

PROBLEMS OF ETHICS

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AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION
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NEW YORK : 1939
PRENTICE-HALL, INC.

CHAPTER I

What Is the Aim of Ethics?

1. *Ethics Seeks Nothing But Knowledge*

If there are ethical questions which have meaning, and are therefore capable of being answered, then ethics is a science. For the correct answers to its questions will constitute a system of true propositions, and a system of true propositions concerning an object is the "science" of that object. Thus ethics is a system of *knowledge*, and nothing else; its only goal is the truth. Every science is, as such, purely theoretical; it seeks to understand; hence the questions of ethics, too, are purely theoretical problems. As philosophers we try to find their correct solutions, but their practical application, if such is possible, does not fall within the sphere of ethics. If anyone studies these questions in order to apply the results to life and action, his *dealing* with ethics has, it is true, a practical end; but ethics itself never has any other goal than the truth.

So long as the philosopher is concerned with his purely theoretical questions, he must forget that he has a human interest as well as a cognitive interest in the object of his investigation. For him there is no greater

danger than to change from a philosopher into a moralist, from an investigator into a preacher. Desire for the truth is the only appropriate inspiration for the thinker when he philosophizes; otherwise his thoughts run the danger of being led astray by his feelings. His wishes, hopes, and fears threaten to encroach upon that objectivity which is the necessary presupposition of all honest inquiry. Of course, the prophet and the investigator can be one and the same person; but one cannot at the same moment serve both interests, for whoever mixes the two problems will solve neither.

A glance at the great ethical systems will show how necessary these remarks are. There is hardly one in which we do not occasionally find an appeal to the feeling or the morality of the reader where a scientific analysis would have been appropriate.

Nevertheless, I do not point out the purely theoretical character of ethics merely to warn my reader, and myself. I do it also because it will help us to define the problems with which ethics is concerned and which we shall try to solve.

2. *The Subject-matter of Ethics*

To what object, or realm of objects, do the questions of ethics relate? This object has many names, and we use them so often in daily life that one might think we should know exactly what we mean by them. The ethical questions concern "morality," or what is morally "valuable," what serves as a "standard" or "norm"

of human conduct, what is "demanded" of us; or, finally, to name it by the oldest, simplest word, ethical questions concern the "good."

And what does ethics do with this object? We have already answered this question: ethics seeks to *understand* it, to gain knowledge of it, and would and can under no circumstances do anything else with it. Since ethics is, in essence, theory or knowledge, its task cannot be to produce morality, or to establish it, or call it to life. It does not have the task of producing the good—neither in the sense that its business is to invest the good with reality in human affairs, nor in the sense that it has to stipulate or decree what the word "good" ought to signify. It creates neither the concept nor the objects which fall under the concept, nor does it provide the opportunity of applying the concept to the objects. All this it finds, as every science finds the materials it works with, in experience. It is obvious that no science can have any other beginning. The misleading view (introduced by the "Neo-Kantians") according to which objects of a science are not simply "given" to it but are themselves always "given as problems" will not lead anyone to deny that whoever wishes to understand anything must first know *what* it is he wishes to understand.

Where and how, then, is "the good" of ethics given?

We must from the outset be clear on the point that here there is only *one* possibility, the same that lies before all other sciences. Wherever an instance of the object to be known occurs, there must be exhibited a

certain mark (or group of marks) which characterizes the thing or event as one of a certain definite kind, thus distinguishing it from all others in a special way. If this were not so we would have no opportunity and no motive to call it by a special name. Every name which is used in discourse for communication must have a meaning capable of being indicated. This is indeed self-evident, and it would not be doubted of the object of any other science—only in ethics has it sometimes been forgotten.

Let us consider some examples outside the field of ethics. Biology, the science of life, finds its sphere limited by a group of characteristics (a special kind of motion, regeneration, growth, and so forth) which belong to all living things, and stand out so clearly for every-day observation that—apart from certain critical instances—the difference between the animate and inanimate is very sharply distinguished, without the use of any scientific analysis. It is only because of this that the concept of life could have first been formed, and obtained its special name. If the biologist succeeds, with progressive knowledge, in establishing new and sharper definitions of life, in order better to bring the events of life under general laws, this means only more precision in, and perhaps extension of, the concept, without however altering its original meaning.

Similarly the word "light" had a definite meaning before there was a science of light, that is, optics, and this meaning determined the subject-matter of optics. The distinguishing mark was in this case that immedi-

ate experience which we call "light-sensation," that is, a not-further-definable datum of consciousness, known only to the perceiver, the occurrence of which—again apart from critical instances—indicates the presence of those events which constitute the subject-matter of optics. The fact that optics in its modern developed form is the science of Roentgen rays and radio-telegraphic waves as well (because their laws are identical with the laws of light) enlarges the meaning of the word "optics" without changing its basis.

As certainly, then, as the expression "moral good" makes good sense, just as certainly must we be able to discover it in a way analogous to that by which one discovers the meaning of the word "life" or "light." But many philosophers see in this a serious difficulty of ethics, indeed *the* difficulty, and they are of the opinion that the sole task of ethics is the discovery of the definition of "good."

3. *On the Definition of Good*

This view can be interpreted in two ways. In the first place, it could mean that the task of the philosopher is exhausted in describing exactly the sense in which the word "good"—or *bon* or *gut* or *buono* or ἀγαθόν—in its moral signification is actually used. It would concern itself merely with making clear the already well-known meaning, by a strict formulation of it in other words (were it not already well known one would not know that, for example, "good" is the

translation of *bonum*). Is this really the goal of ethics? The statement of the meaning of words by definitions is (as G. E. Moore in his *Principia Ethica* has pointed out in a similar connection) the business of the science of language. Ought we really to believe that ethics is a branch of linguistics? Perhaps a branch that has split off from it because the definition of "good" harbors special difficulties we meet in no other word? A very peculiar case, that a whole science should be necessary to find merely the definition of a concept! And in any case, who is interested in mere definitions? They are, after all, only means to an end; they stand at the *beginning* of the real cognitive task. If ethics ended with a definition it would be at most the introduction to a science, and the philosopher would interest himself only in what comes after it. No, the real problems of ethics are certainly of a very different sort. Even though the task of ethics could be formulated as that of stating what the good "really is," this could not be understood as consisting in the mere determination of the meaning of a concept (as also, in our example, optics does not strive for a mere definition of "light"). Rather it would have to be understood as the task of explanation, of complete cognition of the good—which presupposes that the meaning of the concept is already known and then relates it to something else, orders it in more general connections (just as optics does with light, which tells us what light "really is" by pointing out the place in the sphere of natural events to which the well-

known phenomenon belongs, by describing to the last detail its laws, and by recognizing their identity with the laws of certain electrical events).

Secondly, the view according to which the goal of ethics consists of a correct determination of the concept "good" could be interpreted as not being concerned with the formulation of the content of the concept, but rather with giving it a content. This would, however, be exactly that view which we have from the start recognized to be quite senseless. It would mean that the philosopher made, or created, the concept of the good, while without him there existed merely the word "good." He would of course have to invent it quite arbitrarily. (But inasmuch as in formulating his definition he could not act completely arbitrarily, since he would be bound by some norm, some guiding principle, the concept of the good would already be determined by these norms. The philosopher would have merely to find a formulation of it, and we should have before us the previously considered case.) However, it would be quite absurd to demand of ethics nothing but the arbitrary establishment of the meaning of a word. That would be no achievement at all. Even the prophet, the creator of a new morality, never forms a new concept of morality, but presupposes one, and asserts only that other modes of behavior are subsumed under it than those which people have believed up to that time. In logical terms, the prophet holds that the acknowledged content of the concept has a different range from that supposed. This alone can be the

meaning when he declares: "Not that is 'good' which you have held as such, but something else!"

Thus we see the view confirmed that in no way is the formulation of the concept of the moral good to be considered as the final task of ethics; it cannot be regarded as anything but a mere preparation.

To be sure, this preparation is not to be neglected; ethics ought not to spare itself the task of determining the meaning of its concept, even though, as we have said, the meaning of the word "good" may in one sense be assumed as known.

4. *Is the Good Indefinable?*

It is very dangerous to withdraw from this task under the pretext that the word "good" is one of those whose meaning is simple and unanalyzable, of which therefore a definition, a statement of the connotation, is impossible. What is demanded here need not be a definition in the strictest sense of the word. It is sufficient to indicate how we can get the content of the concept; to state what must be done in order to become acquainted with its content. It is, strictly speaking, also impossible to define what the word "green" means—but we can nevertheless fix its meaning unambiguously, for example, by saying it is the color of a summer meadow, or by pointing to the foliage of a tree. We mentioned above that a "light-sensation" which furnishes us with the fundamental concept of optics is not definable; however, we know exactly what is meant

by it, because we can give the exact conditions under which we have a light-sensation. In the same way, in ethics we must be able to give the exact conditions under which the word "good" is applied, even though its fundamental concept be indefinable. In this manner it must be possible to give the meaning of any word, for otherwise it would have no meaning at all. It must even be capable of being given easily; profound philosophical analysis cannot be necessary for this, for the matter concerns merely a question of fact, namely, a description of those conditions under which the word "good" (or its equivalent in other languages, or its contrary, "evil") is actually used.

It is difficult for many philosophers to stick to the realm of facts even temporarily, without immediately inventing a theory to describe the facts. And thus the theory has been frequently propounded that the fundamental concept of ethics is given as is the fundamental concept of optics. Just as we possess a special sense, namely the sense of sight, for the perception of light, so it is supposed that a special "moral sense" indicates the presence of good or evil. Accordingly, good and evil would be objective characters, to be determined and investigated as are the physical events which optics investigates, and which it considers to be the causes of light-sensations.

This theory is of course wholly hypothetical. The moral sense is merely assumed; its organs cannot be pointed out as can the human eye. But the hypothesis is also false; it fails to account for the variations in

moral judgment among men, since the further assumption that the moral sense is poorly developed in many persons, or completely absent, does not suffice to explain these variations.

No, it is not the distinguishing characteristic of the subject-matter of ethics that it is the object of a special kind of perception. Its characteristics must be capable of exhibition by simply pointing to certain known facts, without any artifice. This can happen in different ways. Two ways are here distinguished: first, one can seek for an external, formal characteristic of good and evil; and, second, one can search for a material characteristic, one of content.

5. *The Formal Characteristic of the Good*

The formal characteristic, on which Kant placed the whole weight of his moral philosophy, and which he made prominent by his greatest eloquence, is this: the good always appears as something that is demanded, or commanded; the evil, as something forbidden. Good conduct is such as is demanded or desired of us. Or, as it has generally been expressed since Kant: those actions are good which we *ought to do*. Now, to a demand, a claim, or a desire there belongs someone who demands, claims, or desires. This author of the moral law must also be given in order that the characterization by means of the formal property of the command be unambiguous.

Here opinions differ. In theological ethics this au-

thor is God, and according to one interpretation the good is good because God desires it; in this case the formal characteristic (to be a command of God) would express the very essence of the good. According to another, perhaps profounder, interpretation, God desires the good because it is good. In this case its essence must be given by certain material characters previously to and independently of those formal determinations. In traditional philosophical ethics the opinion prevails that the author is, for example, human society (utilitarianism) or the active self (eudaimonism) or even no one (the categorical imperative). From this last proceeds Kant's doctrine of the "absolute ought," that is, a demand without a demander. One of the worst errors of ethical thought lies in his belief that the concept of the moral good is completely exhausted by the statement of its purely formal property, that it has no content except to be what is demanded, "what should be."

6. *Material Characteristics*

In opposition to this, it is clear that the discovery of the formal characters of the good constitutes only a preliminary step in the determination of the content of the good, in the statement of material characteristics. If we know that the good is what is demanded, we must still ask: What is it then that is actually demanded? In answer to this question we must turn to the author of the command and investigate his will

and desire, for the content of his desire is that which he wishes to happen. When I recommend an action to someone as being "good," I express the fact that I *desire* it.

So long as the lawgiver is not known with certainty, we must stick to the laws as they are generally observed, to the formulations of moral rules as we find them among men. We must discover which ways of acting (or dispositions, or whatever be the term used) are called "good" by different people, at different times, by different wise men or religious writers. Only in this way do we come to know the content of this concept. From the content it may then be possible to infer the lawgiving authority, if it cannot be ascertained otherwise.

In grouping together the individual cases in which something is designated as morally good,⁴ we must search for the common elements, the characters in which these examples agree or show similarities. These similar elements are the characters of the concept "good"; they constitute its content, and within them must lie the reason why one and the same word, "good," is used for the several cases.

To be sure, one will at once come upon cases in which nothing common can be found, in which there seems to be a complete incompatibility; one and the same thing—for example, polygamy—will be considered moral in one community, and in another a crime. In such a situation there are two possibilities. First, there could be several irreducibly different concepts of

"good" (which agree in the purely formal property of being somehow "demanded"); if this were so there would not be a single morality, but many. Or, second, it could be that the divergence in moral judgments was only apparent and not final; that, namely, in the end one and the same goal was approved, but that a difference of opinion prevailed as to which way leads to it, which actions should therefore be demanded. (For instance, polygamy and monogamy are not in themselves judged morally. The real object of valuation is perhaps the peace of family life, or the least troublesome order of sexual relationships. One person believes that this end can be attained only through monogamous marriage, and considers it, therefore, to be morally good; another believes the same of polygamy. One may be right, the other wrong; they differ, not by their final valuations, but only by virtue of their insight, capacity of judgment, or experience.)

Whether there is actually among men a multiplicity of moralities incompatible with one another, or whether the differences in the moral world are only specious, so that the philosopher would find everywhere, under the many disguises and masks of morality, one and the same face of the one Good, we cannot now decide. In any case, there are wide regions in which the unanimity and security of moral judgments is substantiated. The modes of behavior which we group together under the names reliability, helpfulness, sociability are everywhere judged to be "good," while, for example, thievery, murder, quarrelsomeness

pass for "evil" so unanimously that here the question of the common property can be answered with practically universal validity. If such characters are found for a large group of actions, then one can apply himself to the "exceptions" and irregularities, that is, to those cases in which the same behavior evokes divergent moral judgments in different times, among different peoples. Here one finds either that there is no different ground for the judgment from that in all ordinary cases, but that it is merely more remote, hidden, or applied under altered circumstances; or one must simply note the fact as indicating a new or ambiguous meaning of the word "good." And finally, it happens, of course, that certain individuals hold different opinions regarding good and evil from those held by people of their time and community. In these cases it is quite as important to make out the content and causes of their opinions as in any other more regular cases, if the persons in question are important as prophets, moral writers, or morally creative men; or if their teachings disclose hidden currents or impress their moral judgments on humanity and the future.

7. Moral Norms and Moral Principles

The common characteristics which a group of "good" acts or dispositions exhibits can be combined in a *rule* of the form: A mode of action must have such and such properties in order to be called "good" (or "evil"). Such a rule can also be called a "norm." Let it be

understood at once, however, that such a "norm" is nothing but a mere expression of fact; it gives us only the conditions under which an act or disposition or character is actually called "good," that is, is given a moral value. The setting up of norms is nothing but the determination of the concept of the good, which ethics undertakes to understand.

This determination would proceed by seeking ever new groups of acts that are recognized to be good, and showing for each of them the rule or norm which all of their members satisfy. The different norms, so obtained, would then be compared, and one would order them into new classes such that the individual norms of each class had something in common, and thus would all be subsumed under a higher, that is, a more general, norm. With this higher norm the same procedure would be repeated, and so on, until, in a perfect case, one would at last reach a highest, most general rule that included all others as special cases, and would be applicable to every instance of human conduct. This highest norm would be the definition of "the good" and would express its universal essence; it would be what the philosopher calls a "moral principle."

Of course, one cannot know beforehand whether one will actually arrive at a single moral principle. It might well be that the highest series of rules to which the described way leads simply shows no common character, that one has, therefore, to stop with several norms as highest rules, because despite all attempts none higher can be found to which these could be re-

duced. There would then be several mutually independent meanings of the expression "moral good," several mutually independent moral principles which only in their totality would determine the concept of morality, or perhaps several different concepts of the moral, depending upon the time and the people. It is significant how little these possibilities have, in general, been considered by philosophers; almost all have at once sought a single moral principle. Quite the contrary is true of the practical moral systems, which ordinarily do not attempt to establish an all-inclusive principle; as in the case of the catechism, which stops at the ten commandments.

For those who believe that the sole task of ethics consists in the determination of the concept of the good, that is, in the establishment of one or several moral principles, the completion of the described procedure would exhaust the theme of ethics. It would be a pure "normative science"; for its end would lie in the discovery of a hierarchy of norms or rules which culminated in one or several points, the moral principles, and in which the lower levels would be explained or "justified" by the higher. To the question, "Why is this act moral?" the explanation can be given, "Because it falls under these definite rules"; and if one asks further, "Why are all the acts falling under this rule moral?" this would be explained by saying, "Because they all fall under that next higher rule." And only with the highest norm—with the moral principle or moral principles—is the knowledge of the validating

grounds, a justification, no longer possible in this way. There ethics is at an end for him who sees it as a mere normative science.

8. *Ethics as a "Normative Science"*

We now see clearly what meaning the phrase "normative science" can have, and in what sense alone ethics can "justify" an act or its valuation. In modern philosophy since Kant, the idea repeatedly appears that ethics as a normative science is something completely different from the "factual sciences." It does not ask, "When is a person judged to be good?" or, "Why is he judged to be good?" These questions concern mere facts and their explanation. But it does ask, "With *what right* is that person judged to be good?" It does not trouble itself with what is actually valued, but asks: "What is valuable? What should be valued?" And here obviously the question is quite different.

But *this* manner of opposing normative and factual sciences is fundamentally false. For if ethics furnishes a justification it does so only in the sense just explained, namely, in a relative-hypothetical way, not absolutely. It "justifies" a certain judgment only to the extent that it shows that the judgment corresponds to a certain norm; that this norm itself is "right," or justified, it can neither show nor, by itself, determine. Ethics must simply recognize this as a fact of human nature. Even as a normative science, a science can do no more than *explain*; it can never set up or establish a norm

(which alone would be equivalent to an absolute justification). It is never able to do more than to discover the rules of the judgment, to read them from the facts before it; the origin of norms always lies outside and before science and knowledge. This means that their origin can only be apprehended by the science, and does not lie within it. In other words: if, or in so far as, the philosopher answers the question "What is good?" by an exhibition of norms, this means only that he tells us what "good" *actually* means; he can never tell us what good *must* or *should* mean. The question regarding the validity of a valuation amounts to asking for a higher acknowledged norm under which the value falls, and this is a question of *fact*. The question of the justification of the highest norms or the ultimate values is senseless, because there is nothing higher to which these could be referred. Since modern ethics, as we remarked, often speaks of "this absolute justification as *the* fundamental problem of ethics, it must be said, unfortunately, that the formulation of the question from which it proceeds is simply meaningless.

The perversity of such a formulation of the question will be exhibited by a famous example. John Stuart Mill has often been justly criticized because he thought himself able to deduce from the fact that a thing was desired that it was in itself *desirable*. The double meaning of the word desirable ("capable of being desired" and "worth desiring") misled him. But his critics were also wrong, for they rested their criticism

upon the same false presupposition (expressly formulated by neither), namely, that the phrase "in itself desirable" had a definite meaning (by "in itself" I mean "for its own sake," not merely as a means to an end); but in fact they could give it no meaning. If I say of a thing that it is desirable, and mean that one must desire it as a means if one desires a certain end, then everything is perfectly clear. If, however, I assert that a thing is desirable simply in itself, I cannot say what I mean by this statement; it is not verifiable and is therefore meaningless. A thing can be desirable only with respect to something else, not in itself. Mill believed himself able to deduce what is in itself desirable from what actually is desired; his opponents held that these had nothing to do with one another. But ultimately neither side knew what it said, for both failed to give an absolute meaning to the word "desirable." The question whether something is desirable for its own sake is no question at all, but mere empty words. On the other hand, the question of what actually is desired for its own sake is of course quite sensible, and ethics is actually concerned only with answering this question. Mill succeeded in arriving at this real question, in the passage criticized, and thus freed himself of the senseless form of the question, to be sure, less by his false argument than by his healthy instinct, while his opponents remained tied to it and continued to search for an absolute justification of desire.

9. *Ethics as Factual Science*

Such norms as are recognized as the ultimate norms, or highest values, must be derived from human nature and life as facts. Therefore, no result of ethics can stand in contradiction to life; ethics cannot declare as evil or false those values which lie at the foundation of life; its norms cannot demand or command anything that is in a real opposition to those final norms recognized by life. Where such opposition occurs it is a sure sign that the philosopher has misunderstood his problem, and has failed to solve it; that he has unwittingly become a moralist, that he feels uncomfortable in the role of a knower and would prefer to be a creator of moral values. The demands and claims of a morally creative person are merely subjects for investigation for the philosopher, mere objects for cognitive consideration; and this holds also if he should by chance, at other times, be this creative man himself.

We just said that there could be no real opposition between the meaning of the word "good" that is actually accepted in life, and the meaning found by the philosopher. An *apparent* difference can of course occur, for language and thought are very imperfect in daily life. Often the speaker and valuer is himself not clear as to what he expresses, and often his valuations rest on a false interpretation of the facts, and would at once change with a correction of the mistake. The philosopher would have the task of discovering such

errors and faulty expressions, and would have to recognize the true norms that lie at the root of moral judgments, and place them in opposition to the apparent ones which the agent, or valuer, believes himself to follow. And in so doing he would, perhaps, find it necessary to delve deep into the human soul. Always, however, it would be an actual, already fundamental norm that he would find there.

The ultimate valuations are facts existing in human consciousness, and even if ethics were a normative science it would not cease because of this to be a science of *facts*. Ethics has to do entirely with the *actual*; this seems to me to be the most important of the propositions which determine its task. Foreign to us is the pride of those philosophers who hold the questions of ethics to be the most noble and elevated of questions just because they do not refer to the common *is* but concern the pure *ought*.

Of course, after one is in the possession of such a system of norms, of a system of applications of the concepts good and evil, one can consider the connections of the members of the hierarchy, the order of the individual rules, quite independently of any relation to actuality; one can investigate merely the inner structure of the system. And this holds even if the norms are not the really valid ones, but are falsely considered such, or are freely imagined and arbitrarily established. The last case would indeed possess only the interest of a game and would make no claim to the name of "ethics." Ethics as a normative science would, how-

ever, furnish a hierarchical order of rules, in which all acts and attitudes and characters would possess a definite place with respect to their moral value. And of course this would be true not only of existing acts and attitudes, but also of all possible ones; for if the system is to be of any value it must beforehand supply a place for every possibility of human behavior. After becoming acquainted with the highest norms, one can consider the whole system without any reference to actual behavior, by merely considering the possible. Thus Kant emphasized that for his moral philosophy it was indifferent whether or not any moral will actually existed. Hence ethics conceived as a theory of norms would exhibit the characteristics of an "ideal science"; it would have to do with a system of ideal rules, which could, of course, be applied to actuality, and would only thereby possess any interest, but the rules would have meaning quite independently of this application, and could be investigated in their relations to one another. Thus someone might have invented the rules of chess, and might have considered their application to the individual matches even if the game had never been played, except in his mind, between imaginary opponents.

10. *Ethics Seeks Causal Explanation*

To recapitulate: We began with the position that the task of ethics is to "explain the moral good," and we asked, first, what sort of thing this "good" is which we

want to explain. We found that this subject-matter of ethics is not given to us as simply as, say, the subject-matter of optics, light, that is, by a mere sensation; but that for its determination the discovery of a "moral principle" or a whole system of principles or rules is necessary. If we call a discipline that concerns itself with such a system a "normative science," we see that this theory of norms affords nothing more than the discovery of the meaning of the concept "good." In this it exhausts itself. There is no question in it of a real explanation of the good. It offers ethics only the object which is to be explained. Therefore we have from the outset rejected the view of those philosophers who consider ethics to be merely a normative science. No, only where the theory of norms ends does ethical explanation begin. The former fails completely to see the important, exciting questions of ethics, or, worse, turns them aside as foreign in essence to ethics; in truth it fails, except through mistakes, to get beyond the mere linguistic result of determining the meanings of the words "good" and "evil."

It does of course also give us a kind of pseudo-explanation, namely, that which we call justification. Explanation always consists of the reduction of what is to be explained to something else, to something more general; and actually the norms are thus referred back to one another, until the highest are reached. These, the moral principles (or *the* moral principle), according to definition, cannot be referred to other ethical *norms*, and cannot therefore be morally justified.

But this does not mean that all further reduction must be impossible. It might be that the *moral* good could be shown to be a special case of a more general kind of good. Actually the word "good" is used in an extra-moral sense (one speaks not only of good men, but also of good riders, good mathematicians, of a good catch, a good machine, and so forth); it is therefore probable that the ethical and the extra-ethical meanings of the word are somehow connected. If the moral good can in this manner be subsumed under a wider concept of the good, then the question, "Why is moral behavior good?" could be answered by, "Because it is good in a more general sense of the word." The highest moral norm would be justified by means of an extra-moral norm; the moral principle would be referred back to a higher principle of life.

Possibly the reduction could go on a few more steps, but the final norm, the highest principle, can in no way be justified, for the very reason that it is the last. It would be senseless to ask for a further justification, a further explanation. It is not the norms, principles, or values themselves that stand in need of and are capable of explanation, but rather the actual facts from which they are abstracted. These facts are the acts of giving rules, of valuation, of approbation in human consciousness; they are thus real events in the life of the soul. "Value," "the good," are mere abstractions, but valuation, approbation, are actual psychic occurrences, and separate acts of this sort are quite capable of explanation, that is, can be reduced to one another,

And here lies the proper task of ethics. Here are the remarkable facts which excite philosophic wonder, and whose explanation has always been the final goal of ethical inquiry. That man actually approves of certain actions, declares certain dispositions to be "good," appears not at all self-explanatory to the philosopher, but often very astonishing, and he therefore asks his "Why?" Now, in all of the natural sciences every explanation can be conceived as a *causal* explanation, a truth which we need not prove here; therefore the "why" has the sense of a question concerning the *cause* of that psychical process in which man makes a valuation, establishes a moral claim. (We must make clear that when we speak of the discovery of the "cause," we mean by the term "cause" only a popular abbreviation for the statement of the complete laws governing the event to be known.)

In other words, the *determination* of the contents of the concepts of good and evil is made by the use of moral principles and a system of norms, and affords a relative justification of the lower moral rules by the higher; scientific *knowledge* of the good, on the other hand, does not concern norms, but refers to the cause, concerns not the justification but the explanation of moral judgments. The theory of norms asks, "*What* does actually serve as the standard of conduct?" Explanatory ethics, however, asks "*Why* does it serve as the standard of conduct?"

II. *Formulation of the Fundamental Question*

It is clear that in essence the first question is a dry, formal matter that could win little interest from man did it not have such importance for practice, and if the path to its answer did not offer so many opportunities for profound insight into human nature. The second question, however, leads directly to these profundities. It concerns the real grounds, the actual causes and motives that drive one to distinguish between good and evil, and call forth the acts of moral judgment. Not only judgments, but also *conduct*, for this follows upon judgment. The explanation of moral judgment cannot be separated from the explanation of conduct. To be sure, one should not believe, without further reason, that everyone arranges his conduct according to his moral judgments. Obviously, that would be a false assumption. The connection, although indissoluble, is more complicated. What a man values, approves, and desires is finally inferred from his actions—better from these than from his assertions, though these, too, are kinds of action. What kind of demands one makes of himself and others can only be known from one's conduct. A man's valuations must somehow appear among the motives of his acts; they cannot, in any case, be discovered anywhere else. He who traces the causes of conduct far enough must come upon the causes of all approbation. The question of the causes of conduct is, therefore, more general than

that of the grounds of moral judgments; its answer would give more comprehensive knowledge, and it would be methodologically profitable to start with it even if it were not necessary to begin with the study of conduct as the only thing observable.

Therefore, we may and should replace the question raised above, "What motives cause us to establish moral norms?" by the other question, "What are the motives of conduct in general?" (We formulate the question in this general way and do not at once restrict it to *moral* actions because, according to what has been said, it might be possible to deduce valuations and their motives just as well, if not better, from immoral or neutral acts.) We are the more warranted in relating our question at once to *conduct*, since man interests himself in valuations only because conduct depends upon them. If moral approbation were something that remained enclosed in the depths of the heart, if it could never appear in any way and could not exert the least influence on the life, happiness and unhappiness of man, no one would bother himself with it, and the philosopher would become acquainted with this unimportant phenomenon only by an act of introspection. That wonder concerning the moral judgments of man, which we have described as the earliest impulse leading to the formulation of ethical questions, is above all wonder at his own actual moral behavior.

Therefore, we inquire into the causes, that is, the regularity and order, of all human actions, with the aim of discovering the motives of moral actions. And

we profit in so doing because we can postpone the question regarding the essence of morality, the moral principle, until we solve the problem of the natural law governing behavior in general. When, however, we come to know about action in general, it will certainly be much easier to learn what is peculiar to moral actions and to define the content of the concept "good" without difficulty. Perhaps it will turn out that we no longer feel the necessity of determining a sharp boundary for it (just as, after the physical explanation of light, the question of how and whether the concept of "light" is to be distinguished from that of heat radiation or ultra-violet radiation loses all interest).

12. *The Method of Ethics Is Psychological*

Thus the central problem of ethics concerns the causal explanation of moral behavior; all others in relation to it sink to the level of preliminary or subordinate questions. The moral problem was most clearly formulated in this way by Schopenhauer, whose sound sense of reality led him to the correct path here (if not in the solution) and guarded him from the Kantian formulation of the problem and from the post-Kantian philosophy of value.

The problem which we must put at the center of ethics is a purely psychological one. For, without doubt, the discovery of the motives or laws of any kind of behavior, and therefore of moral behavior, is a purely

psychological affair. Only the empirical science of the laws which describe the life of the soul can solve this problem. One might wish to derive from this a supposedly profound and destructive objection to our formulation of the problem. For, one might say, "In such case there would be no ethics at all; what is called ethics would be nothing but a part of psychology!" I answer, "Why shouldn't ethics be a part of psychology?" Perhaps in order that the philosopher have his science for himself and govern autonomously in this sphere? He would, indeed, thereby be freed of many burdensome protests of psychology. If he laid down a command, "*Thus* shall man act," he would not have to pay attention to the psychologist who said to him, "But man *cannot* act so, because it contradicts psychological laws!" I fear greatly that here and there this motive, though hidden, is at work. However, if one says candidly that "there is no ethics," because it is not necessary to label a part of psychology by a special name, then the question is merely terminological.

It is a poor recommendation of the philosophical spirit of our age that we so often attempt to draw strict lines of division between the sciences, to separate ever new disciplines, and to prove their autonomy. The true philosopher goes in the opposite direction; he does not wish to make the single sciences self-sufficient and independent, but, on the contrary, to unify and bring them together; he wishes to show that what is common to them is what is most essential, and that what is

different is accidental and to be viewed as belonging to practical methodology. *Sub specie aeternitatis* there is for him only *one* reality and *one* science.

Therefore, if we decide that the fundamental question of ethics, "Why does man act morally?" can be answered only by psychology, we see in this no degradation of, nor injury to, science, but a happy simplification of the world-picture. In ethics we do not seek independence, but only the truth.