

On the Forward Look of Value Judgments

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In an interesting article, “The Forward Look of Value Judgments” John Goldthwait calls attention to an interesting and important feature of value judgments, their future reference or forward look that distinguishes them from factual or fact-assertive propositions.ⁱ Goldthwait argues that while value judgments are assertive, they cannot be true or false in the sense that factual judgments are because their “forward-looking character” means that we do not have access to the empirical data necessary to affirm or deny what is claimed in the assertion. Therefore, value judgments and normative claims are not objective but matters of opinion whose utility lies in guiding us toward our future.

Goldthwait’s closely reasoned argument for the subjectivity of value judgments represents a new kind of argument for moral subjectivism that deserves to be taken seriously. Goldthwait has an important insight about the nature of value judgments as forward-looking; however, he draws a hasty conclusion in affirming that value judgments are not true or false but matters of opinion because they lack the principle of empirical verification. Goldthwait’s argument fails on two accounts. First, Goldthwait, by limiting factual judgments to reportative or descriptive claims, has misunderstood the nature of factual judgments. Indeed, his own claim about verifiability is not empirically verifiable. Second, when we consider the isomorphism of factual and value judgments we find that value judgments do in fact possess the necessary experiential objectivity to be judged as true or false in the normal sense of the term.

ⁱ John Goldthwait, “The ‘Forward Look of Value Judgments,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 30 (1996) 547-550.

Goldthwait's argument hinges on his claim that fact-assertive propositions are testable, because they assert that something is or is not so. For example, the claim "Rubies are worth more than garnets" is a fact-assertive claim that consulting the comparative market value of rubies and garnets can test. Should the comparison show that rubies have a higher market value than garnets, then the claim "Rubies are worth more than garnets" is true; if the contrary, then the claim is false. On the other hand, the value-assertive propositions like "Theft is morally wrong" or "Going to college after high school is better," as a decision, state of affairs, condition, or a proposed course of action, "than going to work" cannot be empirically verified. Since they cannot be empirically verified, they are not true or false.

Goldthwait is wrong to characterize fact-assertive propositions as only those that can be empirically, and by implication immediately, verified. Take the following set of claims.

1. Tomorrow will come.
2. Tomorrow, I will read the paper at breakfast.
3. If silver nitrate is dropped into this chloride solution a white precipitate will form.
4. I will be hurt if I jump out of my third floor classroom.
5. Garnets will be worth more than rubies next year.

These are not fact-assertive claims in the sense that they describe present states. They are predictive in the sense that they are references to future states. To be sure, they can be verified by waiting to see if tomorrow comes and I read the newspaper at

breakfast, or by dropping silver nitrate into the solution, jumping out of my third floor classroom, or consulting the comparative market value of garnets and rubies next year. While these claims are not fact-assertive as describing a present state of affairs, they are, in fact, reasonably certain predictions based on a body of accumulated facts. One day has succeeded another for millennia. All things being equal I do read the newspaper at breakfast and have done so for thirty years. The silver nitrate test is regularly done in hundreds of chemistry labs every day. I have enough experience of falling bodies to be reasonably sure that jumping out of third floor windows causes sufficient pain and discomfort to qualify as being hurt that I do not actually have to jump out to verify it. And given past market performances, it is unlikely that garnets will be worth more than rubies next year.

By saying these claims are not fact-assertive, yet verifiable, I mean that based on knowledge of world process, these claims have a high probability of being true. They are not true in the sense of factually true as a description of a present state of affairs that can be verified by sensory activity, Goldthwait's criterion of judgments of fact.ⁱⁱ In spite of the lack of empirically verifiable facticity, few people would be comfortable affirming that they are only matters of opinion - worthy belief, perhaps, but still opinions and are so not true or false. If this were true, then I would also be required to affirm that the contrary claims, "The world will end tomorrow," "I will not read the newspaper at breakfast,"

ⁱⁱ Goldthwait's position is a form of naive empiricism that affirms that knowing is like taking a look. ". . . empirical fact-assertive propositions refer to sensually experienceable objects. We can examine the objects about which our statements are made, and discern whether the statements are true to these objects. If so we assign them the sign "True" and if not, "False." (548). But knowing is not taking a look. A fully constituted act of knowing consists of three operations: experience (data, facts, information), understanding (a grasp of the intelligible relationships in the data), and judging (affirming or denying whether or these relations and terms are so).

“Silver nitrate will not form a white precipitate in the presence of chloride,” “I will not be injured jumping out of a third floor window,” or “Rubies will be worth more than garnets” are also only matters of opinion, perhaps unworthy belief, but not true or false. However, claims 1 and 3 are obviously true. Claim 4 is so likely true that I always search out an elevator or stairs rather than windows to leave three story buildings. Claim 2 is so likely probable that it is a good predictor of what I will in fact be doing at breakfast tomorrow. And claim 5 is sufficiently false that it is a reliable reason for not investing in the rising futures of garnets relative to rubies.

I belabor this simple example not to imply that Goldthwait would argue that such claims are not subject to judgments of true or false. Rather, I use it to call attention to an important dimension of what we are doing when we make factual judgments. What Goldthwait calls fact-assertive propositions are claims that are in effect judgments based not on certain - or existing states of affairs verifiable by sensory activity - but statements of probabilities that are conditionally true until all the conditions are fulfilled. Once the conditions are fulfilled, we may say that the claim is a virtually unconditioned.ⁱⁱⁱ To affirm that I will be injured if I jump out of my third story classroom is true does not require that jumping and being injured are an actual state of affairs, a description of the way the world is. It is a claim that affirms that all things being equal, it is highly likely that if I jump from my third story classroom, I will be injured. These claims in the practical world are “guides toward the future” to adapt Goldthwait’s phrase. However,

ⁱⁱⁱ Such claims, including those Goldthwait calls fact-assertive, are revisable in light of new data, new sets of conditions, or changed horizons of meaning. To say that judgments are virtually unconditioned claims does not mean that they are not subject to verification, they are. However, we also need to recognize that as virtually unconditioned they are revisable.

this characteristic is not sufficient grounds to conclude that they are not true or false.

Goldthwait is correct that value judgments, value-assertive propositions, are forward-looking in a sense similar to predictive claims. The characteristic of their future reference does not mean, however, that the propositional force is only a matter of opinion. Few people would be willing to argue that my claim “I will be injured if I jump from my third story classroom” is only a matter of opinion. Rather, they would regard it is a likely probability; so much so that it is not a proposition that we test by regularly jumping out of third floor windows to reach the ground. Thus, given a fairly standard aversion to pain and discomfort, a person is on safe ground affirming in a practical argument that “A person ought not to jump out of third story windows when leaving class.” The objective content of this claim is more than opinion.

Now let us raise the stakes on this argument and move from practical knowledge, which is obviously true or false to the more complex field of moral knowledge, or moral claims. I argue these claims, like predictive-assertive claims, also consist of more than opinion.^{iv} They constitute a body of reasonably reliable knowledge.^v However, this will require more explanation than an analogy.

^{iv} Moral claims are a sub-class of value claims; and therefore, a field on which to work out my argument. I recognize that Goldthwait’s argument is more inclusive than moral claims. However, I think, if we can show that Goldthwait’s thesis is false in one class, then the thesis as a whole falls. Moreover, I also believe, though I am not prepared to argue so here, that this analysis will apply to other value spheres such as aesthetics, social theory and the like.

^v For the purposes of this argument, let us stipulate that knowledge is a body of verified claims, judgments, of some $F_{[x]}$. This avoids Goldthwait’s somewhat deceptive notion that knowledge is of objects, empirically verified. Working out the complete cognitional theory and epistemology to support this definition is not necessary for this paper.

In its basic thrust, moral knowledge concerns human action toward the future.^{vi} Factual knowledge is principally a grasp and an affirmation of the meaning of what has occurred in the past or what is occurring in the present.^{vii} Moral knowledge, by contrast, ultimately intends an answer to questions regarding the future, “What am I or we to do?”^{viii} Furthermore, moral knowledge concerns human action in a particular kind of way. It involves envisioning a future and acting to bring that future into being, either through someone’s own efforts or, more commonly, through a person’s participation in the collaborative activities of groups.

Moral knowledge as such, however, involves a very specific kind of concern with human futures. Moral knowledge expresses a direction of change traced by the movement from a present to an envisioned future state. While factual knowledge can involve knowledge of the future, for example when an understanding of chemical or physical regularities allows a person to predict the results of an experiment, moral inquiry intends something quite different about the future than the meaning expressed by such laws.

^{vi} There will be those who will object that there is an implicit teleological bias in this formulation of the meaning of moral knowledge. However, the claim is not teleological but factual. It concerns what we are doing when we make moral judgments. For example, deontological positions would argue that moral claims are about existing rights/duties/rights claims. This, to be sure, is true; however, in so far as such claims are a warrant on action they are in fact future oriented since presumably the action warranted by the claim is not yet but to be completed. Even where moral inquiry is directed to past, or completed, actions, the action is regarded, for the purpose of inquiry, as revisable, and so at least imaginatively, still an open, or incomplete, action.

^{vii} This is the type of knowledge we have in fields such as chemistry, physics, laws, or public administration. It is, we might say, a knowledge of facts. The meaning is bound to the conviction that the intended action will leave us better or worse off. Hence Aristotle’s claim that all actions aim at some good. (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.1)

^{viii} Obviously, practical and moral intelligence are closely related. Practical intelligence is concerned with action itself in relation to the concrete problems of human living. Moral intelligence concerns the worth or value of alternative actions.

Moral prescriptions or value claims express a specific type of vector or direction of change that is intended by the evaluative terms better, worse, right, wrong, good, evil, progress, and decline. Certainly, people will disagree about which human actions and which futures will constitute movement toward the good or progress. However, there will be little disagreement about whether the intent of the action is to leave us better or worse off. It is this direction of movement from a present toward a better or worse future that is the concern of value-driven moral inquiry.^{ix}

Furthermore, while actual knowing can grasp the intelligibility of present and projected future states of world process and can discern the elements of the foreseen change, it is the orientation or direction of the change that is grasped in moral knowing and intended in the prescriptive terms, good and bad, right and wrong. Moral knowledge, as distinctively moral, does not pertain to the intelligibility of static states of world process. Neither does it pertain to individual elements of experience, for example situations, actions, motives, goals, consequences, taken in their individuality or in isolation from each other. Rather moral knowledge concerns a type of dynamic relationship expressed by a pattern of movement from a real historical situation, through a prescribed action, toward a future with its more or less remotely intended goals and foreseen consequences. Thus, moral knowledge is irreducibly a knowledge of dynamic relationships within a framework of world process dynamically conceived.

^{ix} This is not a meta-ethical claim but a statement of fact that is empirically verifiable. It in no way predetermines what content of the judgment of better or worse will be only that human beings regularly and recurrently do evaluate actions, states, conditions, possibilities and the like according to some scale of value in which evaluative terms like better or worse, right or wrong, good or evil are grasped as meaningful. What such terms mean, of course, is a meta-ethical question. That question does not, however, need to be resolved here in order to pursue this inquiry. The problem I am dealing with is whether an action, norm or policy leads to a better or worse future.

Initially, the elemental notions of progress and decline are only patterns of expectations or structured modes of human engagement with reality. They are types of intentional operations which, on their own, specify no concrete content as to what kinds of human actions will constitute instances of progress. Like all human knowing, moral knowing derives the concrete content of its prescriptive knowledge from experience. But the future-oriented pattern of moral knowing seeks out a specific kind of experience to fill the content of its notions of progress and decline. The concrete content of moral knowing is derived from empirical attention to the direction of change expressed in the movement from past actions toward their respective futures.

We all have had personal feelings, desires, and questions that craved satisfaction. Past experience of these desires in their normative, dynamic relationship to the future objects that satisfied them marks the beginning of moral knowing. In addition, our social experiences of interpersonal harmony and discord furnish a substantial body of experiential data that bears on the concrete content of our open heuristic notions of progress and decline. The future oriented concern of moral inquiry has no difficulty in turning its attention to past and present experiences of interpersonal relationships with a view toward discerning whether our action succeeded in promoting their future goals or, whether such future goals live up to our expectations. It is this knowledge of past actions, in their normative dynamic relationship to their respective historical contexts, their intended futures, and their more or less remote actual outcomes, that moral knowledge draws on in service of its future oriented task of directing human action.^x

^x But there is a very specific way in which evidence drawn from past experience bears upon the content of moral knowledge. As long as no conflicts arise between the expectation of progress and its achievement, moral knowledge remain unproblematic. In such cases, progress is simply whatever has satisfied our

The criteria for selecting and rejecting the experiential evidence that will bear on the content of our moral knowing is grounded in the basic structure of social living. While progress and decline are initially experiences of past actions that have more or less adequately satisfied the demands of individual needs, desires, and feelings, it is social living that thrusts on us a common set of demands that our notions of progress and decline must satisfy. Such social living is comprised of the cooperative efforts of individuals working in groups to deliver to their members wide ranges of goods that individuals working alone could never have aspired toward on their own. Consequently, the diverse needs, desires, and aspirations that individuals actually seek to satisfy are, in fact, socially conditioned goals that can only be attained through complex systems of social cooperation.^{xi} The dynamic logic of this relationship between ranges of individual

desires and needs in similar situations in the past. However, when conflicts arise over what actions will satisfy personal desires, and needs or, more significantly, over which desires and needs we will choose to satisfy, then moral intelligence is faced with the task of selection and judgment. Which of our past experiences are to fill our open heuristic notions of progress and decline with the concrete content? It is in social living that such conflicts arise most dramatically. It is in social living that we encounter differences. Furthermore since human beings have a virtually unlimited ranges of new desires and extraordinary flexibility in our ability to devise vast ranges of new desires, needs, and aspirations, the problem of moral selection and judgment among conflicting desires in social living is further complicated.

^{xi} Desires for the basic goods of food, shelter, and intimacy are recurrent, and so is the cooperative labor that seeks to fulfill them. The practical intelligence that generates labor (action) is itself recurrent. Desires for particular goods need to be met not just once or twice but recurrently. As the individual develops skills, so practical intelligence informing communal labor engenders cooperative roles and tasks so institutionalizing the recurrent production of particular goods into forms of order. The economy represents one type of order and businesses are forms of order within the larger scheme. Rather than individuals fulfilling their desires for nourishment and shelter on their own, there emerge the vast network of cooperation and specialized tasks, institutionalized as farming, fishing, food processing, transportation, wholesaling, retailing, markets, builders, architects, factories, etc. The maintenance of relations is not as some would argue merely the result of aggregate personal decisions, because the relations are in fact systematic. Rather beneath them lie a host of hidden intelligible relations that are systematized as recurrent schemes. However, the operation of the schemes

desires and the cooperative social structures required to meet them establishes an order of priority that moral intelligence grasps and uses in service of its future concerns. The result is that while individual needs, desires, or fears, Goldthwait's "opinions," are the beginning of moral knowledge, they do not constitute its proper object. Rather the content of moral knowledge pertains to the development, maintenance, and on going transformation of the cooperative systems of social relations that condition the emergence and satisfaction of wide ranges of individual desires and needs of many people over relatively long and stable periods of time.^{xii}

The distinctively moral knowledge that is the object of this analysis consists in the grasp of the dynamic movement toward progress that is expressed in the relationship between social structures and the flow of concrete goods whose delivery they condition.

cannot be reduced, as with Marx, Habermas, Foucault and others, to the underlying material conditions, that is, the technical or economic relations, because these positions fail to understand that practical intelligence informs these patterns of cooperation.

^{xii} Our efforts in social living are directed toward coordinating the activities of groups of individuals in service of collectively satisfying recurrent needs and desires or particular goods. These efforts inevitably end up creating hosts of new interests and needs that are themselves conditioned on ever more complex systems of social cooperation. This ordering, insofar as it conditions the satisfactions of hosts of particular goods, is itself a good. Such coordinated social projects include families, industries, businesses, economies, religions, voluntary associations, clubs, little leagues, gangs, newspapers, books, schools, professions, cities, nations, cultures, and civilizations. The goals of such cooperative projects are achieved through the division of labor and the differentiation of reciprocal roles and expectations corresponding to the various contributions required by the common project. In its effort to select among alternative notions of progress, moral reflection grasps this dynamic relationship between these diverse goals and the structure of the cooperative social systems that condition their attainment. It is from the analysis of the social structures that condition the recurrent delivery of hosts of concrete goods of a particular sphere of living that we derive the moral norms that are relevant to that sphere. What I call fundamental principles or values are the criteria of judgments of both particular goods and form of order as a good. Thus, I argue the notion of the good is tridimensional consisting of particular goods, forms of order as roles, rules, institutions, etc. and value. An particular instance of the good consists of all three dimensions.

The effort to understand the structures that condition the personal routines of individuals yield concrete norms and codes of action that are applicable to various types of cooperative projects and various types of conflicts that arise in the course of such projects. These norms are field-specific because the particulars have a limited relevance that is defined by the specific structures of social meaning implicated in problems that they seek to address. However, moral analysis does not stop with field-specific norms, because individual social structures do not function in isolation from each other. Human living is a web of interconnected, mutually interdependent social schemes. As well, social systems are not static. The regular pursuit of solutions to human problems and the innovative efforts of individuals to better their condition introduces changes into the social structures that have a transforming effect on related schemes.^{xiii}

Thus, moral analysis in specific fields reveals mutually conditioning relationships between and among fields of social structures. Through successive layers of analyses, moral inquiry reaches a more general layer of fundamental principles or values that are applicable to the whole range of technical, social, political, economic, cultural, and religious structures that are operative in human civilization. Such principles will be general or fundamental because they concern the social systems that condition all other systems of goods. For example, the maintenance of the economic systems that condition the production and delivery of goods and services to a society is a moral good that undergirds the prohibition of theft. Yet such economic systems are themselves

^{xiii} Paul Ricoeur, "Ethics and Politics," in *From Text to Action*, trans., Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson, (Evanston: Northwest University Press, 1991), 325-337. Ricoeur engages in the multi-layers analysis of norms which I describe in this essay. See "Prospective et utopie: Pr evision  conomique et choix  thique," in *Esprit*, vol 34 no. 2 1966, 178-193 or "The Tasks of the Political Educator," *Philosophy Today*, vol 17 no 2, 1973, 142-152.

conditioned by the wide-scale development and maintenance of much more complex and subtle habits and schemes of interpersonal meaning involving mutual trust, personal initiative, public notions of justice and rights, fairness and equity, wide-scale cooperative will, and a confidence in the project of culture.^{xiv} Consequently, the stability of actual economic systems is a conditioned good. Existing systems cannot be maintained if they erode the sense of justice, mutual trust, and hope that undergird all of the interconnected structures of social living that constitute civilization.^{xv}

If this brief analysis of how we get at the moral meaning of concrete schemes is correct and that moral meanings do yield the broader principles of fundamental values, then the moral norms about definable ranges of social schemes are objectively true or false, not mere opinion, preference, or taste. This analysis does have an empirical content, a body of data, put into the service of judgment and verification. Thus, Goldthwait's thesis falls. He is correct to affirm that value claims are forward-looking; however, he is not correct that they lack the necessary empirical, or perhaps better experiential, content required for judging what they assert.

^{xiv} Trudy Govier, *Trust* (Mcgill University Press, 1997). Paul Ricoeur analyzes this as a type of promising keeping that underlies a fundamental sense of responsibility for institutions. See Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction*, trans., Kathleen Blamey, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998 (1995)), 119.

^{xv} Social decline, by contrast, has a basis in bias in which human beings live out a contradiction between the concrete goods that they pursue and the implicitly operative norms that sustain the broader social systems on whose resources they draw for their living. Decline in this sense becomes truly problematic when recurrent instances of bias are fostered by social systems that promote the welfare of certain individuals or groups at the expense of other individuals or groups or which promote short-term goods at the expense of the long-term good. In such cases, the bias to the short-term is reinforced by the dynamics of mutual confirmation among the members of the relevant groups.

Notes