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ETHICS

By G. E. MOORE

LONDON

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E T H I C S

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CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I	UTILITARIANISM	7
II	UTILITARIANISM (<i>concluded</i>)	40
III	THE OBJECTIVITY OF MORAL JUDGMENTS	79
IV	THE OBJECTIVITY OF MORAL JUDGMENTS (<i>concluded</i>)	133
V	RESULTS THE TEST OF RIGHT AND WRONG	170
VI	FREE WILL	196
VII	INTRINSIC VALUE	223
	NOTE ON BOOKS	253
	INDEX	255

ETHICS

CHAPTER I

UTILITARIANISM

ETHICS is a subject about which there has been and still is an immense amount of difference of opinion, in spite of all the time and labour which have been devoted to the study of it. There are indeed certain matters about which there is not much disagreement. Almost everybody is agreed that certain kinds of actions ought, as a general rule, to be avoided; and that under certain circumstances, which constantly recur, it is, as a general rule, better to act in certain specified ways rather than in others. There is, moreover, a pretty general agreement, with regard to certain things which happen in the world, that it would be better if they never happened, or, at least, did not happen

so often as they do ; and with regard to others, that it would be better if they happened more often than they do. But on many questions, even of this kind, there is great diversity of opinion. Actions which some philosophers hold to be generally wrong, others hold to be generally right, and occurrences which some hold to be evils, others hold to be goods.

And when we come to more fundamental questions the difference of opinion is even more marked. Ethical philosophers have, in fact, been largely concerned, not with laying down rules to the effect that certain ways of acting are generally or always right, and others generally or always wrong, nor yet with giving lists of things which are good and others which are evil, but with trying to answer more general and fundamental questions such as the following. What, after all, is it that we mean to say of an action when we say that it is right or ought to be done ? And what is it that we mean to say of a state of things when we say that it is good or bad ? Can we discover any general characteristic, which belongs in

common to absolutely *all* right actions, no matter how different they may be in other respects? and which does not belong to any actions except those which are right? And can we similarly discover any characteristic which belongs in common to absolutely all "good" things, and which does not belong to any thing except what is a good? Or again, can we discover any single reason, applicable to all right actions equally, which is, in every case, *the* reason why an action is right, when it is right? And can we, similarly, discover any reason which is *the* reason why a thing is good, when it is good, and which also gives us the reason why any one thing is better than another, when it is better? Or is there, perhaps, no such single reason in either case? On questions of this sort different philosophers still hold the most diverse opinions. I think it is true that absolutely every answer which has ever been given to them by any one philosopher would be denied to be true by many others. There is, at any rate, no such consensus of opinion among experts about these fundamental ethical

questions, as there is about many fundamental propositions in Mathematics and the Natural Sciences.

Now, it is precisely questions of this sort, about every one of which there are serious differences of opinion, that I wish to discuss in this book. And from the fact that so much difference of opinion exists about them it is natural to infer that they are questions about which it is extremely difficult to discover the truth. This is, I think, really the case. The probability is, that hardly any positive proposition, which can as yet be offered in answer to them, will be strictly and absolutely true. With regard to *negative* propositions, indeed,—propositions to the effect that certain positive answers which have been offered, are false,—the case seems to be different. We are, I think, justified in being much more certain that some of the positive suggestions which have been made are *not* true, than that any particular one among them *is* true; though even here, perhaps, we are not justified in being *absolutely* certain.

But even if we cannot be justified either in

accepting or rejecting, with absolute certainty, any of the alternative hypotheses which can be suggested, it is, I think, well worth while to consider carefully the most important among these rival hypotheses. To realise and distinguish clearly from one another the most important of the different views which may be held about these matters is well worth doing, even if we ought to admit that the best of them has no more than a certain amount of probability in its favour, and that the worst have just a possibility of being true. This, therefore, is what I shall try to do. I shall try to state and distinguish clearly from one another what seem to me to be the most important of the different views which may be held upon a few of the most fundamental ethical questions. Some of these views seem to me to be much nearer the truth than others, and I shall try to indicate which these are. But even where it seems pretty certain that some one view is erroneous, and that another comes, at least, rather nearer to the truth, it is very difficult to be sure that the latter is strictly and absolutely true.

One great difficulty which arises in ethical discussions is the difficulty of getting quite clear as to exactly what question it is that we want to answer. And in order to minimise this difficulty, I propose to begin, in these first two chapters, by stating one particular theory, which seems to me to be peculiarly simple and easy to understand. It is a theory which, so far as I can see, comes very near to the truth in some respects, but is quite false in others. And why I propose to begin with it is merely because I think it brings out particularly clearly the difference between several quite distinct questions, which are liable to be confused with one another. If, after stating this theory, we then go on to consider the most important objections which might be urged against it, for various reasons, we shall, I think, pretty well cover the main topics of ethical discussion, so far as fundamental principles are concerned.

This theory starts from the familiar fact that we all very often seem to have a choice between several different actions, any one

of which we might do, if we chose. Whether, in such cases, we really do have a choice, in the sense that we ever really *could* choose any other action than the one which in the end we do choose, is a question upon which it does not pronounce and which will have to be considered later on. All that the theory assumes is that, in many cases, there certainly are a considerable number of different actions, any one of which we could do, *if* we chose, and between which, therefore, in *this* sense, we have a choice ; while there are others which we could not do, even if we did choose to do them. It assumes, that is to say, that in many cases, *if* we had chosen differently, we should have acted differently ; and this seems to be an unquestionable fact, which must be admitted, even if we hold that it is never the case that we *could* have chosen differently. Our theory assumes, then, that many of our actions are under the control of our wills, in the sense that *if*, just before we began to do them, we had chosen not to do them, we *should* not have done them ; and I propose to call all actions of this kind *voluntary* actions.

It should be noticed that, if we define voluntary actions in this way, it is by no means certain that all or nearly all voluntary actions are actually themselves chosen or willed. It seems highly probable that an immense number of the actions which we do, and which we *could* have avoided, *if* we had chosen to avoid them, were not themselves willed at all. It is only true of them that they are "voluntary" in the sense that a particular act of will, just before their occurrence, would have been sufficient to *prevent* them; not in the sense that they themselves were brought about by being willed. And perhaps there is some departure from common usage in calling all such acts "voluntary." I do not think, however, that it is in accordance with common usage to restrict the name "voluntary" to actions which are quite certainly actually willed. And the class of actions to which I propose to give the name—all those, namely, which we could have prevented, *if*, immediately beforehand, we had willed to do so—do, I think, certainly require to be distinguished by some special name. It might, perhaps, be thought that

almost all our actions, or even, in a sense, *absolutely* all those, which properly deserve to be called "ours," are "voluntary" in this sense: so that the use of this special name is unnecessary: we might, instead, talk simply of "our actions." And it is, I think, true that almost all the actions, of which we should generally think, when we talk of "our actions," are of this nature; and even that, in some contexts, when we talk of "human actions," we do refer exclusively to actions of this sort. But in other contexts such a way of speaking would be misleading. It is quite certain that both our bodies and our minds constantly do things, which we certainly could not have prevented, by merely willing just beforehand that they should not be done; and some, at least, of these things, which our bodies and minds do, would in certain contexts be called actions of ours. There would therefore be some risk of confusion if we were to speak of "human actions" generally, when we mean only actions which are "voluntary" in the sense I have defined. It is better, therefore, to give some special name to

actions of this class ; and I cannot think of any better name than that of "voluntary" actions. If we require further to distinguish from among them, those which are also voluntary in the sense that we definitely willed to do them, we can do so by calling these "willed" actions.

Our theory holds, then, that a great many of our actions are voluntary in the sense that we could have avoided them, *if*, just beforehand, we had chosen to do so. It does not pretend to decide whether we *could* have thus chosen to avoid them ; it only says that, *if* we had so chosen, we should have succeeded. And its first concern is to lay down some absolutely universal rules as to the conditions under which actions of this kind are *right* or *wrong* ; under which they *ought* or *ought not* to be done ; and under which it is our *duty* to do them or not to do them. It is quite certain that we do hold that many voluntary actions are right and others wrong ; that many ought to have been done, and others ought not to have been done ; and that it was the agent's duty to do some of them, and his duty not to