

## Rationality of Value Judgements

'Rationality of Value Judgements', *Nomos 7* [Carl J. Friedrich (ed.), *Rational Decision* (New York, 1964; Atherton Press; London, 1964: Prentice-Hall International)], 221–3.

Professor Oppenheim draws the distinction usually attributed to Hume between descriptive and value judgements and points to the existence of a chasm across which no logical bridge can be thrown. He maintains, if I understand him rightly, that the predicate 'rational' may legitimately be used only to describe judgements or beliefs about matters of fact or logical relations – for example, about facts or events, including such issues as whether a given means is adequate for the fulfilment of a given end or whether a particular policy is compatible with some other policy pursued by the same agent, and the like. But the term 'rational' cannot, I gather, be applied to ends themselves; those are neither rational nor irrational, since values are not the kind of entity to which the conception of rationality is applicable.

I have much sympathy with this view, which I myself once used to hold. But it seems to me that negative instances can be produced which falsify the proposition that this gap between means and ends is logically unbridgeable. Let me suggest one.

Suppose I meet a man who is in the habit of pushing pins into other people. I ask him why he does this, he says that it gives him pleasure. I ask him whether it is the fact that he causes pain that gives him pleasure. He replies that he does not mind whether he causes pain or not, since what gives him pleasure is the physical sensation of driving a pin into human bodies. I ask him whether he is aware that his actions cause pain. He says that he is. I ask him whether he would not feel pain if others did this to him. He agrees that he would. I ask him whether he would allow this to happen; he says that he would seek to prevent it by every means that he could command. I ask him whether he does not think that others must feel pain when he drives pins into them, and whether he should do to others what he would try to prevent them from doing

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to him. He says that he does not understand: pins driven into him cause him pain and he wishes to prevent this; pins driven by him into others do not cause him pain, but on the contrary, positive pleasure, and he therefore wishes to continue to do it. I ask him whether the fact that he causes pain to other people does not seem to him to be relevant to the question of whether it is desirable to drive pins into people or not. He says he cannot see what I am driving at: what possible difference can pain caused to others, or the absence of it, make to the desirability of obtaining pleasure in the way that he seeks to obtain it? I ask him what it is that gives him pleasure in this particular activity. He replies that he likes driving pins into resilient bodies. I ask whether he would derive equal pleasure from driving pins into, say, tennis balls. He says that he would, that what he drives his pins into, human beings or tennis balls, makes little difference to him – the pleasure is similar, and he is quite prepared to have tennis balls substituted, if that is what I want; he cannot understand my strange concern – what possible difference can it make whether his pins perforate living men or tennis balls?

At this point, I begin to suspect that he is in some way deranged. I do not say (with Hume), 'Here is a man with a very different scale or moral values from my own. Values are not susceptible to argument. I can disagree but not reason with him', as I should be inclined to say of a man who believes in hara-kiri or genocide. I rather incline to the belief that the pin-pusher who is puzzled by my questions is to be classified with homicidal lunatics and should be confined in an asylum and not in an ordinary prison. I do this because a man who cannot see that the suffering of pain is an issue of major importance in human life – that it matters at all – who cannot see why anyone should wish to know – still less mind – whether pain is caused or not, provided he does not suffer it himself, is virtually beyond the reach of communication from the world occupied by me and my fellow men. His whole pattern of experience is remote from mine; communication is as unattainable as it is with a man who thinks that he is Julius Caesar or that he is dead or that he is a doorknob, like the characters in the stories of E. T. A. Hoffman. This seems to me to show that recognition of some values – however general and however few – enters into the normal definition of what constitutes a sane human being. We may find that these ends do

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not remain constant if we look far enough in time and space; yet this does not alter the fact that beings totally lacking such ends can scarcely be described as human; still less as rational. In this sense, then, pursuit of, or failure to pursue, certain ends can be regarded as evidence of – and in extreme cases part of the definition of – irrationality.

Although in general I agree with Professor Oppenheim, if my example is valid, it is incompatible with the general proposition which I take to be the basis of his view of the relation of facts to ends, descriptive judgements to those of values; it would demand a radical modification of this view. I do not, of course, wish to claim any originality for my position (which owes as much to Aristotle as to Kant), only validity.

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