ETHICS

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Preface

There is a strong tendency to-day to identify knowledge with natural science. But, as two wars have made us painfully aware, natural science can only tell us the means, not how these means ought to be used, so that we may well be in the end only the worse off for our science. The study of science must therefore be supplemented by a study of the right way of using the knowledge it provides. In so far as we are moral beings we must all pay some attention to this study; the attempts of the ablest thinkers to pursue it in the most comprehensive way and in a spirit as scientific, if by methods very different from those of the natural sciences, are here recorded and criticized.

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Chapter 1

Introductory

YOU, READER, whoever you are, are not a complete beginner in this subject. You already have some idea what "good" and "bad," "right" and "wrong" mean, and you know some acts to be right, others wrong, some things to be good and some bad. Now these are precisely the topics with which Ethics as a subject of systematic study deals. Further, if you did not already have this knowledge, you could not make a start on the subject at all. Ethics is concerned with two main kinds of question, first, with deciding the general principles on which ethical terms, i.e. good, bad, duty, etc., are to be applied to anything, and secondly with deciding precisely what these terms mean. Now there seems to be no possibility of validly deducing ethical propositions by some sort of logical argument from the nature of reality without first assuming some ethical propositions to be true; or at least if there is, the way to do so has not yet been discovered by anybody. This may be a disappointing conclusion, but it is borne out by the whole trend of philosophical thought on the subject. Consequently the only way in which we can develop a systematic theory of Ethics is by starting with the ethical judgements which we find ourselves in our practical thinking constrained to make. To these is often given the name, *common-sense ethics,* and I shall distinguish from this *systematic ethics* as a subject of study by writing the latter with a capital E.

That Ethics should start with common-sense ethics does not of course mean that it should stop there. For one thing, the ordinary practical ethical judgements to which I am referring are each concerned with a particular situation, but Ethics like science seeks to generalize. We have indeed all made some advance in that direction at a very

early age. There are quite a number of ethical generalizations, such as that it is wrong to steal, which we have learnt at our mother's knee, but the student of Ethics is not content with these, he wishes to make further generalizations, and especially he wishes to give the reasons why the generalizations are true and decide which are the most ultimate. Further, he may as the result of his studies come to the conclusion that some of our ordinary generalizations and some of our particular ethical judgements ought to be amended. Certainly, though he may take common-sense ethics as his starting-point, he must not regard the latter as infallible. He could not indeed do this without absurdity, since the common-sense ethics of one civilization is liable to contradict that of another, and the same often applies even to two men within the same civilization. But I do not see how we can correct a common-sense ethical judgement without reference to some other ethical judgement, since unless we first admit the validity of some ethical judgements we have no means of proving any ethical judgement.

How are we to proceed then? It seems to me that the analogy of physical science is here very helpful, far removed as its specific methods are from the methods of Ethics. In science men originally started with ordinary perceptions of physical objects and the judgements expressing them. Then on this basis they developed a theory of the physical world which not only went far beyond their perceptions but refuted and corrected these in many respects, as when it told us that the earth was round and the sun very much larger than the earth, though they by no means look so. Yet in the last resort all physical science is absolutely dependent on our perceptions. We could never have started to form a scientific conception of physical things if we could not perceive them, and even the most recondite investigations by which Einstein's theory is confirmed depend on the scientist trusting his ordinary sense-perception when he observes physical objects. Even if cameras and automatic recording machines are used to act as substitutes for human sense-organs, somebody must observe the photographs and other rec-

ords and trust his senses that he has observed them aright. How then can physical science contradict human perceptions when it can only proceed by trusting our perceptions? The answer is that the object of science is to build up that system which will best account for our perceptions and knit the judgements based on them together into a consistent whole in which the different parts do not contradict but confirm each other. In order to attain the system which of those at our disposal will explain our experience best and give us a rationally connected picture of the world, the sciences and indeed common-sense are constrained to reject certain of our perceptions as illusory in order to be able consistently to give reality to others. Thus even before studying science we reject for such reasons the apparent perceptions that we call dreams.

Now Ethics pursues the same end as regards the judgements of common-sense ethics. These can all be regarded as expressing perceptions of something real but as liable to be distorted by various circumstances. And just as the scientist may, though starting from sense-perceptions and confirming his conclusions by sense-perceptions, reject many of our perceptions as giving an inaccurate picture of things, so the writer on Ethics may, while starting from our ordinary ethical judgements, require the amendment of some of these judgements in order to fit in with others more important and to make up an intelligible coherent system in his own field. He will not, I think, have to reject as illusory nearly so large a proportion of ethical judgements as the scientist does of physical perceptions. The test in either case is not whether our final view just reproduces what we seem to perceive at the common-sense level, but whether it with the aid of these perceptions makes up a really coherent system which, while explaining why we made any errors we did make in our ordinary judgements, helps us to see better what is true in these judgements. This is all very abstract, but it is hardly possible to illustrate it by examples till we have dealt with at least one of the particular ethical systems put forward in the past by thinkers. And in applying the test we shall, I think, just be carrying further the same process of

ethical thinking in which we all engage when we try to make up our minds rationally as to what is right. It is a very attractive feature of this subject that, since we can all think ethically, we have in our own minds the means of testing the theories with which we are presented. No expensive laboratory or difficult mathematical technique is needed in order intelligently to discuss Ethics.

Again, we could not intelligently make any ethical judgements of any sort if we had not some understanding of the meaning of terms like good, duty, etc., yet it is a vital part of the business of Ethics to define their meaning as far as this is possible. So Ethics must in this respect also be regarded as completing a task which we have already begun before studying it at all. We have some idea of what "good," etc., mean before opening a single book on Ethics, yet Ethics helps us to understand their meaning better than we did before we studied it.

The two main ethical concepts are expressed respectively by the words "good" and "ought" (or "duty"). But these terms, especially the former, are very far from unambiguous, being in fact used in a variety of different senses, and it is necessary to distinguish one or two of these before starting. Particularly important is the distinction between good as a means and good as an end. If you are suffering from an illness it may be good for you to have an operation, but this certainly does not mean that it is in any way desirable as an end in itself, it only signifies that it is good in the sense of being a means to produce something else which is good. In this case the end is health. It may however be doubted whether even health is good in itself. We should not care whether our teeth were decayed or our appendix inflamed or not if we could be sure that the decay and inflammation would neither hurt us nor make us less efficient in engaging in any activity. This suggests that health is good only as a means to happiness and to any other ends we may seek to pursue in our activities. But there are some things, e.g. happiness and virtue, which seem to be good in their own right and not merely because they produce something else which is good. Practically everybody would value at least

happiness even if it never produced any advantages beyond itself, provided only it did not do harm, and very many at least would take the same view about virtue. These things are called good-in-themselves, good as ends, or intrinsically good. Obviously this kind of goodness is more fundamental than the other. Something which is merely good as a means can be rationally valued only because it is liable to produce something else which is intrinsically good (or diminish something intrinsically evil as e.g. medicines diminish pain). On the other hand something that is good as a means may also be good as an end, and it is all the better if this is so. Thus kindness may be commended both because it is good in itself and because it produces happiness. The distinction between ends and means must therefore not be taken too rigidly. The very qualities which make virtue good as an end make it good as a means also. Further, we may easily come to love and prize for its own sake something that we originally valued only for its effects and still admit would have no value if it were not for these effects. The miser takes this attitude to his wealth, and we almost all take it in some degree to some particularly useful material objects. On this ground the distinction between end and means has been sharply attacked, e.g. by the American philosopher, John Dewey. But the question is not what we actually prize, it is what are the ultimate grounds why it is reasonable to prize it, and these can only be found in what is an end in itself, not what is merely a means.

People are liable to ask about everything—What is the use of it?—meaning—To what future end is it a good means? But unless some things were good-in-themselves and not only as means, nothing would be of any use at all. To value everything only as a means would be to do everything for the sake of a future benefit which never came. The two mistakes of taking for granted that, because work is useful, it necessarily cannot also be appreciated as an activity of value in itself, and of assuming that oneself and others ought always to be doing something "useful" have, I am sure, resulted in a great unnecessary loss of happiness. In saying this I am not denying that all

too many kinds work can hardly be enjoyed for their own sake, and that it is all the better if the things we enjoy doing for their own sake are also beneficial educationally in a wide sense of "education" (except in so far as it is too much of a strain to be always being "educated"). Many things are well worth doing in themselves apart from their utility for anything else, though they may also be useful.

Nor must we look at a purposive process under the category of means and end in a way which represents the earlier part as necessarily simply a means to the later as an end-in-itself. From this point of view logically carried out it would follow that a book was written simply for the sake of being able to say Finis. Throughout there will be parts that are of value only as means, parts which are of value only as ends-in-themselves, and parts which are of value in both ways. The earlier part may be both a means and an end, and the later is not necessarily in the sense under discussion an end. The return from the theatre in a crowded bus is just as liable to be a valueless but necessary part of a process, other parts of which have value, as the going there, which is admittedly only a means.

It is generally agreed among those who have thought on the subject that, with the possible exception of beautiful objects, valuable on account of their beauty, a merely physical thing cannot be good in itself but only good as a means. Apart at least from the very doubtful exception just mentioned, what is good in itself must be an experience, state of mind or life, it cannot be anything without consciousness at all.

Now to determine whether something is good as a means we require the kind of knowledge which is pursued in natural science, namely, a knowledge of the laws of nature and so of the effects things are likely to produce. But this knowledge, we must insist, is useless for deciding whether something is good-in-itself. We clearly cannot learn this merely by learning that it produces something else good. It is the knowledge of what is good or bad in itself, and not the knowledge of the goodness of means which falls within Ethics. The natural sciences teach us

what is good as a means, but ethically they are neutral in the sense that the same scientific knowledge which is used, e.g. to cure a patient, may be used by a bad man to kill the patient. Recent history has instructed us sufficiently in the lesson that scientific knowledge is a curse to the world and not a blessing if its results are utilized without regard to the principles of ethics. There are many other different senses of "good," but these are the only two we need now distinguish.

The term "ought" differs from "good" in referring primarily to actions. It is sometimes used to signify merely the best means to take to a given end irrespective of whether the end is good or bad, as in e.g. "the murderer ought not to have left his fingerprints on the weapon," but the use in which it is applied to the really best action for an agent to choose in a given moral situation is ethically of much greater importance, and it is in this sense that I shall be using the word in the following chapters, unless I say anything to the contrary. It is one of the chief questions of Ethics what are the ultimate criteria for deciding which actions we ought to do in this sense. The action that we ought to do is also called our "duty," but there is another sense of both "ought" and "duty" of which I shall speak later[1] according to which we are said to do our duty or what we ought in cases where we do what we think is our duty but are honestly mistaken as to our objective duty. Another equivalent of "the action we ought to do" is "the right action," but "right" when used without the definite article has a slightly different meaning. For there might in a given situation be alternative actions which were all right, but it could not be the case that there were two incompatible actions *both* of which we ought to do or which it was our duty to do. Thus it is ordinarily right to pay one's debts by cheque, but not a duty because it is also right to pay them by cash. Our duty is to pay them somehow (either by cheque or by cash or by some other method, e.g. deduction from a bill of ours on the creditor).

[1] *v.* below p. 126 ff.

In order to decide what action we ought to take or it is right to take in a given situation, one at least of the questions we ought to ask is what the consequences of any proposed action will be. It is a disputed question among writers on Ethics whether the rightness of an action depends solely on its consequences or not, but certainly it depends at least partly on them. It is always an objection to performing a certain act that it will produce bad effects, whether it is always a completely conclusive objection or sometimes may be outweighed by other considerations. So in order to decide whether we ought to do something or not we either always or at least usually need to have a knowledge of what the consequences of the action are likely to be. This is knowledge of the type obtained by natural science, as is the knowledge which enables us to decide whether something is a good means to a given end. To obtain it what we need to know is what are the relevant causal laws. It is in itself not specifically ethical knowledge at all. But this knowledge is not sufficient: we need also to know whether the consequences anticipated are to be regarded as good or bad in themselves. Thus the decision as to what we ought to do depends partly on factual knowledge and partly on knowledge of what things are good or bad in themselves, which unlike the former is knowledge of a specifically ethical kind. Thus in order to know what is the right treatment for a particular invalid, we must know both what is likely to be the best medicine for curing him and that he ought to be cured. In this case it is the scientific kind of knowledge which presents the difficulty and not the specifically ethical, but this is by no means always so. We may be hard put to it to decide not only what are the most efficient types of atom bomb, but also when, if ever, we ought to use atom bombs.

This explains how it is that Ethics as a study is not able to give us more help than it does in deciding how we ought to act. To decide this we require not only ethical knowledge but also an empirical knowledge of facts and causal laws, and this is supplied by the sciences or by the common-sense knowledge we all possess of people and physical things. Further, even the specifically ethical ele-