

A DEFENSE OF SUBJECTIVE ETHICAL NATURALISM AGAINST HARE

GARY J. FOULK

The purpose of this paper is to defend a version of ethical naturalism against R.M. Hare's famous claim, in *The Language of Morals*,¹ to provide a generic criticism of that position which refutes, at once, any and all versions of it. I will use the label "subjectivism" for the view I hold, which is that in their moral sense statements such as "x is right" or "x is good" are to be understood as "I, the speaker, approve of x."

The most general statement of Hare's criticism is as follows: "For my argument is that we cannot say that 'x is a good A' means the same as 'x is an A which is C', because it then becomes impossible to commend A's which are C by saying 'A's which are C are good A's.'"(89) The application of this argument to subjectivism would be that we cannot say that "x is a good A" means the same as "x is an A which I, the speaker, approve of," because it then becomes impossible to commend A's which I, the speaker, approve of by saying "A's which I, the speaker, approve of are good A's."

In this formulation of his argument Hare does not claim that if "x is good" means "x is C" then we cannot commend x's which are C, but only that we cannot use the particular formulation "x's which are good x's" to do so. However, he sometimes seems to make the former, much stronger claim. For example, in talking about the hypothetical suggestion that "P is a good picture" means "P is admired by the members of the Royal Academy," Hare says that "if we accept the definition we debar ourselves from saying something that we do sometimes want to say . . .; for the moment let us say that what we wanted to do was to commend the pictures which the members of the Royal Academy admired. Something about our definition prevented our doing this. We could no longer commend the pictures which they admired, we could only say that they admired those pictures which they admired" (84-85).

¹ R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals*, Oxford University Press (New York, 1964). Page references in the text are to this volume.

Finally, Hare sometimes puts his criticism in a third way which is different from either of the above. He sometimes seems to say that if "x is good" means "x is C" then the fact that x is C cannot be our *reason* for commending x; we cannot commend x *because* it is C. For example he writes that "If 'P is a good picture' is held to mean the same as 'P is a picture and P is C', then it will become impossible to commend pictures for being C; it will be possible only to say that they are C" (85).

Seen in terms of subjectivism, then, Hare seems to authorize the following three hypothetical statements and to claim that the consequent of each is unacceptable, thus permitting the inference that the antecedent is unacceptable:

1. If subjectivism is true, then we cannot use the expression "What I, the speaker, approve of is good" to commend what we approve of.
2. If subjectivism is true, then we cannot commend what we approve of.
3. If subjectivism is true, then we cannot commend what we approve of *because* we approve of it.

(2) and (3) are obviously false, and it will be useful to acknowledge this and clear these away before discussing (1), which is more difficult. To begin with (2), suppose that in saying that someone M is a good man I mean that I approve of him. This clearly does not prevent me from commending M. If M does a good job at something I can say to him "I commend you on a job well done." I can commend M for developing and persevering in those characteristics which I consider to make him a good man, *i.e.*, which I approve of. If someone asks me for a recommendation I can say "I commend M to you as just the man you're looking for." All of these ways of commending M are quite consistent with my approving of M and with my meaning nothing more by the moral judgment "M is a good man" than that I approve of M.

To turn to (3), I may very well commend a policy or a principle *because* I approve of it. My *reason* for commending a person may be that I approve of him or some of his characteristics. If C is the characteristic in pictures which makes me like them, then if I am commending pictures on the basis of what I like rather than on the basis of what I think others will like, I will commend pictures *for* being C. All of these ways of commending something x *because* we approve of it or like it are quite consistent with our approving of x and with our meaning nothing more by the moral judgment "x is good" than that we approve of x.

Returning now to (1), there is one type of commendation with respect to which (1) is true, and one type with respect to which (1) is false. The first type of commendation I have in mind is that where one conveys his attitude toward something. Official commendations from generals, presidents, and college administrators often read to the effect that so-and-so wants you to know of his high regard or respect or admiration for your having accomplished such and such. I go to a restaurant with a friend who has been there before and ask him to recommend something. He replies "I like the baked halibut." A student asks a friend for a recommendation about who to take for *Introduction to Philosophy* and the friend replies "I really enjoyed Professor Jones." The point to be seen through these examples is that many commendations simply consist in a person saying that he has a certain pro-attitude toward something. Obviously, then, if subjectivism is true, one could commend something by saying it is good or by saying that he approves of it, but not by the redundant expression "What I approve of is good."

However, there is a sense of "good" in which "What I approve of is good" is *not* redundant and *does* commend. This is the sense in which the speaker, in calling something good, means that the *hearer* will have a pro-attitude toward it, and this sense serves the purpose of the second kind of commendation I have in mind, where one conveys his view about what will satisfy the desires and be the object of the pro-attitudes of the person to whom the commendation is addressed. Indeed, there are occasions on which one might want, upon reflection or in the face of a certain kind of question, to switch from offering the first kind of commendation discussed above to offering this second kind. To return to the restaurant example, suppose that when my friend says he likes the baked halibut I reply "Yes, but will *I* like it?" He may decide to stick to the first type of commendation and say something like "Well, the best I can do for you is tell you what *I* like," but on the other hand he may switch to the second type and say that I will like the baked halibut too.

Now it seems clear that the statement "The baked halibut is good," made to a dining companion in response to his request for a recommendation about what to order, can function as a commendation in either of these two senses, either to convey the attitude of the speaker or predict the attitude of the hearer. Where it functions to convey the attitude of the speaker, an expression such as "The baked halibut, which I like, is good" is not a possible alternative way to serve this function. But where it functions to predict the attitudes of the hearer, the latter expression *is* a possible alternative.

I would now submit that Hare's argument about (1) loses its appeal when this distinction is kept in mind. The sense in which (1) is true is where my first kind of commendation is involved. But the sense in which we *can* use the expression "What I approve of is good" to commend what we approve of is where my second kind of commendation is involved, and this sense is compatible with subjectivism. Thus the fact that we can commend in this latter way does not falsify the consequent of (1) in the sense in which (1) is true, and therefore the falsehood of the antecedent, subjectivism, is not proven.

With respect, then, to the application to subjectivism of what many would call Hare's central argument against ethical naturalism, I have suggested that there is to be found in it three arguments of the Modus Tollens form, having as their respective first premises (1), (2), and (3). I have claimed that (2) and (3) are false, and that although there is a sense in which (1) is true, its consequent must be taken in a *different* sense in order to be correctly denied, so that the denial does not imply the falsehood of subjectivism.

Indiana State University