

Phil 114, April 19, 2007
Stroud: Can we explain value away?

Harman takes it to be straightforward that the best explanation of why we have the moral beliefs we have will not appeal to the truth of those beliefs.

Stroud asks: Is it true that the best explanation of why we have the moral beliefs we do will not appeal to the truth of those beliefs?

Subjectivism: Goodness and badness do not belong to the world as it is in itself, independently of us.

Subjectivism does *not* deny that there are facts about *our treating* things as good and bad. Subjectivism denies that there are *values*, but not that there is *evaluation*.

Stroud argues that the he subjectivist cannot consistently deny that there are facts about our treating things as good and bad. Why?

How can the subjectivist defend his claim, Stroud asks, that there are no facts about what is good and bad? How can the subjectivist arrive at a conception of the world as it is in itself that contains no values?

- Not by listing what we believe, because some of what we believe is that things are good and bad. The relevant conception of the world cannot be: everything we think is the case.
- Not by simply leaving out the content of some of our beliefs. Not mentioning something is not the same as saying that it is not there.
- Instead, by “unmasking explanation.” By explaining why we *treat* things as good or bad without appealing to their actually being good or bad.

Why would an unmasking explanation of evaluative thought support subjectivism?

- (1) Stroud’s answer is metaphysical. “This might be called an explanatory test or criterion of reality. The world as it is in itself amounts to all, but only all, those truths that are sufficient to explain what is so.” Given this criterion, an unmasking explanation of evaluative thought would show that evaluative truths are not part of the “world as it is in itself.” This view “seems to rely on a certain faith in the simplicity of the universe. It sees the world as highly efficient and economical, as no richer than it needs to be for the purposes of science” (224).
- (2) But another answer might be epistemological. If we can explain why we believe what we believe without appealing to the truth of what we believe, then we lack reason to hold those beliefs. Unmasking explanation does not show that evaluative truths *are not* part of the world, but it does show that we *lack reason to believe* that they are (or our beliefs are not justified, or they are probably false). Does this view also rely on faith in the simplicity of the universe? Stroud seems to reject this interpretation on p. 245.

In order to give an unmasking explanation of evaluation, the subjectivist cannot deny that there is evaluation. Otherwise, he would have nothing to explain. The subjectivist must claim,

therefore, that while there are no evaluative facts, there are still evaluations, that people still value things.

Can subjectivists do this? Can subjectivists deny that there are any facts about what *is* good, while still claiming that there are facts about what *we treat* as good?

Subjectivists offer different explanations of what your “treating X as good” is. When you say “X is good” you might be:

- (i) reporting that you have a positive feeling toward X;
- (ii) stating that X is such as to produce positive feelings in people in such and such conditions;
- (iii) projecting what you feel onto X and then claiming that X has what you have projected onto it;
- (iv) expressing a positive feeling toward X;
- (v) encouraging others to have a positive feeling toward X;
- (vi) commanding others to pursue X.

Stroud rejects proposals (iv)–(vi), on the grounds of Geach’s point. When someone says, “X is good,” he must be saying something that can be true or false.

Proposals (i)–(iii) need to say what the feeling is. Hume says that it is “a feeling of approbation.” However: “a particular feeling will be a feeling of disapproval only if it is generated or suffused with the thought that the thing in question is bad. But that is precisely the evaluative thought that they theory is trying to account for” (233).

In treating things as good or bad, therefore, people *believe* that they are good or bad. How is the subjectivist supposed to understand these beliefs?

Stroud argues that to recognize that someone believes that something is bad, we ourselves need to believe that some things are, in fact, bad.

Stroud’s argument:

- (1) Evaluating something as, say, good involves believing that it is good.
- (2) You cannot attribute a belief to someone unless you understand the content of that belief, which involves understanding the concepts involved.
- (3) One understands a concept, however, only if one knows how to use it: only if one has the ability to apply it to things correctly.
- (4) One knows how to use a concept only if one has some beliefs involving that concept.
- (5) Therefore, to attribute to someone a belief that something is, say, good, one must have some beliefs that things are good.
- (6) Therefore, we cannot explain evaluations of things as, say, good without ourselves believing that some things actually are good. In other words, we cannot provide an unmasking explanation.

Objection: “We can attribute to other people beliefs about ghosts, angels, centaurs, and golden mountains. Yet we need not believe ourselves that there are any such things. Likewise, we can

attribute to other people beliefs about things being good without ourselves believing that anything is good.”

Reply:

- These are all *complex* concepts. A centaur is a creature with a man’s torso and a horse’s body. So we understand these concepts in terms of combinations of concepts that we have, concepts of men and horses.
- We cannot understand *simple* concepts in the same way. Consider the concept of color. Try, for yourself, to define what a color is, without appealing to any color terms.
- The concept of value also seems to be simple. Can you define “good” without using any other evaluative notions, in the way you can define “centaur” without using any other centaur notions?

Where does this leave us?

First, we cannot explain evaluation in general.

- What leads to subjectivism is the attempt to understand evaluation *in general*.
- In order to provide such an explanation, we cannot rely on our evaluative beliefs and concepts.
- The only kind of explanation that could explain evaluation *in general*, it seems, would be one that depicted evaluation as the product of the interaction of a value-free world and human responses.
- *However*, if Stroud is right, then we cannot make sense of this picture, in which evaluation results from the interaction of a value-free world and human responses.
- *It follows that* we cannot explain evaluation in general.
- *This is dissatisfying*, since it seems a “perfectly comprehensible intellectual goal.” It seems like the sort of thing we ought to be able to explain, if we were only clever enough.

Second, it does not follow that subjectivism is false and objectivism is true

The fact that we cannot provide an unmasking explanation entails that we *cannot show* that subjectivism is true and objectivism is false.

But subjectivism *might still be* true and objectivism might still be false.

What Stroud has shown is that *we cannot coherently accept* both:

- (1) People believe that things are good or bad.
- (2) Nothing is good or bad.

He has neither shown, nor claimed to have shown:

- (3) If people believe that things are good or bad, then some things are good or bad.

This would be to accept a kind of *idealism*: that how the world is depends on how we believe it to be. This view seems as unsatisfying as subjectivism. It once again makes value our subjective contribution.