

## CHAPTER

## 1

## The Meaning of Ethics

*"For you see, Callicles, our discussion is concerned with a matter in which even a man of slight intelligence must take the profoundest interest--namely, what course of life is best."*

Socrates, in Plato's Gorgias

## ethic

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- eth·ic** (eth 'ik) n. [ME. Ethik < OFr. Ethique < L. ethica < Gr. Ethike (teechne), ethical (art): see ff.] 1. ethics or a system of ethics [the humanist ethic] 2. any single element in a system of ethics –adj. Same as ETHICAL
- eth·i·cal** (-i k'1) adj. [ME. Ethik (< L. ethicus < Gr. Ethikos < ethos, character, custom < IE. Base \*swedh-, essential quality, own character, whence Goth. Swes, L. suus, one's own & L. suescere, to become accustomed) + -AL] 1. having to do with ethics or morality; of or conforming to moral standards 2. conforming to the standards of conduct of a given profession or group 3. designating or of a drug obtainable only on a doctor's prescription –SYN. See MORAL –eth'lo·cal'i·ty (-kal'ð te), eth'lo·cal·ness n. –eth'i·cal·ly adv.
- Ethical Culture** a movement, founded by Felix Adler in New York in 1876, whose members accept as supreme the ethical aim in all relations of life apart from any theological or metaphysical considerations
- eth·i·cist** (eth'e siz'), vt. –cized', -ciz'ing to make, or regard as, ethical
- eth·ics** (eth'iks) n.pl. [with sing. V. in 1 & 2, and occas. 3] 1. the study of standards of conduct and moral judgment; moral philosophy 2. a treatise on this study 3. the system or code of morals of a particular person, religion, group, profession. Etc.

**M**AN IS the animal who can reflect. Like other animals, no doubt, he spends much of his time in merely reacting to the pressures and urgencies of his environment. But being a man he has moments also of conscious stock-taking. When he becomes aware not only of his world but of himself confronting his world, evaluating it, and making choices with regard to it. It is this ability to know himself and on the basis of self-knowledge to make evaluations and reflective choices that differentiates man from his subhuman cousins.

There are, as Aristotle has pointed out, two main ways in which man's power of reflection becomes active. They are called, in Aristotle's language, theoretikos and praktikos respectively; which is to say, thinking about what is actually the case and thinking about what had better be done. In English translation the words contemplative and operative probably comes closest to Aristotle's intent. To think contemplatively is to ask oneself what is; to think operatively is to ask oneself what to do. These are the two modes of serious, one might even say of genuine thought—as distinguished from daydreams, emotional vaporizings, laryngeal chatter, and the repetition of clichés. To think seriously is to think either for the sake of knowing things as they are or for the sake of acting upon, and producing or helping to produce, things as they might be.

Although in practice the two types of thinking are much inter-related, it is operative thinking with which our present study is primarily concerned. Ethics, although it must be guided, limited, and qualified constantly by considerations of what is actually the case, is focused upon questions of what should be done. The converse, however, does not follow. Not all questions about what should be done are ethical questions. Much of our operative thinking is given to more immediate needs – to means whereby some given end can be achieved. A person who deliberates as to the most effective way of making money, or of passing a course, or of winning a battle, or of achieving popularity, is thinking operatively, but if that is as far as his planning goes it cannot be called ethical. Such deliberations about adapting means to an end would acquire an ethical character only if some thought were given to the nature and value of the end itself. Ethics cannot dispense with questions of means, but neither can it stop there.

Accordingly, ethics may be defined as that branch of philosophy, which is the systematic study of reflective choice, of the standards of right and wrong by which it is to be guided, and of the goods toward which it may ultimately be directed. The relation between the parts of this definition, particularly between standards of right and wrong on the one hand and ultimately desirable goods on the other, will be an important part of the forthcoming study.

### *1. The Nature of Moral Deliberation*

The soundest approach to ethical method is through reflection on our experience of moral situations which from time to time we have had occasion to face, or through and imagined confrontation of situations which others have faced and which we can thus make sympathetically real to ourselves. For instance:

Arthur Ames is a rising young district attorney engaged on his most important cases. A prominent political boss has been murdered. Suspicion points at a certain ex-convict, known to have borne the politician a grudge. Aided by the newspapers, which have reported the murder in such a way as to persuade the public of the suspect's guilt, Ames feels certain that he can secure a conviction on the circumstantial

evidence in his possession. If he succeeds in sending the man to the chair he will become a strong candidate for governor at the next election.

During the course of the trial, however, he accidentally stumbles on some fresh evidence, known only to himself and capable of being destroyed if he chooses, which appears to establish the ex-convict's innocence. If this new evidence were to be introduced at the trial an acquittal would be practically certain. What ought the District Attorney to do? Surrender the evidence to the defense, in order that, as a matter of fair play, the accused might be given every legitimate chance of establishing his innocence? But to do that will mean the loss of a case that has received enormous publicity; the District Attorney will lose the backing of the press; he will appear to have failed, and his political career may be blocked. In that event, not only will he himself suffer disappointment, but his ample plans for bestowing comforts on his family and for giving his children the benefits of a superior education may have been curtailed. On the other hand, ought he to be instrumental in sending a man to the chair for a crime that in all probability he did not commit? And yet the ex-convict is a bad lot; even if innocent in the present case he has doubtless committed many other crimes in which he has escaped detection. Is a fellow like that worth the sacrifice of one's career? Still, there is no proof that he has ever committed a crime punishable by death. Until a man has been proved guilty he must be regarded by a sound principle of American legal theory, as innocent. To conceal and destroy the new evidence, then, is not that tantamount to railroading and innocent man to the chair?

So District Attorney Ames reasons back and forth. He knows that it is a widespread custom for a district attorney to conceal evidence prejudicial to his side of a case. But is the custom, particularly when a human life is at stake, morally right? A district attorney is an agent of the government, and his chief aim in that capacity should be to present his accusations in such a way as to ensure for the accused not condemnation but justice. The question, then, cannot be answered by appealing simply to law or to legal practice. It is a moral one: What is Arthur Ames duty? What ought he to do?

Benjamin Bates has a friend who lies in a hospital, slowly dying of a painful and incurable disease. Although there is no hope of recovery,

the disease sometimes permits its victim to linger on for many months, in ever-greater torment and with threatened loss of sanity. The dying man, apprised of the outcome and knowing that the hospital expenses are a sever drain on his family's limited financial resources, decides that death had better come at once. His physician, he knows, will not run the risk of providing him with the necessary drug. There is only his friend Bates to appeal to.

How shall Bates decide? Dare he be instrumental in hastening another's death? Has he a moral right to be accessory the taking of a human life? Besides, suspicion would point his way, and his honorable motives would not avert a charge of murder. On the other hand, can he morally refuse to alleviate a friend's suffering and the financial distress of a family when the means of doing so are in his hands? And has he not an obligation to respect a friend's declared will in the matter? To acquiesce and to refuse seem both somehow in different ways wrong, yet one course or the other must be chosen. What ought Bates to do? Which way does his duty lie?

In the city occupied by Crampton College a strike is declared by the employees of all the public-transit lines. Their wages have not been increased to meet the rising cost of living, and the justice of their grievance is rather widely admitted by neutral observers. The strike ties up business and causes much general inconvenience; except for the people who have cars of their own or can afford taxi fare, there is no way of getting from one part of the city to another. Labor being at this period scarce, an appeal is made by the mayor to college students to serve the community by acting in the spare time as motormen and drivers. The appeal is backed by a promise of lucrative wages and by the college administration's agreement to cooperate by permitting necessary absences from classes.

What ought the students of Crampton College to do? If they act as strike-breakers they aid in forcing the employees back to work on the corporation's own terms. Have they any right to interfere so drastically and one-sidedly in the lives and happiness of others? On the other hand, if they turn down the mayor's request the community will continue to suffer grave inconveniences until the fight is somehow settled. What is the students' duty in the matter? What is the right course for them to follow?

These three situations, although perhaps unusual in the severity of their challenge, offer examples of problems distinctively moral. When the act of moral deliberation implicit in each of them is fully carried out, certain characteristic phases can be discerned.

(i) Examination and clarification of the alternatives. What are the relevant possibilities of action in the situation confronting me? Am I clear about the nature of each? Have I clearly distinguished them from one another? And are they mutually exhaustive, or would a more attentive search reveal others? In the case of District Attorney Ames, for example, a third alternative might have been to make a private deal with the ex-convict by which, in exchange for his acquittal, the District Attorney would receive the profits from some lucrative racket of which the ex-convict had control. No doubt to a reputable public servant this line of conduct would be too repugnant for consideration, it exemplifies, nevertheless, the ever-present logical possibility of going "between the horns" of the original dilemma.

(ii) Rational elaboration of consequences. The next step is to think out the probable consequences of each of the alternatives in the question. As this step involves predictions about a hypothetical future, the conclusions can have, at most, a high degree of probability, never certainty. The degree of probability is heightened according as there is found some precedent in past experience for each of the proposed choices. Even if the present situation seems wholly new, analysis, will always reveal some particulars for which analogies in past experience can be found or to which known laws of causal sequence are applicable. Such particulars will be dealt with partly by analogy (an act similar to the one now being deliberated about had on a previous occasion such and such consequences) and partly by the inductive-deductive method: appealing to general laws (deduction) which in turn have been built up as generalizations from observed particulars (induction). Mr. Ames, we may suppose, found the materials for this step in his professional knowledge of law and legal precedent, as well as in his more general knowledge of the policies of the press, the gullibility of its readers, and the high cost of domestic luxuries.

(iii) Imaginative projection of the self into the predicted situation. It is not enough to reason out the probable consequences of a choice. In a moral deliberation the chief interests involved are not scientific but

human and practical. The only way to judge the comparative desirability of two possible futures is to live through them both in imagination. The third step, then, is to project oneself imaginatively into the future; i.e., establish a dramatic identification of the present self with that future self to which the now merely imagined experiences may become real. Few persons, unfortunately, are capable of an imaginative identification forceful enough to give the claims of the future self and even break. Present goods loom larger than future goods, and goods in the immediate future than goods that are remote. The trained critical thinker must have a sound temporal perspective, the acquisition of which is to be sought by a frequent, orderly, and detailed exercise of the imagination with respect to not yet actual situations.

(iv) Imaginative identification of the self with the points of view of those persons whom proposed act will most seriously affect whatever decision I make here and now, if any importance, is likely to have consequences, in varying degrees, for persons other than myself. An important part of a moral inquiry is to envisage the results of a proposed act as they will appear to those other persons affected by them. I must undertake, then, a dramatic identification of my own self with the selves of other persons. The possibility of doing this is evident from a consideration of how anyone's dramatic imagination works in the reading of a novel or the witnessing of a play. If the persons in the novel or play are dramatically convincing it is not because their characters and actions have been established by logical proof, but because they are presented so as to provoke in the reader an impulse to project himself into the world of the novel or play, to identify with this and that character in it, to share their feelings and moods, to get their slant on things.

In most persons, even very benevolent ones, the social consciousness works by fits and starts. To examine fairly the needs and claims of other selves is no less hard and is often harder than to perform a similar task with regard to one's own future self. Accordingly the ethical thinker must develop social perspective—that balanced appreciation of others' needs and claims that is the basis of justice.

In this fourth, as in the third step, the imaginative projection is to be carried out for each of the alternatives, according as their consequences shall have been predicted by Step ii.

(v) Estimation and comparison of the values involved. Implicit in the third and fourth steps is a recognition that certain values both positive

and negative are latent in each of the hypothetical situations to which moral choice may lead. The values must be made explicit in order that they may be justly compared, for it is as a result of their comparison that a choice is to be made. To make values explicit is to give them a relatively abstract formulation; they still, however, derive concrete significance from their imagined exemplifications. District Attorney Ames for example, might have envisaged his dilemma as a choice between family happiness and worldly success on the one hand as against professional honor on the other. Each of these is undoubtedly good, that is to say a value, but the values cannot be reduced to a common denominator. Family happiness enters as a factor into Benjamin Bates' dilemma no less than into that of Arthur Ames, but it stands to be affected in a different way and therefore, in spite of the identical words by which our linguistic poverty forces us to describe it, it does not mean the same thing. Family happiness may mean any number of things; so may success, and honor—although these different meanings have, of course, an intelligible bond of unity. Arthur Ames' take is to compare not just any family happiness with any professional honor but the particular exemplifications of each that enter into his problem. The comparison is not a simple calculation but an imaginative deliberation, in which the abstract values that serve as the logical ground of the comparison are continuous with, and interactive with the concrete particulars that serve as its starting point.

(vi) Decision. Comparison of the alternative future situations and the values embodied in each must terminate in a decision. Which of the possible situations do I deem it better to bring into existence? There are no rules for the making of this decision. I must simply decide as wisely and as fairly and as relevantly to the total comparison as I can. Every moral decision is a risk, for the way in which a person decides is a factor in determining the kind of self he is going to become.

(vii) Action. The probable means of carrying out the decision have been established by Step ii. The wished-for object or situations is an end, certain specific means toward the fulfillment of which lie here and now within my power. These conditions supply the premises for an ethical syllogism. When a certain end, x, is recognized as the best of the available alternatives, and when the achievement of it is seen to be possible through a set of means a, b, c ... which lie within my power, then whichever of the means a, b, c ... is an action that can here and now be performed becomes at just this point my duty. IF the deliberative process

has been carried out forcefully and wisely it will have supplied a categorical answer to the question. What ought I to do? —even though the answer in some cases may be, Do nothing.

Naturally, not all experiences of moral deliberation and choice reveal these seven phases in a distinct, clear-cut way. Nor is the order here given always the actual order. Sometimes we may begin by deliberating about the relative merits of two ends, seeking the means simultaneously with this abstract inquiry, or after its completion. The foregoing analysis does, however, throw some light on the nature of a moral problem, and may be tested by applying it to the three cases described at the beginning of the chapter.

## 2. *Logical Analysis of a Moral Situation*

The usual sign of a moral question is the auxiliary verb, ought. Not every "ought," however, is a moral ought. There must be distinguished: (1) the logical "ought," as in "The balance ought to be \$34 but I make it 29," ("From the appearance of the sky I should say we ought to have snow tonight," "The story ought never to have had a happy ending"; (2) the prudential "ought," as in "If you want to avoid colds you ought to try Hydrolux Vapo-lite." These two uses of the word "ought" express, like the moral ought, propriety, with respect to a certain end or standard. But unlike the moral ought, the ought in (1) does not refer directly to human conduct, and while the ought in (2) does have this reference; the imperative that it expresses is conditional on a wish. The imperative expressed by the moral ought is, on the contrary, unconditional: You ought to be honorable-not if you wish men to respect you; men's respect is a desirable adjunct of being honorable, but you ought to be honorable in any case. The moral ought is what Kant has called a categorical imperative. In being categorical it is distinguished from the prudential ought; it being an imperative, i.e., a call to action, it is distinguished also from the logical ought. It is the moral ought that is the subject-matter of ethics, and it is in this ethical sense, "therefore, that the word "ought" will be used in the present volume. We may now consider the principal factors, which the moral ought involves.

## VALUE AND POSSIBILITY

The first factor to be noted in a moral situation is the presence of value. Whenever an inclination is felt, that toward which the inclination points is felt to have value. What is felt to have value need not on reflection be judged to have value. Judgment can correct our immediate feelings of value, just; as in an act of sense-perception judgment corrects and interprets the immediate sense-data. Inclination is thus not identical with value; but it is the psychophysical basis of its presence.

To say that a value is present in an object is to declare that the object is in some sense good. We may therefore restate the first requirement of a moral situation by saying that some things must be recognized as good; or, since good is a relative term, that some things are recognized as better than others. But if a is better than b, b is worse than a. It follows, then, that some things are "Worse than others, and the first requirement may therefore be restated as an ability to distinguish what is comparatively good from what is comparatively bad. What particular things are good, and what is bad, is of course another question. The principle here laid down is simply that to a person who did not set a higher value on some things than on others there could be no moral problem. (Indeed, it is a little hard to see how such a person could have any problems at all.) A moral situation presupposes then, as the first condition of its coexistence, the recognition of some values or other.

This primary characteristic of a moral situation defines ethics as a normative science. Ethics is not a science at all in the same way that the empirical sciences are so designated, and its methods are fundamentally distinct. It shares, nevertheless, the larger meaning of science, for its subject matter can be arranged systematically and certain guiding principles be found. But while such sciences as physics, psychology, economics, etc. are primarily concerned with the recording, predicting, and structuralizing of facts, ethics is concerned with facts only secondarily, only so far as they are morally evaluated or judged to be in some way relevant to the application of moral values. That skies are sunny in New Mexico is a fact; that many people are without lucrative employment is also a fact. Both are equally facts, but our valuations of

them differ. It is such differences in valuation, such normative differences that establish the basis of a moral situation.

A second element in any moral situation is the presence of possible alternatives. To evaluate anything as good is equivalent to declaring that it ought to be, or ought to persist. Ethics does not stop with the good, with what merely ought to be; it accepts this as but one element in the question, what ought to be done? To say that a person ought to do a thing implies a power on his part to do or refrain from doing it. We do not say that the President of the United States ought to put an immediate stop to all human suffering, for the President, however much he might desire such a consummation, has not the power of achieving it; the most we can say is that the President ought to take such steps as may lie within his power to move toward the goal. Nor, on the other hand, do we say, speaking accurately, that a man ought to obey the law of gravitation, for this is something that he must do willy-nilly. Neither "must" nor "cannot" is in the strict sense compatible with "ought."

These two elements, the presence of value and the presence of possible alternatives in a moral situation, are intimately related, for in order that the alternatives may have moral significance some kind of value must be attached to each of them. In some cases the value of each alternative is assigned rationally. In other cases, the more familiar of which are those described as "battling with temptation," our rational judgment assigns value to only one of the alternatives; the other is merely felt to have value, as a result of our experiencing a strong inclination toward it. But in either type of situation there must be some value, whether deliberately judged or spontaneously felt, attached to both alternatives, in order that there may be a moral problem.

For example, there exist for me the possible alternatives of plucking a blade of grass or of not doing so, but the situation is not a moral one, for neither alternative has (on any likely occasion) any value. Or again, it lies in my power to go without my dinner. In this instance one of the alternatives (eating dinner) has value, the other (going without it) has probably none, so that again there is no moral problem. If, however, I judged that abstention from dinner would be a stoic discipline good for my character, or if by abstaining I could afford to attend a play that I wanted to see, or could devote the dinner hour to some work that needed to be done, the situation would be to this extent a moral one, for a value would be set on each of the alternatives. Indeed, the great difficulty of

moral problems and the indecisiveness, of much moral deliberation are due principally to this fact, that both of the alternatives with which our deliberation is concerned are in some manner valued and their values are often incommensurate.

### MORAL INSIGHT

A moral situation, furthermore, must have a consequential character. Even where value and possibility are both present a situation may still be amoral—which is to say, it may be a situation to which ethical considerations do not properly apply. Choosing between different dishes on a restaurant menu provides a familiar example. If pot roast and sweetbreads are offered as alternative choices at the same price, the only thing that a diner would ordinarily have to consider is which one of them he would prefer. If his decision is not automatic, if he spends any time in deliberating over the choice, then he must evidently have set some value upon each of the two dishes, between which he regards himself as free to choose. Thus the first two conditions of a moral situation are met: there is a conflict between values, and a choice between them is possible. Nevertheless, the situation as it stands is not a moral one. The alternatives are considered simply as ends in themselves; the values involved in the diner's choice will terminate in the enjoyment of what he has chosen, and the duration of that enjoyment will be short. Nothing of any significance will be entailed by his ordering one meat rather than the other. The situation is pretty much isolated from the main lines of his experience and his choices.

Even where no social relationships are immediately involved, a choice may have moral character, to the degree that it is significantly consequential. If a certain action promises a greater intensity of pleasure at the moment but appears likely to entail later pains or inconveniences of an important kind, moral insight into these future consequences is called for, and the situation is thus a moral one, although not in a social way. Whether consideration must be taken of the claims of other selves or only of one's own future self, in either case the choice is related to, and partly concerned with, something beyond the immediate result. Mechanical computation is not possible here as it is in the case of physical measurements, for there are no sets of physical units that can be compared. In a moral situation the difference between the competing

values is at least partly one of kind, not merely of degree, and human interests and valuations are so manifold, so subject to continual growth and reconsideration, that the insights themselves have only a tenuous stability. What is required is an insight into the remoter values involved, and the probable embodiments they would take in relation to those affected. It is in the deepening and maturing of men's moral insights that the best index of human development is to be found.

The third requirement of a moral situation, then, has a double aspect. The choice must be consequential, and this may be seen from two sides. The alternatives are not simple ends-in-themselves terminating here and now they involve values over and beyond the values of immediate enjoyment. And the agent by whom the choices is to be made must therefore have an imaginative grasp of the consequences, an imaginative insight into the nature of the values that are only hinted at in the immediate situation.

But is insight enough? Even when I fully comprehend that a certain course of action is both possible and the best one for me to undertake is it guaranteed that I will therefore undertake it? All know that it is not. The experience of temptation is familiar to everybody—the inward tension and struggle in which I perceive that one-way acting is the right way but am powerfully drawn towards some enticing but more limited good. Let us look at the nature of this kind of experience more closely.

### *3. The Good and the Right*

What I want to do is frequently opposed to what I know I ought to do: i.e., the present good is often incompatible with what seems to be right. As previously stated, there must be some inclination toward both of the alternatives with which any moral deliberation is concerned. This is the same thing as to say that both alternatives are felt or thought to be somehow good. But the qualities of the competing goods may be radically different. Say that I am tempted to sit drinking beer with friends when I know that I ought to be devoting the evening to my studies. There is an inclination to linger on; there I also an inclination, of another kind, to say good night and leave. The former inclination is strong and attractive but without rational sanction; whereas—

Quite other is the prompting of the “ought.” It is not so much a drive as an inner exhortation. It is not impulsive, but imperative. And what we experience is not ourselves impelled, but ourselves impelling, ourselves impelling ourselves, indeed ourselves impelling ourselves against impulse.

The situation is a sufficiently familiar one. The strongest actual propensity at a given moment is toward a course of action contrary to the one toward which duty beckons. An effort is required to break away from the fascination of the immediate. The sense that such an effort is required, that it can be made, and that it would be better to make it because the result would be an eventually greater good, are conditions of a feeling of “ought.”

The good and the right, though often specifically opposed, are related at bottom. Their actual conflicts are explained by a distinction within the meaning of “good”—between intrinsic and extrinsic goods. A good is called intrinsic when it is judged worthy of being sought for its own sake, i.e., when it is an end in itself; extrinsic or instrumental when it is sought as a means to some other good. The relation is a shifting one, for it is not always possible to distinguish sharply between the end and the means: what is an end from one point of view may be regarded as a means from another. Nevertheless we can say in general that the good of a surgical operation is extrinsic: it must be referred to the greater health that is to come. The enjoyment of a glass of wine is an intrinsic good, a “good in itself”: the wine is not enjoyed for the sake of anything distinct from the enjoyment. Still other goods are at once intrinsic and extrinsic; an enjoyable and nourishing dinner, a refreshing and cleansing bath, and the like. Often the right course of action will consist in choosing some extrinsic good (say, diligent study) which is the only available means to the attainment of some important intrinsic good (say, a professional career). On such occasions the rightness of the action is founded on the good to which it leads, but to the agent it may not appear to partake of any of the character of that remote good. Thus it happens that if the agent is tempted by some more immediate good (such as the pleasures of a lazy life) the conflict, which would be more rationally conceived as a conflict between two goods (present leisure vs. future career) acquires the appearance of a conflict between the present good (leisure) and the present right course of action (diligent study).

## THE PARADOX OF VOLITION

Situations in which there is a genuine moral struggle, in which a temptation must be conquered by a putting forth of moral effort, are crucial for morality. The ultimate justification of a moral principle (and, indirectly, for any ethical theory) is the possibility that it can be made an effective force in moral struggles. William James describes the moral struggle as a situation in which “a rarer and more ideal impulse is called upon to neutralize others of a more instinctive and habitual kind”; in which “strongly explosive tendencies are checked; or strongly obstructive conditions overcome.” He continues:

We feel, in all hard cases of volition, as if the line taken, when the rarer and more ideal motives prevail, were the line of greater resistance, as if the line of coarser motivation were the more pervious and easy one, even at the very moment when we refuse to follow it. He who under the surgeon’s knife represses cries of pain, or he who exposes himself to social obloquy for duty’s sake, feels as if he were following the line of greatest temporary resistance....

The ideal impulse appears... a still small voice, which must be artificially reinforced to prevail. Effort is what reinforces it, making things seem as if, while the force of propensity were essentially a fixed quantity, the ideal force might be of various amount. But what determines the amount of the effort when, by its aid, an ideal motive becomes victorious over a great sensual resistance? The very greatness of the resistance itself. If the sensual propensity is small, the effort is small. The latter is made great by the presence of a great antagonist to overcome. And if a brief definition of deal or moral action were required, none could be given which would better fit the appearances than this: It is action in the line of greatest resistance.

In order to understand James’ profoundly valid paradox we must avoid the popular tendency to explain a moral situation wholly by analogies drawn from the physical world. In those aspects of nature studied by physics and chemistry it is always the line of least, never of greatest resistance, however, is due to the fact that it is not directly applicable to concrete experience, for in concrete experience no laws are applicable with unremitting exactitude. Physicists may be allowed to

formulate their own laws by the methodology, which their technical interests require. But scientific laws tell us nothing directly about moral experience. In this province everyone must be, to a large extent, his own observer. And what is a more assured fact of introspective observation than that in cases of moral struggle we often can and sometimes do follow the path of greatest resistance?

What we ought to do, however unappealing originally, can be made, by a concentration of purpose, what we want to do. Intelligence (or, as it has previously been called, insight) is the mediator. The reason why it may be right for my present self to forego the pleasure of a drinking party is that the sacrifice may promote a good for my future self: time for study, or a clear head for tomorrow morning, or money saved, or all three. What I choose is distinct from the greatest immediate satisfaction but not separate from all satisfaction whatever. I have put myself imaginatively in the place of my future self and am thus able to consider the good or the pleasure or the emotional satisfaction apart from abstracted from (i.e., separated by the imagination from) the present experience. This abstractive ability of man is what marks him as rational, and, so far as it becomes effective in directing his conduct, as moral.

There is another way, too, in which man’s abstractive ability shows itself: in the altruistic “ought.” A person can recognize duties not only toward his own future self but toward other persons also.

Here again intelligence is the mediator. Man is able to consider the good or the pleasure or the emotional satisfaction apart from the individual to be satisfied, apart not only from [the particular experience] but from the experienced. If emotional satisfaction is the thing desired, it is so for B, C, D and others as well as for A. the happiness of others is just as much an end as my happiness and just as much to be sought after. The “ought” is the peculiar emotion which now enters to convert this intellectual achievement into conduct.

By this abstractive process the Golden Rule of Jesus, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” and the less positive form of the same command, given half a millennium earlier by Confucius, “Refrain from doing to others what you would not have them do to yourself,” can be realized as expressions of a binding obligation.

Right and wrong, then, are not hollow sounds nor is discussion about them an idle game. If we mean what we say in designating an action right or wrong, if we are doing more than mouthing a conventional formula, our judgment will in some manner affect our subsequent conduct. Ethics is not a pastime for the understanding alone. Ethical theory calls for moral practice, and the full meaning of ethics becomes intelligible only as we translate theories into moral principles that can be made effective forces in the struggle toward ideal ends.

#### *4. The Search for a Standard*

But how, it will be asked, is the particular character of right and wrong on any given occasion to be determined? How can one be sure that the development of moral insight (even if such an accomplishment were not in any case formidably difficult) will necessarily lead to a "right" judgment of where one's duties lie? Or, to shift the perspective, how can one be sure that one's moral insight is sufficiently developed? Superior intelligence is not always enough; it maybe put at the service of evil ends. Satan, whatever his delinquencies, was no fool. What clear test, then, (so the popular quandary runs) can be applied to human conduct so as to determine on each occasion whether it is right or wrong; or (from a somewhat more mature point of view) so as to distinguish the higher of two contending values from the lower? Various criteria are proposed, such as the following.

(i) Natural Inclinations. "Follow your impulses; do whatever gives you the most enjoyment": people sometimes talk as if in these trite maxims they had discovered a significant moral truth. Actually they have done the contrary: they have denied that moral truth exists. If inclinations are the only standard of conduct, then there is no standard by which one chooses between one inclination and another. Whatever inclination is strongest at any moment becomes for that reason right. Temptation becomes honorable by the sheer fact of being tempting. Evidently there is no moral standard offered here; there is merely a negation of moral standard.

Sometimes the claims of irrational impulse are bolstered by philosophical arguments based on the alleged facts of human nature. Such arguments will be examined more fully in Chapter 3; here it need only be

remarked that human nature is too complex and mysterious to be reduced to any single set or type of facts. If it is a fact that men yield to impulse it is no less a fact that they can and sometimes do rationally redirect or halt their initial impulses. To overcome and remake one's nature is itself an expression of one's nature. That a man faced with alternatives can choose the harder course as against the easier is a supremely important fact, without which moral action would be powerless and moral judgment empty. But it is just this kind of ideal fact, which the champions of impulse, instinct, and inclination as sufficient guides of life habitually overlook.

(ii) Statute law. The law of the land is a standard of right and wrong from which no individual is wholly exempt. At the same time it is safe to say that no one obeys all the laws. In the first place, there are numerous laws on the statute books that have long ago become obsolete without ever having been annulled. To obey all the laws an individual would have to employ legal aid to find out what laws there are exactly what they require in terms of conduct. Secondly, even among the laws that are known, some are held in higher respect than others. During the period when the eighteenth amendment to the constitution was in force there were many so-called "law-abiding citizens" who had no scruples about buying a drink. Besides, it is a recognized right of an American citizen (by voting and in related ways) to seek to change the existing laws. There must, therefore, be some standard by which the goodness or badness of actual laws, as well as of proposed laws, can be judged.

(iii) Public opinion is in the long run more authoritative than statute law, for a law that lacks public support will not be obeyed and in the end will either be repealed or, as in the case of many "blue laws," ignored by common consent. Nevertheless, public opinion is often wrong. Its fallibility in particular cases is recognized even by those who accept it as a generally reliable guide. The vast majority of men think emotionally and gregariously. One of the chief tasks of education is admittedly to raise the standard of public opinion. There must be some higher standard, then, by which we can judge the state of public opinion at any time to be bad or good.

(iv) There are those who hold that the higher standard is furnished by religious authority. Such a view presupposes: (1) a belief in God, (2) a belief that God communicates His will either directly or indirectly to men, and (3) more particularly, a belief that one's own Church or sect or

Holy Book is the channel through which God's will is revealed, as a check on the vagaries of one's individual conscience. Even if these beliefs can all be accepted without difficulty, questions of interpretation frequently arise. The Ten Commandments, for example, forbid stealing. Does this prohibition apply to the practice of ruining your business competitor by price-cutting, and so eventually pocketing his expected receipts? Does it apply to the practice of certain oil, mining, and lumber companies of wasting the country's (i.e., the American people's) natural resources for private gain? Since no clear definition of stealing receives universal consent, the divine command, though indubitably just and important, is subject to numerous ambiguities. Again, Christ's law of love is pretty clearly the keynote of his teaching. But Christians disagree widely on the method of applying that law to such socially urgent problems as war and labor relations.

(v) Conscience is a part of everyone's standard. Regardless how we may explain it the existence of a "still small voice" that sometimes on crucial occasions says "Do!" or "Refrain!" is an inescapable phenomenon. The voice of conscience often opposes itself to the inclinations of the moment, sometimes to public opinion; and in fundamental matters it may be, for the dedicated man, a higher court of appeal than any outer law, secular or religious. Still, conscience is far from infallible. It can and ought to be educated, and when a man relies on it uncritically it may turn out to be but the prompting of self-interest satanically masquerading in holy dress.

(vi) Conscience then must be controlled, and revelation must be interpreted, by reason. Very true. But that is not to say that reason is the standard. Immanuel Kant is the outstanding example of a philosopher who tried to make it so, and as might have been expected, his applications of his rationally established principles are quite as debatable as those of any other moralist. If generosity is better than selfishness that is not because it is more rational: some philosophers, in fact, have held it to be less so. Rationality is a necessary aspect of ethics but not its sufficient criterion. Ethics, in short, must be logical, but ethics is not logic.

Evidently no isolated standard of right and wrong is proof against attack. The function of ethics is not to provide a simple and sure rule by which moral problems can be "solved." An active intelligence revolts against whatever doctrine claims to utter the last word on any matter. Especially is this true in ethics, where the conclusions sought are of such

intimate importance to each serious inquirer. Immediate decisions will often have to be reached by appealing to some convenient rule of thumb or to some already developed habit or preference. But it is an advantage of theories that they can be inquired into at leisure. The task of theoretical ethics is not to lay down static norms by which each new moral problem that arises can be decisively answered. Its task is rather to develop a method suitable for the evaluation and criticism of existing norms and for the exploration of new value possibilities, in order that when moral decisions have henceforth to be made their grounds may be more adequate and more worthy.

## Applied Ethics

Conceived broadly, applied ethics is the investigation of the ethical aspects of (or the attempt to apply ethical considerations to) any problem, personal or social, or any policy or practice. Taken narrowly, applied ethics is the branch of practical reasoning in which ethical reasons, rules, principles, ideals, and values are used to evaluate the conduct of individuals or groups.

Construed in either way, applied ethics can be contrasted with other philosophical tasks in ethics, notably meta-ethics (the analysis of ethical concepts and ethical reasoning), normative ethics (the study of norms used in guiding and evaluating conduct), and ethical theory (the comprehensive investigation of ethical problems, concepts, principles, reasoning, and their justification).

## History

Applied ethics has attracted at least the passing attention of the greatest thinkers, from Socrates' (c. 470-399 B.C.) defense of his refusing to escape from undeserved punishment to Bertrand Russell's (1872-1970) defense of civil disobedience to protest nuclear weapons. Other examples include Locke (1632-1704) on religious toleration, Hume (1711-1776) on suicide, Kant (1724-1804) on lying in a good cause, Bentham (1748-1832) on the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, J.S. Mill (1806-1873) on equality between the sexes, Nietzsche (1844-1900) on punishment, Dewey (1859-1952) on democracy in America, and Sartre (1905-1980) on genocide in Vietnam.

As a study of these examples will show, no one style of investigation and argument is practiced by philosophers in the field of applied ethics. Heterogeneity is one of the hallmarks of applied ethics—its problems, purposes, methods, and results.

## Related Fields

Applied ethics includes traditional casuistry—the application of ethical reflection to cases of practical concern. Like casuistry, applied ethics is frequently situational rather than abstract, in the sense that the reflective task is typically set by an actual case in which an agent's

decision and action is required. However, insofar as casuistry has a distinctive method (“the method of cases”) or is confined to cases where moral rules conflict, applied ethics is much broader and less well defined.

Applied ethics also includes professional ethics, the reflection on the ethical aspects of issues and problems that arise within particular vocations (medicine, business, journalism, etc.) Applied ethics is more inclusive, however, since not all practical problems requiring ethical reflection fall within the domain of any recognized profession.

Applied ethics is a part, perhaps the major part, of applied philosophy generally; and the terms ‘applied ethics’ and ‘applied philosophy’ are often used as synonyms. Taken strictly however, the two fields are distinct. Insofar as applied philosophy addresses problems in the philosophy of art, education, law, reasoning, etc., and insofar as these problems are not solely ethical, applied philosophy is much the broader field.

## The Role of Theory

The proper role of ethical theory in applied ethics is controversial. Indeed, it constitutes the principal problem in the theory of applied ethics.

At the one extreme are those philosophers who argue, in effect as Plato (c. 430-347 B.C.) does, that unless applied ethics is clearly and adequately rooted in ethical theory, it is no better than a resourceful defense of prejudice. The very term ‘applied ethics’ suggests a top-down application of ethical theory to a practical problem. On this view a major problem is which ethical theory to apply, since there are more than one and their dictates are not identical in all cases.

At the other extreme are those who argue, as Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) in effect does, that since no known ethical system is complete and adequate, no independent fulcrum exists on which to turn practical argument one way or the other. Instead, a theory must itself be tested for its adequacy by its practical implications and not the other way around. The main danger here is that uncritical moral intuitions may come to dominate even the most systematically developed theory.

Yet others argue that there ought to be a reciprocal interaction between abstract theory and considered judgments about actual cases, with the aim of obtaining a reflective equilibrium between the two.

The actual practice of philosophers, both classic and current, can be cited to illustrate each of these approaches.

### Methods

The simplest method of reasoning in applied ethics is to give advice or render a judgment based on the application of an accepted rule to a clear case. This turns applied ethics into an exercise in deductive reasoning from two premises: one that expresses the sole relevant ethical consideration (rule, principle, ideal, etc), and another that characterizes the case at hand in such a manner as to enable the ethical consideration to be applied to it.

However, most actual cases, whether of interest to the ordinary person or to the philosopher are much more complex. Complications enter from several directions, as can be illustrated in the abortion controversy.

The facts of the situation may be such that no antecedently acceptable rule clearly applies. Deliberately causing the death of a nonviable human fetus does not obviously violate the moral rule against murder. On the other hand, the principle that one may do as one pleases with one's own property (or body) hardly applies, either.

The facts may be sufficiently complex and ambiguous that several ethical considerations apply but with incompatible results. Again, the abortion controversy amply illustrates the role that rights, duties, interests, and ideals may play and the way in which appeal to these considerations can lead to contradictory judgments on the morality of abortion, in general or in particular cases.

Uncertainty or dispute over the relevant ethical consideration(s) in the case can cause, and be caused by, uncertainty or dispute over the relevant facts. In the case of abortion, is it the fact that the fetus is living, or that it is human progeny, or that it is a potential person that matters? What (if anything) follows from these facts for the moral status of abortion? Although traditional casuists would answer these questions very differently from utilitarians, reaching a judgment on the morality of abortion using either approach constitutes an exercise applied ethics.

### Interdisciplinary Tendencies

In actual controversial cases (e.g.: ought capital punishment to be abolished? Ought universities to divest their holdings in corporations doing business in South Africa? How much ought concern for international human rights influence a nation's foreign policy?), it is often extremely difficult to obtain an accurate and complete account of all the relevant facts.

In addition, the necessary factual information can often be obtained only by practitioners in the field and by using the methods of the social sciences. As a result, philosophers engaged in applied ethics must often rely on experts in the pertinent sciences to provide them with the relevant data, or they must develop the skills to gather their own data.

### Ethicists as Experts

Philosophers who study and teach applied ethics (often now called "ethicists") have begun to play a professional role as consultants, providing expert advice and testimony in many different institutional settings. During the 1970's and 1980's, philosophers have served as members of various commission (primarily on issues of medical ethics), testified before legislative committees, and performed other duties in which their ability to identify and evaluate the ethical impact of various policies or practices has been utilized.

In recent years, the study and practice of applied ethics has been concentrated at research centers through their publications, conferences, and workshops. Pioneering the field is the Hastings Center (New York), founded in 1969 with a focus on bioethics. Most such centers are affiliated with university departments of philosophy, such as the Center for Philosophy and Public Affairs (University of Maryland, 1976), the Center for the Study of Values (University of Delaware, 1977), the Center for Values and Social Policy (University of Colorado, 1979), and the Social Philosophy and Policy Center (Bowling Green State University, Ohio, 1981).

## Journals

Although articles in applied ethics have from time to time appeared in almost every professional journal in philosophy (notably, in *Ethics*, founded in 1890), the desire to provide a regular forum for those interested in this field has led to the founding of several quarterlies devoted primarily to problems in applied ethics: *Social Theory and Practice* (1970-), *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1971-), *Social Philosophy and Policy* (1983-), *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (1984), and *Public Affairs Quarterly* (1987-). See also (in addition to the many articles on specific moral issues): *academic Ethics*; *Bioethics*; *Business Ethics*; *Casuistry*; *Engineering Ethics*; *Legal Ethics*; *Library and Information Professions*; *Medical Ethics*; *Nursing Ethics*; *Professional Ethics*; *Public Policy*.

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