



Moral Foundations

AN INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS

Alexander F. Skutch

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Preface

IN THIS BOOK I relate morality to earlier stages of the cosmic process of which it is an advanced development, interpret moral sentiments and ethical concepts in the light of this relationship, and by giving due weight to all pertinent motives, lay the foundations of an ethic both comprehensive and congenial to our spiritual aspiration.

Morality is essentially the conscious effort to cultivate harmony in our individual lives, with the people around us, and at its best with the wider realm of nature and the planet that supports us. Ethics is the division of philosophy that studies morality in all its diverse expressions. Both analytic and constructive, it not only tries to fathom the springs of moral action and the meanings of the words it uses, but from its birth in ancient Greece it has examined the ends of human life and the means for their attainment. These ends have been as diverse as the temperaments of the people who taught or wrote about ethics, but most have been concerned

with the cultivation of a firmly established happiness, contentment, or sense of fulfillment. It is hardly an exaggeration to call ethics the quest of felicity. Fascinated by the peculiar features of our moral life, philosophers have given too little attention to the close connection between morality and its antecedents in the animal kingdom and, beyond this, in the Universe at large. Even Herbert Spencer, a thinker with interests as wide as Aristotle's, failed to articulate his ethics with his evolutionary philosophy as closely as he might have done.¹ In this book I try to achieve a closer union.

When we view morality broadly as the effort to increase harmony in all that concerns us, we recognize its resemblance to a widespread cosmic process. From its prime foundations in space and matter, the Universe is pervaded by a movement that unites diverse entities in patterns of increasing amplitude, complexity, and coherence—the process of harmonization. On a vast scale it has created the solar system, in which Sun, planets, and their satellites move in a pattern so stable that it has endured for the long ages needed to cover Earth with abundant life—a system that might serve as a paradigm for an orderly society. On a very small scale, a similar process unites atoms in molecules and both in crystals that are often both beautiful and enduring. On an intermediate scale harmonization is evident in the growth of organisms both vegetable and animal, wherein a greater diversity of components are more closely integrated and interdependent than in any inorganic creation of whatever magnitude. When, after countless generations of slow advance by the crude, gambling methods of biological evolution, harmonization brought forth minds sensitive to the process that perme-

ates them, they use their capacity to foresee and choose to promote harmony in the living world—they become moral agents. Because biological evolution has been opportunistic rather than planned, and the excessive intensity of a primarily beneficent process has overcrowded Earth with living things that too often compete fiercely for what they need, the task of these agents has not been easy; but realization that their efforts are in the direction of a cosmic movement that creates order and beauty and increases the value of existence—a movement that impels them forward—should encourage them to persevere.

Prolonged study of free animals, especially the more social birds, has impressed me with the broad similarity of their problems to ours. Their welfare, like ours, depends upon concord with others of their kind. They have developed patterns of behavior that promote cooperation and mitigate interindividual conflict. A major difference between them and us is that their behavior is largely innately controlled whereas ours is largely learned. Hence we become more conscious of our conduct than we suppose other animals to be, but our habits are less strongly impressed upon the nervous system. This circumstance, in restless minds able to choose between alternative courses of action, is responsible for all the vagaries of human behavior. It has made morality a human need, as compensation for our loss of integrated patterns of behavior that are innate rather than learned. Our wandering thoughts and all the temptations that solicit us in a complex civilization have made us more prone to go astray than we suppose other animals to be; but they, too, are not guiltless of aberrations from the pattern of behavior that safeguard their survival as individuals

and as species. Differences between them and us should not blind us to fundamental similarities. They might be said to have a protomorality such as our remote prehuman ancestors possessed, and from which our more self-conscious morality evolved as innate behavior was gradually superseded by learned behavior.

To support a favorite theory or achieve expository neatness, philosophers have too often tried to derive the whole of morality from a single motive, such as self-preservation, the pursuit of pleasure or happiness, duty, or something else, neglecting other motives that might support our moral endeavor. Although this course may be intellectually satisfying, it commonly fails to achieve an ethic of ample breadth and inclusiveness. Only by giving voice to all our innate resources of moral relevance can we establish an ethic that satisfies a wide moral vision. By this course we may expand our moral endeavor beyond humanity to the creatures around us, now so afflicted by our activities, and to the abused planet that supports us all. An ethic established firmly on all pertinent motives, from the strongest to the weakest, should immensely encourage our growing efforts to save Earth from the disaster that increasingly menaces it. The environmental movement is of great ethical relevance because the possibility of a firmly established, enduring morality depends upon its success, but it is still much too weak to accomplish its aims on a global scale and needs all the support, practical and intellectual, that we can give it.

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Chapter One

The Science of Ethics

I. Delimitation of the Subject

ETHICS IS THE study of morality in all its varied manifestations. Morality is one of the higher or more advanced modes of harmonization, which can occur only after the earlier modes have prepared for it through a long evolution. It is the endeavor of intelligent, foreseeing beings to bring order and stability into their individual lives and to dwell in concord with the innumerable creatures of their own and other kinds which share Earth with them. Moral beings realize this goal in the measure that they succeed in arranging all the details of their lives in a coherent system, and in adjusting the resulting individual patterns of conduct in a comprehensive social pattern, which reduces to a minimum the strife between living

things and, as far as possible, permits each of them to attain the perfection natural to it. Thus, broadly viewed, morality is the effort of harmonization to mitigate, by means of self-conscious agents, the conflicts which spring up everywhere as a secondary effect of the very universality of the impulsion toward harmony or order. Ethics is the study of the impulses which lead to this endeavor, the methods it employs, and the phenomena to which it gives rise.

At the outset, it seems necessary to delimit morality from certain other of the higher modes of harmonization, and to define its relation to them. This is no easy task, for they are closely associated. On one side it merges into the arts, while on the other it is joined by the closest bonds to religion. But no particular art, nor all of them together, is competent to effect that articulation and coordination of all our activities without which our most devoted efforts in limited fields may lead to discord and frustration rather than to the prosperity and happiness which they are intended to promote. This attempt to regulate and coordinate is essentially a moral endeavor; hence the science of morality ranks above any special art, and must assign to each of them its place in the whole scheme of human life.

Just as it stands above the arts, so morality ranks below religion in the hierarchy of human activities. For while moral endeavor, when most inclusive, strives to bring harmony into our relations with all the beings which surround us, religion attempts to attune our inner life to an encompassing whole. The primary goal of morality is practical harmony, that of religion spiritual harmony; yet these two are so closely linked that it is difficult to disentangle them. Restrained by fear of statute law, social censure, or