Skepticism in Ethics

PANAYOT BUTCHVAROV

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To David John and
Catherine Suzanna

CONTENTS

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Skepticism in Ethics

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

At the end of the earliest exposition of his emotive theory of ethics, Charles L. Stevenson acknowledged that the obvious response of many would be: "When we ask 'Is X good?' we don't want mere influence, mere advice. . . .We want our interests to be guided by . . . truth, and by nothing else. To substitute for such a truth mere emotive meaning and suggestion is to conceal from us the very object of our search." To this Stevenson replied: "I can only answer that I do not understand. What is this truth to be *about*? . . . I find no indefinable property, nor do I know what to look for."[1] Perhaps Stevenson might be excused for not trying harder to "find" the property in question. But no excuse is available for the failure of recent moral philosophy as a whole to do so.

G. E. Moore, whom presumably Stevenson had in mind in the last statement I quoted, and whose *Principia Ethica* determined the course of twentieth-century British and American ethics, claimed to be aware of an objective simple, indefinable, and nonnatural property *good*, in terms of which we could understand what ends are worthy of pursuit and therefore what actions we ought to perform. Is there such a property? Are we aware of such a property? Obviously, the answer would depend in part on the relevant phenomenological data, though not on a bare appeal to them, but on an appeal informed by a sufficiently subtle understanding of what it is for something to be a phenomenological datum. The answer would depend in part on purely metaphysical considerations about the sort of property goodness would be if there were such a property, and then about the very possibility of there being such a property. And the answer would, clearly, depend in part also on our success or failure in satisfying ourselves that such a property is, or at least can be, known, in the sense that we do or at least can know that there is such a property and that certain things have it and others do not, an issue by no means settled solely on phenomenological or metaphysical grounds.

In view of its subject matter, perhaps it is ultimately a tautology to say that ethics is the most important branch of philosophy. But certainly it is not the most fundamental. Little in it can be done that would be of value except on the basis of an adequate phenomenology, metaphysics, and epistemology. The fate of Moore's ethics, well exemplified by the passage from Stevenson with which we began, was to a great degree due to his failure to provide in detail the necessary phenomenological, metaphysical, and epistemological explanations in terms of which it would need to be understood. One specific purpose of this book is to

provide such (long overdue) explanations, at times engaging even in fairly detailed exegesis. But this is not a book about Moore; some of the explanations to be offered might not have been acceptable to him. And its general purpose is much more ambitious: to provide, insofar as this can be done in one book, the phenomenological, metaphysical, and epistemological foundations of an ethical theory that can withstand the challenge of skepticism, insofar as this can be done, a theory that indeed resembles in some important respects Moore's (as well as Hastings Rashdall's and, less so, also H. A. Prichard's and W. D. Ross's), but in others is closer to the ethical theories of the major twentieth-century continental moral philosophers Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann, and in still others to the mainstream of classical Greek and medieval ethics. The reader should therefore expect phenomenological, metaphysical, and epistemological discussions much more detailed than those usually found in a book in ethics. For skepticism is, in part, a metaphysical position and, in part, an epistemological position, and, insofar as metaphysics and epistemology involve phenomenological considerations, in part also a phenomenological position. But our inquiry may also be regarded, more simply, as concerned with the question, Do we, or at least can we, know what is good and what is right? since the phenomenological and metaphysical discussions will be motivated by the epistemological goal. To answer this question we shall consider a number of views, all of which may be described as varieties of skepticism in ethics.

By skepticism in ethics I shall mean the general view that we have no knowledge of ethical facts, of facts that may be the subject matter of ethical judgments and statements, of the goodness of some things or the rightness of some actions, or of virtue, or of duty. The more familiar versions of this view rest on the claim that we have no such knowledge because there are no such facts, that so-called ethical judgments and statements are neither true nor false, have no cognitive content, and therefore, strictly speaking, are not judgments or statements at all. These versions may be said to be opposed to ethical realism. But the skeptic may also rest his case on a very different claim: that while there are ethical facts and therefore genuine ethical judgments and statements, possessing determinate truth-value, we do not, perhaps cannot, have knowledge of those facts, of the truth-value of those judgments and statements. In this book I shall explore the extent to which both kinds of ethical skepticism are justified, and indeed will concede that there is a respect in which each is justified. I believe that the second kind, which is the one opposed to cognitivism proper, is much more serious than the first. But it is the first, which is opposed to realism, that has received most attention, and I shall devote the first six chapters to it.

The *general* topic of realism is, once again, trendy. It dominated philosophy in the later decades of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries. That realism was contrasted then with idealism and contrasted now with just irrealism (or antirealism) is of less significance than it may seem, since what the idealists meant by "mind" or "spirit" included what is meant today by "our conceptual scheme." And, like the idealism of the earlier period, contemporary irrealism rests on one or both of two assumptions that are not necessarily related (both evident, for example, in Hilary Putnam's recent writings). The first is rep-

resentationalism, the view that we are encircled by our sensations, ideas, and beliefs (whether these are understood as mental, or neural, or linguistic states or events), which at most *represent* an independent reality. If so, then it becomes plausible to suggest that we have no reason to suppose they represent anything at all, or that even if they do, they could be taken to represent any one of a great variety of possible realities. G. E. Moore (and, later, Sartre) denied this assumption by arguing that to have, say, a sensation (understood as a mental state or event) is already to be outside the circle, to be in direct epistemic contact with something other than a sensation. (Hilary Putnam rejects such a view as magical,[2] presumably because it does not fit the scientific picture of perception. Yet, in his later works, he himself deplores the scientism and physicalism characteristic of current analytic philosophy.)[3] The second assumption is that we can have no epistemic access to an unconceptualized reality. H. H. Price, in the chapter on the given in *Perception*, in effect argued (I take some liberties with the text) that the very idea of our conceptualizing something presupposes that there is something (to be) conceptualized and that this presupposition is coherent only if we allow for an independent, unmediated by concepts, epistemic access to the thing. That this is so is especially plausible if we think, as most philosophers do today, that conceptualization involves the employment of language. Usually, it takes years to learn to talk.

As with any trendy topic, the first rule a discussion of realism must enforce is: distinguish! Michael Devitt has recently argued[4] that realism must not be confused with a theory of truth, or a theory of meaning, or a theory of knowledge, though it may be dialectically connected with such theories. It is a metaphysical theory.

Very roughly, I shall mean by unqualified realism with respect to x the view that (1) x exists and has certain properties, a nature, and (2) that its existence and nature are independent of our awareness of it, (3) of the manner in which we think of (conceptualize) it, and (4) of the manner in which we speak of it. Obviously, a great variety of views can be called realist or irrealist. One principle of classification would be what meanings are attached to the terms "exists" ("real"), "awareness," "independent," "conceptualize," and how conditions 3 and 4 are distinguished (as they should be by any phenomenologically sensitive philosophy of mind), crucial questions to which recent discussions of the topic accord very little attention. Another principle of classification would be which (if not all) of the four conditions are accepted. This question becomes even more complicated if we distinguish, as Meinong did, between the two parts of (1) and thus between realism with respect to the existence of x and realism with respect to the nature (properties) of x. It should be noted that the conditions are largely independent of one another. Perhaps (3) entails (4), but not vice versa; Meinong held that the second part of (1), as well as (2), (3), and (4), may be satisfied even if the first part of (1) is not; Moore held that almost nothing fails to satisfy (2); Berkeley held that almost everything does.

A third principle of classification, which is especially relevant to our purposes in this book, would be the subject matter of the view, the value of the variable x with respect to which one or more of the four conditions are accepted or rejected. In addition to what may be called unqualified global realism (more plausibly stated

as "Whatever exists satisfies conditions 2, 3, and 4," rather than as "Everything satisfies conditions 1, 2, 3, and 4") and unqualified global irrealism (more plausibly stated as "Whatever exists satisfies none of conditions 2, 3, and 4," rather than "Nothing satisfies any of conditions 1, 2, 3, and 4"), and the many possible qualified but still global realisms and irrealisms between those extremes (qualified by excluding only one or two of conditions 2, 3, and 4), there are theories distinguished according to their specific subject matter, for example, realism or irrealism with respect to numbers, realism or irrealism with respect to the theoretical entities of physics, realism or irrealism with respect to the properties ethics is concerned with. Just as there are important differences among the varieties of realism (irrealism) distinguished according to the first two principles of classification, there are important differences among the varieties distinguished according to this third principle, differences that result from the differences in subject matter.[5]

Now there are at least three requirements, I suggest, genuine realism in ethics should satisfy. (1) The alleged reality of ethical properties must be understood in a straightforward, familiar, unsurprising fashion. What it is for something to be real or to exist is perhaps the deepest philosophical problem, but one does realism in ethics no service by resting it on highly dubious and unclear solutions to that problem. (2) The argument for realism in ethics must not rest on definitions of all ethical terms in nonethical terms. Of course, if it is obvious that the definitions capture the senses of the ethical terms, this requirement would be unjustified. But it should be commonplace by now that this is not obvious in the case of any definitions so far proposed or that can even be conceived. For example, Gilbert Harman's remark that "there are relative facts about what is right or wrong with respect to one or another set of conventions"[6] cannot be regarded as an argument for genuine realism. (3) The argument for realism in ethics must concern the realist interpretation of an ethical *theory*, not of isolated, haphazardly selected reports of alleged moral "intuitions." To take a familiar example, whether Hitler's moral depravity is an irreducible moral fact cannot be judged in abstraction from a theory of moral depravity, which itself must be a part of a whole ethical theory. The reason is that we can have no genuine understanding of what moral depravity is without such a theory. A vapor trail in a cloud chamber (another much-used example!) is not a reason for concluding that a free proton has passed through the chamber except in the context of a physical theory; we need such a theory even to understand what a proton is. The case with ethics is quite similar, I suggest, and this is why my discussion of skepticism in ethics will include the provision of an ethical theory.

There is also at least one requirement that genuine cognitivism (by which I mean one that entails realism) in ethics must satisfy: that our alleged knowledge of, or justified belief in, ethical facts be understood in a straightforward, familiar, unsurprising fashion. One does no service to cognitivism by resting it on highly dubious epistemologies. For example, even if some day someone will work out a defensible purely coherentist theory of justification (one that is not wedded to a coherence theory of truth, yet preserves and elucidates the connection between justification as coherence and truth as correspondence),[7] to rest cognitivism now on such a theory can only be described as misguided. The idea that "there is no

exit from the circle of one's beliefs"[8] would not be a promising start for a defense of cognitivism in ethics. Nor would be reliance on the view that the test of reality is explanatory necessity,[9] which usually itself rests on a commitment to "the scientific image of the world," a commitment that, philosophically, belongs in the century of the French *philosophes*, when science was still a wonderful novelty, not the century of Husserl and Wittgenstein, when, despite its enormous advances, the limits of its relevance to philosophy should have become a philosophical commonplace. Perhaps there was an excuse for Laplace to proclaim that he (that is, celestial mechanics) had no need for the hypothesis of God. But anyone today, whether theist or atheist, who thinks of the issue of God's existence in this way does not understand that issue. In this respect ethics is not unlike the philosophy of religion.

The above requirements, when combined, call for what may be described as a highly conservative approach to the issues of realism and cognitivism in ethics. We must defend realism and cognitivism by showing that a standard, traditional type of ethical theory describes ethical realities as these would be understood in a standard, traditional manner, and that (at least in part) it can be known to be true in ways that can be understood in a standard, traditional way. The rationale for this approach has to do with philosophical strategy. A proposed solution to a philosophical problem is far more valuable if it does not depend on a change in the conditions in terms of which the problem arose and was originally understood. This is especially true in ethics. Unlike most other branches of philosophy, it is firmly rooted in everyday thought, in which often its subject matter is understood better than by academic philosophers, and from which it derives its identity, interest, indeed life. This is why the topics of realism and cognitivism in ethics differ importantly from those of realism and cognitivism with respect to some other subject matters. Realism in mathematics may allow severely reductive definitions. Cognitivism with respect to some of the "theoretical entities" of science can be defended, perhaps, only by substantive modifications in our ordinary conception of knowledge. Not so with ethics. Only utter despair over finding a defense of realism and cognitivism that satisfies the above requirements could justify tampering with them. The time for such despair, I suggest, is not yet upon us.

It may seem that skepticism in ethics is far less common now than it was thirty or forty years ago. And, indeed, its more primitive versions are seldom defended today. But to some extent appearances in this respect are deceptive. For, as I have just argued, it is not sufficient to say that ethical statements have truth-value, of which we can have knowledge. It is also necessary to have a clear view of what such truth-value and such knowledge amount to. They may well be so unlike truth and knowledge as ordinarily conceived as to render the claim to realism and cognitivism empty. I proceed to give some examples from the recent literature, but merely to explain my approach further, not to engage in detailed criticism of the views of others. I shall therefore be succinct, even at the risk of appearing unfair.

John Rawls tells us that the justification of ethical propositions "is a matter of the mutual support of many considerations, of everything fitting together into one coherent view."[10] But that he can appeal (in a footnote) to Quine's view and (in

another footnote) to Goodman's view that this is the nature of justification in general hardly suffices to make clear that such a notion of justification accords with what we ordinarily understand by justification, knowledge, and truth. As I pointed out earlier, the relationship of justification-as-coherence to truth is quite opaque, and this violates the ordinary notion of justification. If the relationship is made transparent by accepting a coherence theory of truth, then this violates the ordinary notion of truth. It is worth noting that a conception of justification such as Rawls's (or Quine's or Goodman's) when applied to science is a major motive for irrealism with respect to science. As a motive for irrealism with respect to ethics, it would be almost irresistible, given the striking differences between science and ethics, such as the role of observation and experimentation and the incomparably greater extent of agreement and progress in the former.[11] I shall return to the coherentist theory of justification in chapter 7. Suffice it here to say that the appeal to coherence, whether in the theory of justification or in the theory of truth, rests on the belief that there is nothing else to which we can appeal. In this book I shall try to show that this belief is false, that our ordinary, noncoherentist, indeed foundationalist notions of justification and truth have a clear application in ethics, whatever the case with science may be.

Richard B. Brandt defines ethical notions in terms of those of cognitive psychology and regards the justification of ethical propositions as of the same nature as the justification of the propositions of cognitive psychology. For example, he defines good as what is rationally desired and claims that a desire is rational if and only if it is not extinguishable under cognitive psychotherapy, that is, if and only if it is shown to be what it would be if it were maximally influenced by evidence and logic, meaning by "evidence" observational evidence and by "logic" inductive and deductive logic. And he tells us that by justification he means, roughly, that possible through inductive or deductive logic.[12] But, I suggest, neither his definitions nor his conception of justification correspond sufficiently to what is meant and sought in ethical inquiry, whether conducted by philosophers or by laymen. For example, it seems quite uncertain that selfishness, or benevolence, or both, or neither, are extinguishable under cognitive psychotherapy.[13] But we do not regard our usual appraisals of them to be at all uncertain. Brandt's unargued assertion that his definitions and procedure capture the only thing that could be clearly meant and rationally sought is in effect, I suggest, an espousal of skepticism. It expresses the belief that these definitions and procedure are the best we can do in ethics. I shall try to show in this book that we can do better.

Also motivated by the desire to be "scientific" are recent defenses, for example, by Nicholas L. Sturgeon,[14] of (at least the possibility of) moral realism based on the (possible) role that moral facts may serve in the explanation of actions and moral beliefs. As I have already indicated, I share neither their motive nor their highly dubious view that the test of reality is explanatory necessity, but consider such defenses nevertheless interesting and not in any obvious way incompatible with anything I shall say in this book. But at best they are highly programmatic and are open to difficulties, familiar in the philosophy of science, of specifying what would count as an explanation and particularly as a better explanation than the alternatives

to it. (On this, much good sense can be found in Hilary Putnam's more recent works, especially those collected in the third volume of *Philosophical Papers*.) Moreover, again as I have remarked earlier, it is not enough just to talk of moral facts and to give one or two examples, such as that Hitler was a morally bad man, or that torturing an animal just for the fun of it is wrong. We need a theory of the moral facts we would appeal to in our explanations, and until such a theory is provided we cannot judge the adequacy of the explanations. It is not obvious that a theory such as Moore's or that to be defended in this book would not turn out to be explanatorily adequate. Indeed, it is not likely to be a physicalistic theory, though, as we shall see, even this is not obvious. In any case, if we allow only for physicalistic explanations, then the view we are considering becomes so programmatic as to be indistinguishable from mere speculation. On the other hand, if a nonphysicalistic theory does provide the only detailed and adequate explanations available, then this would be a major argument against physicalism. Whether it does or not should not be judged on the basis of global theses such as that of physicalism, but by looking at the details of the theory.

In *The View from Nowhere*,[15] Thomas Nagel defends what he calls "realism about values" (p. 139 *et passim*) but denies that this "would require crowding [the universe] with extra entities, qualities, or relations, things like Platonic Forms or Moore's nonnatural qualities" (p. 144). What are values, then? "Normative reasons" (p. 143). And what is that? Nagel writes: "The objective badness of pain, for example, is not some mysterious further property that all pains have, but just the fact that there is reason for anyone capable of viewing the world objectively to want it to stop" (p. 144). And again: "If I have a severe headache, the headache seems to me to be not merely unpleasant, but a bad thing. Not only do I dislike it, but I think I have a reason to try to get rid of it" (p. 145). It is curious that Nagel finds badness, if understood as a property that all pains have, mysterious (I doubt that any nonphilosopher does), but does not so find what from a logical standpoint is also a property, namely the property of every pain of being such that there is reason for anyone capable of viewing the world objectively to want it to stop. Surely, here the cart is put before the horse. That pains have the latter, extremely complex property is plausible, indeed comprehensible, only if the reality of the former property is taken for granted. The view that the latter is to be admitted but the former denied is hardly realism about values as these are ordinarily understood. I shall return to this (in my view obscurantist) use of the term "reason" at the end of chapter 2.

In his important work *The Theory of Morality*, Alan Donagan asserts that "the elementary deliverances of common morality are . . . true or false according to the realist, or correspondence, theory of truth," but we find him also claiming that these deliverances have the form "Practical reason itself—that is, anybody's practical reason, provided that no error is made—prescribes that actions of kind K may not (may) be done."[16] But until we are clear about what it is for practical reason to prescribe something, and especially about the epistemic significance of the fact that it does prescribe this or that (as distinguished from its disclosing to us this moral fact or that), and about what it is for it to make no error, we are left with the

uncomfortable feeling that the truth of moral judgments is not understood by Donagan quite in the way implied by the correspondence theory of truth. Suffice it here to suggest that the Kantian belief that reason may make pronouncements from within itself, whether ethical or mathematical, whether with or without the aid of pure intuition, rested on the assumption that only thus could the possibility of synthetic a priori knowledge be explained. But there is the alternative that Platonism offers.

A very different approach is that of Alan Gewirth, who attempts to derive moral principles from an analysis of the concept of human action. I believe that his derivation is invalid.[17] But what is relevant to the present discussion is that his attempt aims at the right target. Unless we make the error of thinking that principles so derived are "mere tautologies" and not expressive of truths about their subject matter (we should think here of the analogy with mathematical principles), we would find their derivation as basing ethics on the most solid foundation possible, analogous to that of mathematics. (But only analogous, since, despite what he implies, Gewirth's "dialectically necessary method" is not purely deductive.) Even if the derivation is invalid, the attempt at it shows a clear awareness of the general goal a cognitivist ethical theory must have.

It should go without saying that the view expressed or implied in some recent writings[18] that we should use Wittgenstein's later philosophy of mathematics as the model for our understanding of the subject matter of ethics is at least as opposed to realism in ethics as Wittgenstein's philosophy of mathematics is opposed to realism in mathematics. It is an interesting view and very much merits extended discussion. But its interest and merit derive so directly from the interest and merit of Wittgenstein's general later philosophy that it is the latter that must be the subject of extended critical discussion—a task obviously not to be undertaken in this book. And it is characteristic of other, mostly earlier, defenses of cognitivism that seem to have been directly or indirectly influenced by Wittgenstein's later philosophy (I have in mind now Stephen Toulmin's *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics*,[19] Kurt Baier's *The Moral Point of View*,[20] Joel J. Kupperman's *Ethical Knowledge*,[21] Renford Bambrough's *Moral Scepticism and Moral Knowledge*),[22] that they do not found, at least not in any clear way, ethical cognitivism on ethical realism—indeed, they sometimes explicitly deny such a foundation is possible or needed. For example, after a lengthy attempt to defend moral cognitivism by analyzing the concepts of reason and morality, Baier seems satisfied to say, "Our very purpose in 'playing the reasoning game' is to maximize satisfactions and minimize frustrations,"[23] without even seeming to be aware that this claim is controversial. Kupperman is explicit. He writes: "We . . . could do without the correspondence theory of truth in relation to ethics. Again the example of mathematics is useful . . . most philosophers would concede that some mathematical propositions are true, and virtually no one would apply the correspondence theory of truth to mathematics."[24] But mathematicians and, once Kupperman, many philosophers are very much concerned with the question what, if anything, in reality corresponds to true mathematical propositions and, if convinced that the answer is Nothing, would find little consolation in the fact that this does not preclude them from continuing to *speak* of mathematical truth and knowledge. If cognitivism is to be severed from

realism, I suggest, this would require not casual observations about language or about moral, mathematical, and scientific practice, but a revolutionary and detailed *unified* theory of reality and knowledge.

Nor can we take seriously as defenses of realism in ethics views, also inspired by Wittgenstein but perhaps by some recent continental philosophers as well, that rest on the claim that ethical judgments are no less realist than any other judgments since *all* judgments are founded in shared language-games, and "the world text" is at least partly written by ourselves.[25] The interest of such defenses reduces to that of the deep *global* irrealism on which they rest. And, obviously, to describe them as defenses of realism in *ethics* would be misleading. It would be like defending theistic knowledge by denying the general distinction between knowledge and belief. The global irrealism of the view, reminiscent of philosophies such as Hegel's and Bradley's, is of course an important position, but its adequacy cannot be discussed here.

It should also go without saying that the familiar appeal in recent works to so-called intuitions is hardly evidence of the espousal of a clearly cognitivist position. Sometimes it is an application of the ordinary language analysis practiced by Wittgenstein, Ryle, and Austin in earlier decades, an appeal to what we would or would not say in various, usually imaginary, situations. But more often the appeal to "intuitions" in recent ethics is merely the avowal of moral attitudes. In neither case does it attain the theoretical level on which the issue of cognitivism versus noncognitivism arises. And the vagueness and inconsistencies of such intuitions were exposed long ago, in great detail, by Sidgwick.[26]

Doubtless, many readers will have remained dissatisfied by what I have said in this introductory chapter. For, generally, what I have tried to do is to distinguish my approach to the subject matter of this book from other contemporary approaches. But I have not attempted to argue in detail against any of them. And this may seem especially unsatisfactory to readers favoring varieties of what may be called the scientific approach and of the neo-Wittgensteinean approach. What justification can I offer for saying so little about them? The obvious, but also superficial, justification is that this book is not a critical survey of the contemporary scene in ethics; for that another book would be needed. But the deeper justification is that the *nonethical* bases of the two approaches mentioned are not arguments one can evaluate but rather attitudes.

The scientific approach in ethics is based, if not on straightforward physicalism, then on a general conviction that what there is and what we know about what there is can be determined only by the methods of the experimental sciences. I am unaware of anything even resembling a sustained, detailed argument for this conviction; that it may receive some support from the so-called causal theories of knowledge is not such an argument, for these theories are themselves rendered at all plausible only by that conviction. (That they avoid some Gettier-type counterexamples to the definition of knowledge as justified true belief is hardly what renders them plausible, for they themselves are open to such counterexamples.) The neo-Wittgensteinean approach in ethics is based, of course, on the contention that thought, judgment, and knowledge are inherently linguistic in nature and that their linguistic nature is inherently social. But what is the argument for this contention?

Is it the so-called private language argument, an argument that even after thirty-five years of discussion remains so obscure and controversial as to be a most unlikely explanation of the popularity of the contention? The truth is that the Wittgensteinean contention expresses a deeply held attitude toward language on one hand and toward thought, knowledge, and the world on the other, and that so does the contention motivating the scientific approaches to ethics. Such attitudes are of course mainly intellectual and thus capable of being correct or incorrect. But I doubt that it can be *shown* by argument that they are incorrect.[28] One can only show that arguments supporting them are inadequate. And my point in this paragraph has been that either no arguments supporting them have been given, or that the arguments that have been given are not the basis of the attitudes, and even if the former are shown to be inadequate, this would not change the latter. I am certain, for example, that if I proved to a neo-Wittgensteinean that the private-language argument is inadequate, I would not have shaken his or her basic philosophical convictions at all.

I announced earlier that the purpose of this book is to explore the extent to which realism and cognitivism in ethics can be defended against the skeptic. To do so, I shall eventually offer (though not in full detail) an actual ethical theory that is reflective of ordinary ethical thought and is as realist and cognitivist as such a theory can possibly be. We shall find (though, unavoidably, much later in this book) that both its realism and its cognitivism must be qualified in important ways. Although in itself the ethical theory is thoroughly realist, its ultimate nonethical foundation may only be irrealist. And it must acknowledge severe limitations on our knowledge of ethical facts. But neither of these admissions should comfort the skeptic since neither is required by considerations peculiar to ethics. The element of irrealism in the theory, I shall argue, is present in any genuine cognitive activity, though not at all in the wholesale, indiscriminate manner supposed by recent Wittgensteinean writers, or for the reasons they offer; it is due to the special nature of the concept of identity, the failure to recognize which, I shall argue, explains the most common reason given for rejecting realism in ethics. That the reality of ethical properties and facts must be qualified in the manner I shall suggest is not a proposition even entertained in ordinary ethical thought, but this is so because of the highly technical nature of this proposition and especially of the reasons for accepting it. Yet the qualification of the realism of the theory would be entirely consonant with ordinary ethical thought, since it must be made regarding realism with respect to, for example, colors and shapes as well. Ordinary ethical thought would be satisfied with the conclusion that ethical properties are as real as colors and shapes, especially when assured that the implied reservations regarding both have nothing to do with Humean or global Wittgensteinean considerations. And the element of noncognitivism in the theory that I shall acknowledge is required by what I believe are *general* limitations on human knowledge. These limitations are familiar and usually acknowledged in ordinary ethical thought, and they are indeed implied by the ordinary conception of knowledge.

I shall begin with an account of the conceptual scheme our theory will employ.

CHAPTER TWO

A Conceptual Scheme for Ethics

1. The Method

In my outline of what I consider to be the basic concepts of ethics I shall be guided by the ordinary uses of the corresponding ethical terms, but only because otherwise the concepts outlined might be irrelevant to the issues that led to the emergence of such a branch of philosophy as ethics. This is why the outline, though guided by the ordinary uses of certain ethical terms, is not at all intended to capture these uses; it is not at all a set of definitions subject to appraisal by appeals to actual or imaginary examples of what we would or would not be ordinarily inclined to say. Even if such definitions were possible, it is not clear what philosophical value they would have. But they are not possible. The idea that the ordinary use of a term such as "duty" (or, for that matter, "knowledge") can be captured in a definition can only issue from a misunderstanding of the nature of ordinary language. The definitions I shall offer (all of them quite informal) are motivated by a mild criticism of the relevant part of our ordinary conceptual scheme and constitute a no less mild regimentation of it. (Such a regimentation is absolutely essential in any inquiry, whether in philosophy or in science.) Therefore, neither will they be intended to constitute an "analysis" of concepts, whatever this might be, and so would not be subject to the Moorean accusation of confusing one property with another.[1]

Nor shall I engage in a detailed account of the ordinary uses of ethical terms, one that does not attempt to capture these uses in definitions. At its best, such an account deserves to be called linguistic phenomenology, which J. L. Austin described as follows: "When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking . . . not *merely* at words (or 'meanings,' whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena."[2] Linguistic phenomenology can be of considerable value, but also it can easily be carried to extremes, and in any case I am doubtful that it is necessary for an inquiry such as ours, even though occasionally I shall employ it. It is needed more in the *account* of an adequate ethical theory than, as in this book, in the *defense* of that theory against philosophers' objections.[3] This is why what I shall say about crucial notions such as goodness, right, or virtue, will simply ignore some of the uses of the corresponding words. To take an extreme example, I shall say nothing relevant to the use of "ought" in

I've checked the ignition system, the gas, the battery, and the car ought to start with no trouble."[4]

Moreover, it is at most a conceptual scheme for *ethics*, not for a general *theory of value*, that I shall offer. I shall say nothing about the concepts of aesthetics or about some familiar value-concepts that resist easy classification, though in chapter 3 I shall have occasion to mention what some others have said about a few of them. For example, the conceptual scheme to be proposed will not include the concepts of the beautiful and the ugly, the noble and the contemptible, the charming and the disgusting, the funny and the boring, the cute and the homely, the stately and the flimsy, the poignant and the dull, the important and the trivial, the striking and the ordinary. The reason is not any conviction that ethics can be sharply distinguished from the other branches of the theory of value (for example, both Plato and Moore, and more recently Iris Murdoch,[5] insist on the connection between goodness and beauty), but the limitations on what can be undertaken in a book the task of which is not even the provision of a complete ethical theory but rather the provision of the phenomenological, metaphysical, and epistemological foundations of an ethical theory that can withstand (within certain limits) the challenge of skepticism.

2. Concrete Goods and Abstract Goods

I shall assume that realism and cognitivism in ethics are, fundamentally, realism and cognitivism with respect to the *properties* goodness, rightness, and morality, and their contraries, in the ethically relevant senses of "goodness," "rightness," and "morality." I begin by taking the (ethically relevant) *notions* of goodness, evil (or badness), degree of goodness or of evil, and quantity of goodness or of evil as primitive, but will focus my discussion here on the first. To take a notion as primitive, however, is one thing; to fail to elucidate it is quite another. This whole book may be regarded as devoted to the elucidation, phenomenological, metaphysical, and epistemological, of the notion of goodness. A great deal can be said about a notion that cannot be usefully defined. Elucidation is not definition. Indeed, ordinarily, it is far preferable, even when a definition is possible. This much we should have learned both from Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre, and from Wittgenstein, Ryle, and Austin.

About the other primitive concepts it should suffice here to make the following remarks. Evil is usually understood to be the contrary, not the mere absence or at least privation, of goodness, but whether this is so cannot be decided in advance of a detailed account of goodness. If it is the absence or privation of goodness, then of course it can be defined in terms of goodness and would no longer be primitive. (For example, Thomas Aquinas held that "no being is said to be evil, considered as being, but only so far as it lacks being,"[6] that evil, though not the mere absence of good, is the privation of good.) Degree of goodness would be exemplified in the fact (if it is a fact) that happiness is better than gustatory pleasure. Quantity of goodness would be exemplified in the fact (if it is a fact) that, everything else being

equal, a marriage in which both persons enjoy a certain degree of happiness contains more goodness than a marriage in which only one enjoys that degree of happiness, and therefore is better than the latter, though in a sense of "better" different from that in which happiness may be said to be better than gustatory pleasure. Another example would be the fact (if it is a fact) that, everything else being equal, ten years of happiness is better than just two years.

We will need yet another sense of "better," namely, that in which we may say that a certain situation is better than a certain other situation when we take into account both the degrees and the quantities of goodness involved. It is not primitive; it is to be understood in terms of the concepts of degree and quantity of goodness. Its application would be exemplified by the statement (whether true or false) that, everything else being equal, the happiness of one person constitutes more total goodness, is better than, the gustatory pleasures of two persons. Obviously, in many actual cases it would be extraordinarily difficult to decide that one situation is better than some other situation, in this sense of "better," a fact familiar to students of utilitarianism. But it does not follow that we do not have or do not need the concept it expresses. We must not, however, assume that the totalities of goodness compared in this third sense are numerically measurable, that it makes sense to say, for example, that one is twice better than another. For we must not assume that *degrees* of goodness are arithmetically additive, even though we may assume this in the case of *quantities* of goodness. Happiness may be better than gustatory pleasure, but it is probably absurd to say that it is twice, or three times, etc., better. Degrees of goodness are not unique in this respect. The same is true of degrees of likeness. A shade of color may be more like another shade than it is like a third, but perhaps we cannot sensibly say that it is twice or three times more like the second than like the third. But while we may not be able to say of a certain case of goodness A *how much* better it is than another case of goodness B, in the third (as well as the first) sense of "better," this is not a reason for affirming that A is *not* better than B, or for denying that, in general, either A is better than B, or B is better than A, or neither is better than the other. In the rest of this book I shall use "better," and related expressions such as "more goodness," in the third sense, except when the context makes clear that it is used in one of the other two senses. I shall return to some of the issues mentioned in the present paragraph in chapters 6 and 8, to which alone they are relevant.

I shall assume that the metaphysical distinction between concrete entities and properties ("abstract entities," "universals") is legitimate and that goodness is a property, if it is anything at all. (In what follows in this chapter I shall often omit this or other similar qualifications, in order to avoid complexity of exposition. But it must be understood that I shall only be describing a conceptual scheme, without presupposing that it has application). If to say of a certain thing that it is good is to describe it, to say something true or false about it, then it is to attribute to it a certain property. It follows that we must distinguish sharply between goodness itself and the things that are good, just as we must distinguish sharply between the geometrical figure triangularity and the concrete entities (if there are any) that are triangular.

For our purposes, we can regard as concrete entities not only what would ordinarily be called individual things, but also actions, as well as such things as a certain person's life, on grounds similar to those that would allow us to call a flash of lightning or yesterday's weather concrete entities. It may, of course, be asked whether events, for example, a flash of lightning or a certain action, are not states of affairs and therefore not concrete. A detailed answer to this question cannot be attempted here. It is worth noting, however, that the main metaphysical reason for an affirmative answer, namely, that events are complex entities, would also be a reason for regarding individual things such as color spots and even persons as states of affairs.[7] That it is not a good reason for either view can be seen from the fact that although an action, or a flash of lightning, or a color spot can be said to have spatial and temporal properties, and to be perceived, none of these can intelligibly be said of a state of affairs. (I may see that the spot is blue, but not in the sense in which I may see the blue spot. *Perhaps* the former entails the latter, but not vice versa. Seeing-that is an epistemic state, seeing is not.) It is worth noting also that the typical referring expressions for actions are genitives with gerunds, and these are not expressions referring to states of affairs. "John's flipping the switch" refers to a flipping, not to the state of affairs that John flipped the switch, just as "John's daughter" refers to a certain female person, not to the state of affairs that John has a daughter. And we must not suppose that the needed referring expressions are what Fowler called fused participles, for example, "John flipping the switch." Such expressions, as Fowler pointed out, are grammatically corrupt, like "I flipping the switch."[8]

Goodness is usually attributed to concrete entities. But sometimes it is attributed to certain properties, to abstract entities.[9] We may say that a certain person's life is good, but we may also say that happiness as such, that is, the property a life may have of being happy, is good. Now, I suggest, a person's life can be said to be good on the grounds that it is happy only if happiness itself can be said to be good, and in general a concrete entity can be said to be good only on the grounds that it has some other property or properties that themselves have the property of being good. (A number of distinctions are needed here, which I shall make shortly.) This is the point and, I suggest, the only clear sense of describing the goodness of concrete things as a consequential or supervenient property, not an intrinsic property. I shall return to this point.

It may be argued, as W. D. Ross did, that happiness is good only in the sense that it is good to be happy, that what is good is the fact that something (someone) is happy.[10] But, I suggest, Ross's argument seems to be merely a misguided and anyhow unsuccessful attempt to avoid commitment to universals. It is misguided because the category of facts or states of affairs seems much more questionable than that of universals.[11] It is unsuccessful because the facts that supposedly are good fall into classes defined by certain lower-ranking properties, and these properties could themselves be described as good. For example, let us say that facts of the form expressed by "*x* is happy" have in common the property of involving happiness in a certain specific way. Surely they are good only because they have that property. And why then would we want to deny that that property itself is good? Moreover,

it may well be the case that the fact that a certain person's life is happy is not good (is not "a good thing"), because it has some other, very bad characteristics or very bad consequences. If we say, as Ross did, that the fact is good in itself, taken abstractly, whatever its other characteristics or its effects, would we be saying anything more than that that life's being a happy life entails its being at least in one respect a good life? And if asked why and how this entailment holds, would we not reply, because happiness is good? We should think here of the parallel with the entailment of being colored by being blue. It would be sheer mystery if this entailment were not grounded simply in the fact that blue is a color. It would be equally mysterious that being a happy life should entail being at least partially a good life if happiness were not itself good. As to the straightforwardly nominalist claim that to say that happiness is good is to say that all happy lives are good lives, let me point out again that, if some happy lives are not good, say, because their being happy has very bad consequences, then this universal statement is not true, even if it is true that happiness is good. (If Wittgenstein had been a happy man, he might not have written his philosophical works.) And even if it is true that pleasure is good, whole classes of concrete pleasures are presumably bad, for example, those of sadism. It would be better if they did not occur, because they involve great pain in another person. The universal statements that would be true are, respectively, "All happy lives are at least partially good" and "All pleasures are at least partially good." But why are they true? Because all happy lives are good *qua* happy and all pleasures are good *qua* pleasures. I suggest that these last two assertions can be understood only as derivations from the assertions, respectively, that happiness is good and that pleasure is good.

But the metaphysical assumption that there are properties in the sense of universals will not be defended here. The defense of our ethical theory would be successful if it could be questioned only by denying this assumption. We may note that the alternatives to the theory of universals provided by strict nominalism and by the various resemblance theories are seldom adopted today by writers on the problem of universals.[12]

But, despite my misgivings regarding the category of states of affairs, it is not part of my thesis that if there were such entities the property goodness could not be exemplified by them. Indeed, any property that can be exemplified by both properties and states of affairs would have a special ontological status. I shall return to this point in chapter 5. Suffice it here to observe that there are other predicates that have such an apparently heterogeneous application—for example, "exists," "is being considered," "is beautiful," perhaps "is one"—and to recall the special status Plato assigned to the Form of the Good and the fact that the medievals regarded goodness as a transcendental, not as a genus, some of the other transcendentals being being, truth, beauty, and one.

In addition to happiness and pleasure, a number of other properties, or abstract entities, may be, and ordinarily would be, called good, for example, life, health, knowledge, justice, friendship, certain kinds of action such as promise keeping, irreducibly societal properties such as the flourishing of the arts and sciences.[13] Although this fact will occupy us in detail throughout our inquiry, it is worth noting

here that there is nothing mysterious, or queer, or nonnatural about these properties. Nor is there any ordinary reason for denying that there are such properties, that they are real, or that they are knowable. Nor is the description of them as good a matter of widespread disagreement, except through ignorance or easily eliminable misunderstanding. The history of ethics, especially in modern times, has consisted largely in attempts (in my view unsuccessful) to reduce the goodness of some of them to that of others, not in disagreements about their being good. What has seemed *philosophically* questionable is that they should be described as having a common property, namely, goodness, and this question will be a central topic of this book. I shall therefore postpone discussion of it. I am assuming here that the goodness predicated in such statements is a monadic property (if there is such a property at all). The view that it is a relational property will be considered in the final section of this chapter.

Continuing with the point with which we have been concerned so far, we may say that goodness is, strictly speaking, a property of properties, and that good concrete entities, which we may call concrete goods, exemplify it only, so to speak, indirectly, by exemplifying some other properties that themselves exemplify goodness directly, and which we may call abstract goods.[14] (Using Platonic terminology, we may say that the Form of the Good is a form of forms, in which concrete things can participate only indirectly.) It follows that the sense in which a concrete entity may be said to be good is not the same as, but is derivable from and explainable through, the sense in which an abstract entity may be said to be good. The term "good" is not used univocally with respect to concrete entities and abstract entities.

Indeed, the difference between its two senses is even greater than it appears to be at first glance. A concrete entity that has a good monadic property is to that extent good, "intrinsically good," "good in itself," just in the sense that it has a property that is itself good in the primary sense. Usually it is on the basis of such facts that we make our ethical decisions, however unjustifiably, and it is in relation to such facts, which of course are of great variety and richness, that moral life emerges. But a concrete entity may have any number of relevant properties, some good, some bad—somewhat as the waters in the Bahamas are, though mostly turquoise, at some places blue, at others brown, and at still others white. Also a concrete entity may contribute to certain other things' being good; it can be "good as a means," in virtue of its relational properties, whether causally or by being an element of what Moore called an "organic unity."[15] To describe it as good without qualification, that is, without adding after the adjective "good" some term *F* or a phrase such as "*qua* an *F*" or "insofar as it *F*'s" or "to the extent it is *F*," can only be, I now suggest, to make a claim about the balance of goodness over badness in the sum total of all its own relevant monadic and relational properties, and of the relevant properties of what it is a means to. It would be analogous to saying that the waters in the Bahamas are turquoise. The conceptual justification of the general utilitarian account of right action is provided by this fact about the unqualified use of "good" with respect to concrete entities. The unqualified goodness of a concrete entity such as an action can only be its contributing at least as much total goodness, or as little total badness, as any of its alternatives would contribute. There is no

conceptual room for any other content of the idea of the unqualified goodness of an action, and it is the unqualified, not any qualified, goodness of an action that is of central concern in ethics. I shall, of course, repeatedly return to this crucial point.

Yet, ordinarily (but by no means always), the unqualified application of the term "good" to a concrete entity seems to have no determinate sense, a fact emphasized by P. T. Geach in his claim that "good" is an attributive rather than a predicative adjective, that a statement of the form "*x* is good" requires completion into a statement of the form "*x* is a good *F*."[16] (Nevertheless, millions have thought they understood Genesis 1:31: "And God saw every thing he had made, and behold, it was very good.") But a determinate sense *can* be specified in the way I have suggested, namely, by saying that a concrete entity is unqualifiedly good if and only if it contributes, through its intrinsic (monadic) properties or through its causal or noncausal relations to other things, more goodness or less badness than there would have been if the thing had not existed. In the special case of human actions, where the unqualified use of "good" is common, this would mean that the action contributes at least as much goodness (or as little badness) as any of its alternatives open to the agent would contribute, in the wide sense of the term "contribute" just specified. We may express all this more succinctly by saying that a concrete entity is unqualifiedly good in the sense that it is optimizing. (But it can be optimizing even if not optimific.[17] It may contribute most goodness not in virtue of its consequences but in virtue of its monadic properties.) My point is not that the term "good" in fact has such a sense, though I believe that it does, but that it can be given such a sense and that this sense is logically impeccable, though admittedly vague as long as the concepts of goodness, badness, and degree and quantity of goodness or badness have not been adequately elucidated.[18] Moreover, as I have pointed out, and will argue later in detail, this is the sense that is ethically central, indeed indispensable, for it is the sense in which *actions* are to be described as good.

Geach seems aware that his view is less plausible regarding statements such as "Pleasure is good" and "Preferring inclination to duty is bad," in which "good" is predicated of abstract, not concrete, entities, but dismisses them on the grounds that they involve peculiarly philosophical uses of words that require explanation. But, of course, there is nothing peculiarly philosophical about these statements. And even if an explanation of them cannot be given, if this means the provision of definitions of "good" and "bad," an explanation in the sense of a theory of good and bad may still be available. Another author, Paul Ziff, avows that "Pleasure is good" sounds to him remarkably odd.[19] It does not sound so to me. One reason for my skepticism regarding great concern with the ordinary uses of words is that discussions of them consist chiefly in exchanges of avowals about what sounds "odd" to one and what does not.

If such statements strike some of us as odd, the obvious reason is that they are seldom made in ordinary discourse, since we seldom have a reason for making them. "If something is blue then it is colored" also may strike us as odd, since we seldom need to contrast colored entities with colorless ones. In English it may be

better to say, "Pleasure is *a* good," and there would be philosophical reasons for preferring this if the relation of pleasure to goodness is that of a species to its genus. Then the statement would be analogous to "Blue is a color," again a statement we seldom have reason for making in ordinary discourse yet one that is logically impeccable. Or, we may express ourselves informally with sentences such as "Pleasure is a good thing," "thing" being, of course, not a sortal word at all in such a context.

But except to human actions, we would seldom apply the word "good" to concrete entities in the sense of optimizing. The reasons are several and closely related. First, the existence of the concrete entity is ordinarily already a fact, not something we must decide whether to bring about or not (and when it is the latter, the action of bringing it about is what we may judge to be unqualifiedly good). Whether it is on the whole better that it exists or not is often of no clear practical importance. But what often *is* important is some property or relation of the entity, and so we qualify the description of it as good by saying that it is good for such-and-such a purpose, or a good so-and-so, or good in such-and-such a respect. The second reason is that the totality of respects in which a concrete entity may be described as good is intellectually and epistemologically overwhelming; we can hardly comprehend it and can know, at most, a very small part of it. Indeed, as we shall see, this is true also of actions. But there, overwhelmed or not, we must make a judgment, for we must make a decision about how to act. And the intrinsic nature, the monadic properties, of the action (for example, its being the keeping of a promise) or its immediate consequences (for example, another person's being pleased) are ordinarily quite easy to comprehend and therefore form a convenient basis for judgment. The third reason is that with respect to most concrete entities we have no clear idea, perhaps no idea at all, of what would, or even could, have existed in their place if they did not exist. Is Germany good in the sense of optimizing? We have no clear idea what the specific long-range alternatives to the existence of Germany might have been, even though we have some idea of what is meant by the existence of Germany and of what would be relevant to the judgment that it has contributed more goodness or less badness than there would have been if it had not existed. The case with actions is obviously and dramatically different. The idea of the alternatives *open to an agent* is reasonably clear, especially when we stipulate, as we shall, that only actions the agent contemplates, of the possibility of which he or she is aware, are open to the agent. It is not surprising, therefore, that the question "Is Germany good?" strikes us as nonsensical, though the question "Was appeasing Germany in 1938 good?" does not.

3. Right Action

I shall use the adjective "right" to express the sense of "good" when this latter adjective is applied to actions without qualification, but subject to the stipulation that they be open to the agent in the sense explained. (I shall count omissions as actions, subject to the same stipulation. Often the alternatives genuinely open to

an agent, those the agent has considered, are only two: to do a certain action or to refrain from doing it.) A right action is one that is (or was, or will be, or would be, or would have been) optimizing, even if not optimific.[20] By an action that *ought* to be performed, I shall mean an action that is optimizing and is also such that none of its alternatives is optimizing. In a given situation several actions might be optimizing, and therefore none would be one the agent ought to perform but all would be right. A wrong action is one such that it is not optimizing but at least one of its alternatives is optimizing. The reason for the qualification, that is, for not defining a wrong action simply as one that is not right, is to allow for the logical possibility of cases in which no action open to the agent would be optimizing.[21] Throughout this book, when I speak of actions I mean particular, concrete actions, not kinds or sorts of actions; when I need to speak of the latter, I shall do so explicitly.

I have emphasized that a right action must be one that is "open to the agent" partly in order to reflect a familiar restriction in ordinary thought on the notions of "right action" and "action one ought to do," namely, to actions the agent *can* perform, at least in Moore's sense that the agent would perform them if he or she chose to do so,[22] but partly to draw attention to an important respect in which the unqualified application of "good" to actions is quite unlike its unqualified application to other concrete things. If by "action" we meant any physically possible movement of the agent, the question whether a certain action is optimizing might have no clearer sense than the question whether Germany is optimizing. Of course, the ordinary use of "action" is far more limited than that of "movement," but it is still too broad for our purposes. Hence I have also restricted the set of alternatives relevant to any judgment that a certain action would be optimizing to the set of actions the agent actually contemplates when making the judgment. Indeed there is an obvious sense in which an agent cannot perform an action of which (of the possibility of performing which) he is unaware, because he cannot choose to perform it.

No analogous restriction with respect to concrete entities other than actions seems possible, and even if one were possible it would probably have no importance. In the case of actions it is not only possible but needed. For actions open to the agent in the sense I have explained have a special, obvious, central ethical significance. They are the ones from which the agent must choose. Moreover, at any one time their number is quite limited, and therefore a clearer sense can be attached to the idea that at least one would be optimizing, since a genuine comparison at least seems possible. Without the restriction the set of relevant alternatives the agent faces seems to become logically unmanageable.[23] Indeed, a consequence of it is that the right action for an agent to perform at a given time may well not be the optimizing physically or psychologically possible action. But this consequence (which is the reason Lars Bergström rejects the restriction) is inevitable if we take seriously the fact that an agent faces no ethical decision regarding actions of the possibility of which he or she is unaware, and if we are not to treat actions merely as ordinary concrete entities, with all the difficulties we have noted regarding the determination of whether a certain concrete entity is optimizing. It is worth repeating