, flat and flimsy and deprived of any basis in the realm of data, but also that it is nonsensical in its confusion of concepts.

First of all, there is no reason whatsoever for declaring that the beauty of a melody, or even the moral sublimity of an act of charity, is in reality a feeling and not a property of the object. Experience tells us just the opposite. The beauty is given as a quality of the melody, and the sublimity as the quality of a moral act. This clearly differs from the way in which a typical feeling (for example, a state of depression or irritation) is given to us.

The situation is just the opposite in the case of healthy foods. As soon as we try to verify what we mean by “healthy” (in saying, for example, that a certain mineral water is very healthy), we realize that we are using the term “healthy” in an analogous sense, and that the primary sense of health is in question only when we speak of a healthy man or a healthy animal or any other living being. We immediately realize that by healthy, we mean with respect to mineral water that it serves our health, either in overcoming or avoiding an illness. Moreover, we clearly see that the relation expressed by the term “serves,” as when we say that medicine serves health, is a causal relation.

If, on the contrary, we ask ourselves what we mean in saying of a melody “How beautiful!” and in saying of an action “How noble!” or “How good!”, we find that in no way do we use these terms in an analogous sense and that they refer primarily to something else. There is neither

8. Cf. prolegomena, 4.

a property of ourselves nor any feeling in our soul to which we could attribute the good or beautiful in its primary sense. Rather, we mean something that precisely by its very nature can only be a predicate of the object.

In order to grasp how entirely superficial and senseless it is to reduce the values to feelings, we must consider for a moment the term “feeling.” It is, as we shall see later in detail, an equivocal term.⁹ It is sometimes used to denote mere states, such as fatigue, depression, irritation, anxiety; sometimes for experiences, such as bodily pain or bodily pleasure; and sometimes for meaningful affective responses, such as joy, sorrow, fear, enthusiasm. We shall see later¹⁰ the essential difference that exists between a mere state of alteration and a meaningful, intentional response such as joy. Here it may suffice broadly to distinguish them, and to see how the subjective-value thesis looks against the background of this distinction.

If we interpret the thesis as asserting that moral goodness or beauty is in reality a feeling like a bodily pleasure, then the absurdity is immediately evident. There is nothing in experience that would allow such a reduction; rather, experience totally excludes it. A bodily pleasure extends in space and time. We can localize it more or less, and we can strictly measure its duration. To predicate of beauty or of moral goodness that it extends in space and in time is sheer nonsense.

Bodily pleasure presents itself univocally as something that can be experienced only by ourselves and that has no existence outside of its being experienced. Moral goodness and beauty clearly show themselves as things independent of our experience; we clearly realize that the moral goodness of another’s act of charity in no way depends on its being witnessed by ourselves. On the contrary, we discover it to be good, and we know that it would yet be good whether or not we were aware of it.

Now no one will actually try to reduce moral values or the dignity of a human person to certain bodily feelings or to a projection of such

9. By this we do not deny that there are some common features that are at the basis of the different uses of this term.

10. Chapter 17, “Value-response.”

feelings. This attempt is only to be found with respect to aesthetic values, such as beauty. We shall, however, disregard the specificity of this attempt here, because once one has grasped the impossibility of reducing values in general to feelings, the attempt to do so with aesthetic values reveals its futile character.

Insofar as values are concerned, moral values especially, this subjectivism contends that they are projections not of bodily but of psychical feelings. This theory holds that in praising as morally noble the action of a man, we only give *expression* to the fact that we rejoice before the object, that it moves us or pleases us. And the content of these experiences is projected into the object: we express ourselves in our judgments as if the object were endowed with a certain quality.

According to this theory, value-judgments are merely a confused way of expressing ourselves. The real meaning of a value-judgment would then be: "I feel pleasure or displeasure in connection with this object," or "The object causes a positive or negative feeling in my soul." Yet, if we compare a value-judgment with a proposition dealing with our feelings, we immediately see the obvious difference. In stating that forgiveness is morally good, revenge morally evil, we mean by morally good the character of an attitude and not of any feeling that I experience in witnessing these attitudes in another person. When, on the contrary, someone says, "I cannot stand angry people; they frighten me to death," he means a feeling that angry people cause in him. When someone says of a landscape that it is sublime, or that a human person has a higher value than an animal, he certainly does not mean by sublime or by value a feeling that he discovers in his soul. Sublimity, moral goodness, the value of a human person are either properties of a being or they are fictions. As we have already seen, they can never be feelings, because predications that are meaningful and correct when applied to feelings or psychical entities become senseless when applied to values. The thesis that value-judgments are statements concerning one's feelings (and thus that they *are* feelings) is obviously wrong.

A special version of this value-subjectivism is Ayer's emotive theory. He contends that value-judgments are not statements referring to our

feeling but rather a mere *expression* of feeling or a command.¹¹ Thus, according to him, value-judgments can be neither true nor false. The statement "Justice is good" or "Injustice is evil" should, according to Ayer, be synonymous either with a mere expression of a feeling or with the command "Be just" or "Do not be unjust."

The term "expression of feelings" is in many respects vague. In the first place, the term "feeling" is, as we mentioned above, equivocal; in order to give sense to this thesis, the datum that is here meant by feeling would have to be carefully elaborated. Secondly, the term "expression" is equally ambiguous. In its most authentic meaning the term refers to the intuitively given transparence of psychical entities in a person's face or in his voice or movements. In this sense we say that a face expresses joy, a voice expresses fear, a way of walking expresses an affected or sophisticated attitude. In this sense, too, we say that a certain face expresses kindness, purity, intelligence. It is obviously impossible in this primary sense of the term to identify a value-judgment with any expression.

By expression we may also mean any exteriorization of our emotions; for example, tears may be an expression of sorrow, singing an expression of joy, or jumping in the air an expression of exuberant cheerfulness. In this sense certain words or even sentences may be called expressions of our joy, our sorrow, our fear, our enthusiasm. Such words and sentences obviously have a character completely different from any statement. They differ completely from a proposition in which we state that we rejoice or that we are angry. They have the function rather of an exteriorization, the character of a dynamic manifestation of our inner experience. This type of expression, Ayer contends, constitutes the major part of our value-judgments.

We can disregard in our context the thesis of Ayer that value-judgments are neither true nor false because they are not propositions. We may disregard this part of Ayer's thesis for, even if he admitted that value-judgments can be true or false, the main basis for his relativism would not be overthrown: if value-judgments really do only refer to feel-

11. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1950), 20-22, 102ff.

ings independently of the more logical question whether they can be true or false, then values would truly be something entirely subjective.

The point of interest here is to see whether Ayer is right in saying that value-judgments are an expression of feelings or a command. Now this theory is equally in blatant contradiction to experience. Great music is given as beautiful to me, the quality of beauty revealing itself univocally as a property of the object; it stands before my mind as distinct from psychical experiences of my soul, such as joy, serenity, being moved, or sorrow and anxiety. The moral nobility of an act of charity is clearly given as a property of the act, as something on the object's side, definitely distinguished from any psychical happening in the soul.

Our primary contact with values is in no way a judgment; it is not the act of imparting a property to an object but the *perception* of something autonomous. The original experience is the perception of the importance of an object; only after this initial disclosure of the value may we by a judgment attribute it to an object.

In the case of an expression, the primary experience is an emotion, for example, joy, sorrow, fear; and the words we utter as expression of this experience can in no way be interpreted as the formulation of something we perceived before as the property of an object. These dynamic expressions have an analogous character to the "Ouch" someone utters when he is hurt, or to the famous "Uh" of Mozart's Papageno when he sees Monstratos. They are an exteriorization of something, having no meaning in the strict sense, indicating no object but having only the character of a projection of a psychical experience. They speak exclusively of the psychical entity whose expression they are; they manifest univocally the nature and presence of joy, sorrow, or fear.

This expression itself shows up only in an active, dynamic process of exteriorization. How could one pretend that the beauty of a great work of art, the value of truth, the moral value of justice, the dignity of the person (all of which are primarily known in a perception) are in reality mere expressions of feelings?

We are moved to tears because of the beauty of a work of art. Our being so affected is clearly distinguished, therefore, from the beauty of

the object. How should the expression of our emotion be identical with beauty? Or how could one pretend that in saying that this work of art is beautiful, we are in reality not stating a fact but merely expressing our reaction?

Moreover, the untenable character of a theory such as Ayer's becomes fully manifest when we analyze the kind of feelings of which value-judgments are supposed to be expressions. It is obvious that mere states, such as fatigue, irritation, depression, which are only *caused* by an object but not motivated by it, are not at all in question in the theory under inspection. Clearly they have not the dynamic trend of exteriorization, although they are typically "expressed" in the first and literal sense of expression. Obviously what Ayer means by the term "feeling" comes under the heading of intentional experiences, experiences having a meaningful conscious relation to an object. Experiences such as joy, sorrow, enthusiasm, indignation, admiration, contempt, love, hatred, hope, and fear are the feelings that, according to this theory, are the very source of value-judgments. But the futility of this theory discloses itself as soon as we realize the nature of these acts. The intentional nature of affective responses, their meaningful response character, essentially *presupposes* the knowledge of a datum on the object's side that is the very reason for our joy or enthusiasm. So long as an object presents itself to our knowledge as neutral or indifferent, such a response is impossible. This elementary fact, as we have already noted in the first chapter, became the starting point for Freud's discovery of the phenomenon of repression. So far are the affective responses from being the sources of the importance of the object that, on the contrary, they presuppose the knowledge of this importance.¹²

To believe that in stating the moral goodness of justice we only exteriorize our enthusiasm about justice is as absurd as to believe that the statement $2+2 = 4$ is nothing but an exteriorization of our conviction. The acts that in both these cases are said to exteriorize themselves in a

12. This importance can naturally also be the merely subjectively satisfying in the case of joy. But in these cases we are aware of the difference, for no man would speak of the financial profit about which he rejoices as morally noble, sublime, and so on. He might perhaps say that it is lucky.

statement cannot be separated from the object that they essentially presuppose. There is no enthusiasm, no veneration, no esteem *as such*, just as there is no conviction *as such*. Every veneration is essentially a veneration of someone; every enthusiasm, an enthusiasm *about* something; every esteem, the esteem for a person; every conviction is necessarily conviction *of* a fact. The feelings to which, according to this theory, the values must be reduced, themselves presuppose an importance on the object side.

Thus Ayer confuses the *principium* with the *principiatum*. But apart from that it is plainly clear that the content of the quality on the side of the object (which we term “beautiful,” “sublime,” “heroic,” “noble,” and so forth) clearly differs from the content of our responses, such as joy, enthusiasm, love, admiration, esteem, and so on. Above all, the radical difference that separates the *consciousness of* something, the awareness of an object and its quality, from our response to it should once and for all make manifest the impossibility of identifying the sublimity of Beethoven’s ninth symphony, which we grasp, with our experience of being moved by it or enthused about it. C. S. Lewis unmasks in a brilliant way the ridiculous confusion of this interpretation of values:

Even on their own view—on any conceivable view—the man who says *This is sublime* cannot mean *I have sublime feelings*. Even if it were granted that such qualities as sublimity were simply and solely projected into things from our own emotions, yet the emotions which prompt the projection are the correlatives, and therefore almost the opposites, of the qualities projected. The feelings which make a man call an object sublime are not sublime feelings but feelings of veneration.¹³

In summarizing we can say that the attempt to interpret the values as mere projections of feelings into an object, either because the object causes these feelings or because we associate them with the object, collapses and reveals itself as sheer nonsense as soon as we take the trouble first to expose the equivocal character of the term “feeling,” and then to examine the real nature of the experiences in which we grasp a value and respond to it.

13. Op. cit., 2.

The attempt to interpret value-judgments as sentences, expressions, or commands also collapses when minutely analyzed. It is obviously impossible to interpret as commands statements such as "The ninth symphony of Beethoven is beautiful," or "The human person has a higher value than an animal," or "Truth is something precious." What kind of command should these value-judgments embody? If one would say it is a command to appreciate this music, or to respect the human person, or to worship truth, the question-begging character of such a view is obvious. Not only does one definitely mean something else, but the very reason for commanding such responses is precisely the *value* of the object. This involves the same confusion as if one would say, "It is true that Caesar was murdered in 43 B.C.," and make this statement synonymous with the command to be convinced of it.

Without doubt, this reduction of values to a mere object of commanding is meant only to be applied to moral values. The transposition of the extra-moral value-judgments into commands is so plainly artificial that we can hardly believe anyone would seriously cling to it.

In the moral sphere, of course, commands and prohibitions play a great role. It is here that the view under consideration attains a certain meaning; in the assertion, for instance, that the sentence "Killing is morally evil" is synonymous with the sentence "Thou shalt not kill," or, again, that "Charity is morally good" is synonymous with "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

Now it is not difficult to see that the two sentences are not identical in meaning; they express two different facts, although these facts are interrelated. In stating that killing is *evil*, we clearly refer to a property of the act of killing; but we are not expressing any prohibition. We do not even refer to any prohibition. But we are certainly indicating a fact that necessarily leads to the prohibition. We refer to something that is, on the one hand, the reason and basis for the prohibition, and from which, on the other hand, the prohibition logically follows. The same applies when we state that charity is good. We must realize that the connection between both facts—the goodness and the command to goodness—is evidently such that the goodness is the *principium*, and the command,

the *principiatum*. Thus, it is impossible to substitute the command for the value, because the command, as soon as it is a moral command and not a mere positive commandment (such as the commandment in the Decalogue to observe the Sabbath), necessarily presupposes the value of the object to which it refers.

It would be just as nonsensical if one said that truth is nothing but the commandment to be convinced of something. In reality the truth of a sentence is presupposed in its independence in order to require conviction and oblige belief in it.

And what kind of command, then, should the moral value-judgment involve? Arbitrary commands that an incompetent individual places on someone else? Obviously not. Perhaps the commands of a community? This would amount to the relativism of the French sociological school that we discussed above, or at least to a pure value-positivism.

If, on the contrary, the command in question is conceived as issuing from a true authority (for example, the father in the family, the state, and above all the Church), the value is presupposed in the very notion of true authority. But even a true authority, implying the notion of value, could be claimed to be only the source of a valid positive law. The difference between a merely positive law and a moral commandment is so obvious and has so often been stressed that we need no longer insist on it.¹⁴

In our age of psychoanalysis it is high time that we had a psychoanalysis of relativism. If anything calls for a psychoanalytic investigation, it is the artificial and desperate effort to deny the most obvious data and to make of them innumerable different things—anything, in fact, except what they distinctly reveal themselves to be.

14. As Husserl convincingly showed in his *Logische Untersuchungen*, pt. I, it is incorrect to say, "Logic is a normative discipline," because logic does not deal primarily with commands but shows the objective validity of the principle of contradiction or of the laws of syllogism. The same applies to ethics. The fact that something is endowed with a value is at the basis of every true moral norm.