Chapter Six: Nothing Possesses Value Intrinsically

1. *Doing things with false sentences*

Nothing is good and nothing is bad. No action is right and no action is wrong. That is the idea we'll discuss in this chapter. We want to understand the idea that no state of affairs is good or bad, and no action right or wrong, and we want to know whether it is true.

Nothing is good, that is, except in the sense either of good for something (warehouses are good for storing things) or pleasant or enjoyable (red wine is good, especially with strong cheese). And nothing is right, that is, except in the sense of correct ("4" is the right answer to the problem "what is the sum of 2 and 2?").

No states of affairs are good in the sense of morally or ethically good, we might put it, if we need to characterize this other sense of good. No actions are morally or ethically right. The general happiness is not good, honest dealing is not right.

That the general happiness is not good does not imply that it is bad. The general happiness is neither good nor bad. That honest dealing is not right does not imply that it is wrong. Honest dealing is neither right nor wrong.

When someone says that pleasure is good, or that love is better than hate, or that laws that allow for torture are bad, they are speaking falsely—if, indeed, nothing is good and nothing is bad.

When someone says it's just right to treat people with respect and it's wrong to tease children for fun, they, too, are speaking falsely—if, that is, nothing is right and nothing is wrong.

Someone who says that the general happiness is the sole good of social organization or that it's wrong to tease children for fun might very well thereby get their point across, even though they have spoken false sentences.

People all the time say false things and manage thereby to get their point across. "What a beautiful day" can get across the point that the weather today is fierce and wild just as easily as can "the weather today is fierce and wild." "Pleased to meet you" might convey displeasure and be intended to. "Ottawa seeks to resolve the crisis" is false, given that a city cannot seek to do anything, but everyone understands that that sentence tells us that the Canadian Prime Minister is seeking to resolve a particular crisis.

If all statements attributing ethical goodness or moral rightness to things are false (as are all statements that attribute intentions to cities), then people who speak these false statements must be getting some of the results they want, or else they would change their ways of speaking. What might be the results they're getting, results significant enough to encourage them to continue engaging people by saying things that are false?

Those who speak sentences attributing badness to certain states of affairs or wrongness to certain kinds of action might not realize that they are speaking falsely. They might well think that they speak truly. They might well think that teasing children for fun really is wrong. They are not, that

is, speaking ironically and hoping that others will notice that they are speaking ironically so to be moved to figure out what they actually mean by what they say. They mean by "teasing children for fun is wrong" that teasing children for fun is wrong and that it is true that teasing children for fun is wrong.

Even though (on the view we are considering), teasing children for fun is not wrong (and it's not right either), people who say that teasing children for fun is wrong usually mean that it is. But what do they accomplish by speaking that false statement (one they think is true)?

The answer is that they succeed in expressing any number of emotional attitudes that they have, or they succeed in changing something they want to change. When someone says that teasing children for fun is wrong, they express their belief that teasing children for fun is wrong (at least if they mean to express that belief) but, whether that belief is true or false, they also express their disapproval of teasing children for fun, their commitment not to tease children for fun, or their wish that no one ever tease children for fun. They indicate that they themselves don't tease children for fun and that they don't like that children are teased for fun (or, at least, they represent themselves as indicating these things; they might be trying to deceive us). By expressing their disapproval of teasing children for fun, they might be commanding their audience not to tease children for fun. In saying "teasing children for fun is wrong," they might well succeed in preventing someone in their audience from teasing a child for fun.

The statement "It is wrong to tease children for fun" need not be true for stating it to express disapproval of teasing children for fun and for stating it to have effects on others that the speaker wishes it to have.

Now consider the statement "Whenever freedom and equality conflict, the right thing to do is to favour equality." On the view at hand, this statement is false. It is false not because the right thing to do in that situation is to favour freedom, though. It is false because rightness is not a property of anything. It is false in a way similar to the way in which "the number 5 is red" is false. "The number 5 is red" is false not because, actually, 5 is blue or green. It is false because whatever numbers are, they are not coloured. (While numerals are always a colour, numbers never are.)

Whatever favouring equality over freedom is, it is not right. (The difference in the cases is that while some things, though not any number (some fire trucks, perhaps), are red, nothing at all is right.)

By stating the false sentence "Whenever freedom and equality conflict, the right thing to do is to favour equality," a speaker might succeed in expressing his or her approval of actions in which equality is favoured over freedom.

Or the speaker might succeed to express her commitment to equality over freedom in cases of conflict. Or she might succeed to direct her hearers to favour equality over freedom whenever the two conflict. (She might be commanding herself.) Or she might succeed to express her wish that she or others favour freedom over equality whenever the two conflict.

"It is wrong of my professor to grade assignments on the basis of how students dress" could be, even if false, an expression of disapproval, an expression of commitment, a command or a recommendation, or an expression of a wish. That the sentence is false does not prevent saying it from succeeding at various tasks the speaker is attempting to complete.

2. *The evidence argument that values are tastes*

The theory of values and evaluation we're currently developing is that values are tastes. Just as one might have a taste for vanilla (a preference for vanilla over chocolate, say), one might have a taste for fairness (fairness over unfairness and fairness over warm feelings). Sally likes fairness and approves of fairness; Sally can like fairness and approve of fairness even though fairness is neither good nor bad, neither right nor wrong, and even though Sally doesn't think fairness is good or right.

One argument that values are tastes begins with the thought that if any particular ethical judgement were true, it would be true by virtue of describing something correctly. So, if "it is wrong to tease children for fun" were true, then its truth would consist in getting the fact that it's wrong to tease children for fun right. That is, there would be a fact of the matter regarding the rightness or otherwise of teasing children for fun (teasing children for fun would possess the property of being wrong), and the statement "it is wrong to tease children for fun" would correspond to that fact or capture it or otherwise correctly report or express that fact. Instances in which children are teased for fun would be correctly described as being wrong.

The argument continues with the thought that when a statement describes something correctly, we can conceive of observational or other evidence that tends to show that the world actually is how the statement describes it as being. If it's true that the rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain, then people who understand what that statement says would be able to imagine states of affairs that were they to obtain, would tend to confirm or disconfirm that statement. If it's true that the rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain, then were we to consult tables of rainfall in Spain, we would find that the plain is rainy for more days than other areas are; if we find that other areas are just as rainy or more rainy than the plain, we would have evidence that the statement is false.

The idea is that if a statement is true, there will be or there will have been evidence that it is. Even if we are unable to collect that evidence, we will be able to say what would count as evidence.

But, the argument continues, for no statement that something is good, bad, right or wrong can we conceive of observational or other evidence that tends to show that the world is how the statement supposedly describes it as being. Thus, no statement that something has or lacks value correctly describes anything. Therefore, no statement that something has or lacks value is true. If such statements are never true, they are all false.

"Teasing children for fun is wrong" is not true, then, for it fails to describe accurately instances of teasing children for fun. It says of these instances that they have a property they don't actually have, namely, the property of being wrong. Same goes for "teasing children for fun is sometimes okay." It is false, for it says of some instances of teasing children for fun that they have the property of being okay but none of them do. None of them have the property of being okay for

we cannot conceive of evidence that they are okay, and if we cannot conceive of evidence of a thing being some way, then it is not that way.

The key idea in the evidential argument that values are tastes is that if goodness (badness) were a property that a state of affairs could possess, then the fact that the state of affairs possesses it would affect other states of affairs, in principle eventually making a difference to what we could observe or experience in the world. Since we cannot conceive how, say, the wrongness of teasing children, thought of as a property had by events of teasing children, makes a difference to anything we observe or experience, being wrong is no property of teasing children.

Suppose, to take a different example, a person was unjustly persecuted by university administrators for having criticized a university policy. He was reprimanded for expressing his criticism and warned to keep his criticisms to himself. Was it wrong for the university administrators to persecute him unjustly? Well, look at the incident in all its detail. We can detect the injustice by noting that the critic breached no policies and that criticising the university can serve to return the university to its values and to its mission as a university. We can detect the persecution by noting the summons to a meeting, by noting the falsity of the allegations, and much else. But where in all this can we find the either the wrongness itself or any evidence of the wrongness? Nowhere, it seems, for we cannot conceive what the evidence would be. Calling unjust persecution wrong, then, doesn't get right any fact about the unjust persecution. Calling unjust persecution wrong does reveal attitudes we have toward unjust persecution (we disapprove of it, we don't like it, we would that it were not to happen, we might be prepared to act against it); but it doesn't say anything about the character of instances of unjust persecution.

Nothing is good or bad, or right or wrong. Of course, people disapprove of certain actions and dislike actions that have certain properties. We sometimes express our approvals and disapprovals, our likes and our dislikes, using the terms good or bad and right or wrong. What are expressing are our tastes, just as we do when we use those terms to express our attitudes toward meals or flavours.

3. *The psychological argument that values are tastes*

The argument in the section above concludes that nothing is actually good or bad or right or wrong. The values we hold do not answer to states of affairs. Values are simply tastes we have. The argument we will now consider comes to a different conclusion, though one consistent with that of the above argument. This argument is meant to show that the point when we talk about values isn't on the cognitive side, which is the side of beliefs, hypotheses and theories. The point, rather, is on the side of desires and emotions.

The psychological argument begins by noting that beliefs guide actions but do not themselves motivate actions. That you believe that Toronto is west of Halifax doesn't itself lead you to do anything. For that belief to figure in a reason to do something, you would need to want something—to go from Halifax to Toronto, say, or to get as far away from Toronto as you can.

Notice, though, that to judge an action right or wrong is in itself to express a motivation, or so it appears. Someone who sincerely announces that teasing children for fun is wrong is disinclined, at least to some degree, to tease children for fun. That an action would count as an instance of

teasing children for fun would be for this person a reason not to perform that action. Likewise, someone who sincerely announces that it's good to help strangers in their times of need is inclined to help strangers in their times of need (though she might fail to do so should she be more inclined to do something else, such as save her money).

But if sincerely expressed statements about what is right and wrong, what is good and bad, all by themselves betray motivations, they do not express beliefs, for beliefs are not themselves motivating. Thus, sincerely expressed statements about right and wrong or good and bad are expressions of approval or other affective attitudes—emotions or preferences.

Since, then, matters of desire or emotion are matters of taste, of matters of liking, and not matters of how things are, our values are matters of taste, not attempts to get some facts right.

The key idea in the psychological argument is that judging that some action is wrong is by itself and immediately to be inclined not to perform that action. Since, then, ethical judgements directly express motivational states, they don't express cognitive states.

One serious difficulty with this argument is that for everyone except those already sure that statements of right and wrong or good and bad are all of them false, sincerely making a statement about what's good or right certainly seems to be expressing a belief one has. People happy to say in their own voice that teasing children for fun is wrong almost always think they are conveying to others what they believe. They believe that teasing children for fun is wrong is something they believe; they believe that "teasing children for fun is wrong" is true.

They also, of course, allow that when they sincerely assert their belief that teasing children for fun is wrong, those who hear them are entitled right away to think that they are upset by instances in which children are teased for fun, that they disapprove of teasing children for fun, that they are prepared to stand against the teasing of children for fun. They both believe that teasing children for fun is wrong and they disapprove of teasing children for fun—and they can express both their belief and their conative or affective attitude simply by affirming that teasing children for fun is wrong.

The problem with the psychological argument, then, is that a person can express both a belief and a desire (or other conative or affective attitude) by saying just one thing. "Kindness is good," when spoken sincerely, reveals to the hearer both that the speaker believes that kindness is good and that the speaker is motivated to be kind or to promote kindness. The argument proposes that because statements of good or right reveal motivations, they don't express beliefs. But that conclusion assumes that stating something cannot reveal both a belief and an affective attitude. That assumption is false.

Another objection to the psychological argument is that the belief-desire model of reasons for acting is false. The idea here is that beliefs themselves can motivate. Or, perhaps, the idea is that beliefs can motivate because they can engender motivating desires or emotions. We come to believe that teasing children for fun is wrong by thinking about the matter; having formed that belief, though, a belief we take to be true (a belief we take to get right a certain fact), we then form a desire that children not be teased for fun—because, after all, it's wrong to tease children for fun.

A final objection is that to hold an ethical judgement is not by itself to be motivated to try to attain some end. To hold that teasing children for fun is wrong isn't to be motivated not to tease children for fun or to be motivated to do anything else. It's simply a belief and beliefs are not motivating. If we are inclined not to tease children for fun on the grounds that it is wrong to do so, that is because we have a desire not to act wrongly. "Teasing children for fun is wrong; thus, I will not tease any child for fun" does not really capture our practical reasoning. "Teasing children for fun is wrong; I don't want to act wrongly; thus, I will not tease any child for fun" is a better rendition of what goes through our mind. We can add to this line of thought that beliefs about value are justificatory rather than motivating. Given that we don't want to act wrongly, our belief that teasing children is wrong justifies or warrants our steadfast refusal to tolerate any teasing of children for fun.

4. *The normative-properties argument that values are tastes*

The properties of an object or event are the features or qualities or characteristics or attributes of that object or event. One property of each red thing is that it is red. A property of paperback books is that they have pages. A property of Justin Trudeau is that he is Pierre Trudeau's oldest child.

Is goodness a property? Well, if you think that something is good, universal welfare programs, for instance, then you think that goodness is a property of that thing—universal welfare programs have the property of being good.

According to the argument now under consideration, goodness, it will turn out, is not a property of things. We are making a mistake if we think it is.

The properties of things are themselves, begins this argument, motivationally neutral. The property of being red or having pages or being Pierre Trudeau's oldest child are simply characteristics of the things of which they are properties. They do not all by themselves draw us toward the thing or push us away from it. To attract or repel us, a property of a thing must connect to one of our desires or emotions. No properties are like magnets that pull us toward them or push us away from them whatever we want. No properties are like drill sergeants shouting orders at us that we fear to disobey. Rather, it's our liking or fearing red things that accounts for our behaviour toward them, not their being red.

But if goodness were a property of something among all its other properties, it would engender feelings in us independently of our psychologies. Goodness would include to-be-admiredness. Good things would tend to draw our admiration and do so directly, bypassing our actual likes and dislikes. Rightness as a property would include to-be-doneness. And yet nothing has to-be-lovedness or to-be-reviledness within it. No property carries a demand, not even a resistible one, that we perform an action of a certain sort.

The property of being good would draw us one way or the other, independently of our desires, like a strong wind or a magnet might—but it would draw us that way intentionally, acting for us as a practical reason to do something. We could not help but love the good thing, with all that entails about admiring and desiring it and wanting to protect it. And we would love it as soon as we noticed its goodness, whatever our psychological makeup is.

Therefore, there are no objective values, no states of affairs that are intrinsically good, and no actions that are intrinsically right. Nothing has the effects on us that a good thing or a right action would have to have purely by its being a good thing or a right action.

One objection to this argument is that lots of things that exist are strange from the point of view of the physicalist hypothesis that everything is but matter in motion and the affectively neutral properties sustained by matter in motion. Many strange things either exist outside of the physical world but have bearing on it or supervene on physical facts or states of affairs. Consciousness might be an example of a non-physical property found within the physical world, a property unlike physical properties in very many ways. Purpose or teleological significance might be another example. The idea behind this objection is that its being mysterious from a purely physicalistic perspective, or even being inconsistent with that perspective, does not mean of a thing that it is non-existent or unreal. If something, like intrinsic to-be-doneness, is real, then it is physicalism that's false, not the claim that certain things are good while others are neutral or bad.

Another objection would note that there are plenty of things that by their physical properties alone affect us in ways independent of our particular psychologies. For example, some people cannot tolerate the sound of fingernails scratching a chalk board. Others cannot but react with deep pleasure hearing certain melodies (Gabriel Fauré's "Sicilienne" might contain one). It might be that to-be-admiredness or to-be-doneness are similarly properties some things contain, properties to which some of us are sensitive. Plato, for instance, held that when we apprehend the form of the good (as it participates in things we experience) we cannot help but be attracted to it and to conform our behaviour to it.

5. *Summing up*

Nothing is good and nothing is bad. No actions are right and no actions are wrong. If those claims are true, all statements describing a state of affairs as good and all statements describing an action as right are false.

Though each of us values many things, nothing we value is valuable. Nothing is ethically good. We have our likes and our dislikes, but our likes and dislikes are neither correct nor incorrect representations of anything. There is nothing for our likes and dislikes to answer to. If something were good we should, it would seem, like it. To fail to like it would be to make a mistake. But if nothing is good, our likes and dislikes have no responsibility to track or to respond to worthiness in the world, for if nothing is good, worthiness does not exist.

We looked at three different arguments meant to show that nothing is good or bad and no action is right or wrong. The first argument proposed that if something were good, its goodness would have effects on other things such that we would be able to conceive of evidence that it is good. But we can think of a state of affairs first as good and then as bad without thinking of anything else anywhere changing. That thought experiment indicates that the goodness of the thing has no effect on anything else. Thus, it cannot leave evidence of its presence and, so, given that anything real leaves evidence of itself, the thing isn't in fact good (or bad).

The second argument proposed that since sincerely made statements about good or right express non-cognitive attitudes such as desires or emotions, they don't express beliefs. When we talk about good and right, we are expressing our tastes, and not our thoughts about how the world is.

The third argument proposed that the properties of being good or right would make the objects or actions that have them attractive or compelling to us and do so independently of our current likes and dislikes, whatever they are. Since no property of a thing or action can have something such as to-be-admiredness or to-be-doneness within it, nothing possesses the property of being good and no action possesses the property of being right.

If it is true that nothing is good or bad and nothing is right or wrong, then our values are not true or false or sound or unsound, except, perhaps, in relation to each other within our psychologies. If it's true that we should do something, quit smoking, for instance, that would be because our interests overall would be furthered by our doing that thing. It wouldn't be because that thing is the right thing to do. Critical discussion of what we should do could proceed only by noting what we happen as a matter of fact to value. It couldn't cite the goodness or rightness in themselves of things or actions.