PRINCIPLES
OF
ETHICS

An Introduction

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I

What Is Ethics?

ETHICS AND MORALITY

Ethics may be defined as *philosophical inquiry into the nature and grounds of morality*. The term "morality" is here used as a general name for moral judgments, standards, and rules of conduct. These include not only the *actual* judgments, standards, and rules to be found in the moral codes of existing societies, but also what may be called *ideal* judgments, standards, and rules: those which can be justified on rational grounds. Indeed, one of the chief goals of ethics is to see if rational grounds can be given in support of any moral judgments, standards, or rules, and if so, to specify what those grounds are.

Whether actual or ideal, morality has to do with right and wrong conduct and also with good and bad character. Moral judgments are made not only about people's actions but also about their motives or reasons for doing them and about their more general character traits. For example, an action may be judged to be wrong when a person knowingly harms someone, and an action may be considered right if its purpose is to help another in a time of need. An individual's motive for an act may be judged to be bad when his aim is to take unfair advantage of people (even if he falls short of his objective), while someone else's action may be judged to spring from a good motive when he does something out of genuine concern for the well-being of others (even if, through no fault of his own, his action fails to bring about the intended effect). With regard to a person's character traits, if one individual is consistently honest in his

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dealings with people while another is hypocritical, we may conclude that the first person has good character because he is honest and that the second has bad character because he is a hypocrite.

In all such judgments of actions, motives, and character traits, we are applying moral norms. A moral norm may be either a rule of conduct or a standard of evaluation. That is, it may be a requirement that anyone in certain circumstances should do, or refrain from doing, a certain kind of action. Or the norm may be a standard of evaluation, which we implicitly refer to whenever we decide whether something is good or bad, desirable or undesirable, worthy or worthless. As applied to conduct, standards are used for judging how good or bad are the consequences of a person's actions. It is possible for the same *kind* of action to be wrong in one situation and right in another, because in the first situation the consequences of such an action are bad while in the second the consequences of the same kind of action are good. As an example, consider how an act of lying can be wrong in one case and right in another. If one person harms another by telling a lie, we would ordinarily deem the action wrong. However, in the following situation we would probably judge the same kind of action (telling a lie) to be right: An American abolitionist who is protecting a runaway slave in the cellar of his house tells a lie when a suspicious neighbor questions him about fugitives. We have, then, two sorts of reasons why an action ought or ought not to be performed: (1) that the action is of a *kind* that is required or prohibited by a moral rule, and (2) that the action will, in the given circumstances, have good or bad *consequences* as judged by a standard of evaluation.

Moral judgments of people's motives and character traits are made on the basis of standards of evaluation, not rules of conduct. Thus we judge a person to be morally admirable according to the degree to which he fulfills some ideal of human excellence or virtue. And we think of a person as vicious, ignoble, or despicable insofar as he has motives and character traits we consider morally evil or blameworthy. It is, of course, possible to judge an individual to be morally good because he always strives to act as required by moral rules of conduct and to refrain from actions forbidden by those rules. But even in this case what is being judged directly is not the person's actions but his "will," that is, his aims, motives, and intentions in behaving in certain ways.

It is important to notice that the rules of conduct and standards of evaluation someone uses in his moral judgments need not be the conventionally accepted norms of a society's established moral code. They may,

instead, be norms which the individual has chosen for himself after having rejected, wholly or in part, the conventional morality of his society. (See subsection below on Customary Morality and Reflective Morality.) But no matter whether a person has unthinkingly absorbed a set of rules and standards from his social environment or has chosen them himself on the basis of critical reflection, he will implicitly or explicitly use them as grounds for judging right and wrong conduct as well as good and bad character. Insofar as a person tries to live up to the rules and standards he sincerely accepts, they become part of his "philosophy of life," guiding his choices and giving direction to his conduct. They determine his ultimate ends and ideals in life, providing him with reasons for considering some goals to be more worth striving for than others.

When a stable set of rules and standards governs the choices and conduct of most of the people in a given society, we speak of the norms shared by a whole culture. Such norms (which make up the *actual* morality of that people) are embodied in the society's customs, traditions, and laws. They define its moral outlook and give form to its whole way of life. They are reflected in social attitudes of approval and disapproval, and are supported by moral sanctions. These sanctions may be either positive (praise, rewards, expressions of admiration) or negative (guilt and blame, punishments, expressions of condemnation).

We see, then, that moral standards and rules have a special function in practical life. Whether they are chosen by an individual as norms for judging his own character and conduct, or form a society's actual moral code, they serve as action-guides. They are the principles that determine what an individual or group conceives to be moral reasons for (or against) doing one thing rather than another. Thus we can find out what an individual's or group's actual moral norms are by seeing how they morally justify certain actions as being right.

With regard to any moral judgment, standard, or rule, the following questions may be asked: Is it a true judgment, a correct standard, a valid rule? That is, are there good reasons for accepting the judgment as (probably) true, or for using the standard or rule as an action-guide? Or is the judgment (probably) false, the standard unacceptable, the rule unjustified? It is questions like these which we must consider when thinking about ideal morality. They are just as much a part of the subject matter of ethics as are the judgments, standards, and rules of any actual morality. Let us now look more closely at the kind of thinking that is involved in philosophical reflection about morality, whether actual or ideal.

DESCRIPTIVE, NORMATIVE, AND ANALYTIC ETHICS

In the case of actual morality, it is possible to study its data (the specific moral judgments, standards, and rules accepted by a given individual or society) either scientifically or philosophically. Taking first the scientific point of view, we may consider the data as a set of empirical facts to be described and explained by scientific procedures. This can be done whether we focus on the moral consciousness of the individual or on the moral institutions and practices of a culture as a whole.

For a particular individual, his "moral consciousness" consists of his beliefs about what is right and wrong; his feelings of guilt and remorse when he fails to live up to his own moral norms and his sense of self-respect when he does fulfill them; the attitudes he takes toward himself when he holds himself accountable for certain actions, and his attitudes toward others when he considers their actions worthy of praise or blame. It also includes his being inspired or motivated by moral ideals; his exercising willpower and self-control in carrying out what he conceives to be his duty; his commitment to live by certain rules as matters of principle, putting aside all considerations of his own comfort, pleasure, or convenience. It is clear that if a person's morality were different, his whole experience of life would be altered. He would not only behave in another fashion, but would have different thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and desires. In short, he would be another kind of person.

Now since an individual's actual morality is part of his experience of life, it can be studied empirically. His moral judgments can be accurately described and their causes and effects investigated. A psychological explanation can be given to show why a particular person has certain moral beliefs and attitudes and how they influence his behavior. Psychologists can study the origin and growth of an individual's conscience, even relating his moral experiences to unconscious wishes, anxieties, and emotional conflicts of which he is unaware.

Similarly, on the level of society, empirical knowledge about actual morality can be sought and obtained through scientific investigation. Anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and social psychologists have examined the various moral codes of different societies and of diverse epochs. They have studied the moral norms operating in the ways of life of different economic and social classes within a culture. They have observed and explained the presence of "deviants" in a society, people whose norms are at variance with those generally accepted by the culture. They have examined

the relationship of moral rules and standards to the social structure and their role in preserving a society's institutions. All these social aspects of actual morality are subject to the techniques of historical research, anthropological "field work," and sociological analysis.

This empirical knowledge of moral phenomena in the life of an individual and in the structure and functioning of a society may be summed up as: *the scientific description and explanation of actual morality.* For convenience, this scientific study of actual morality can be called *descriptive ethics.* It may now be readily distinguished from *the philosophical study of morality,* whether actual or ideal.

Philosophers are interested in actual morality not as a set of facts to be described and explained scientifically, but as the starting point for an inquiry into the possibility of constructing and justifying an ideal morality. Instead of asking, What are the causes for this particular person's accepting such-and-such standards and rules? the philosopher asks, What sorts of reasons (if any) would be good reasons for a person in such-and-such circumstances to accept such-and-such standards and rules? Instead of explaining how a moral practice may serve the interests of a certain class of persons in a given society, the philosopher asks, Are there any moral practices that promote the common good or meet the requirements of social justice; can it be shown that either the common good or social justice is a valid principle for assessing moral practices in any society? Instead of describing what might well be vague, confused, or inconsistent moral beliefs accepted by a given individual at some period in his life, the philosopher examines the logical relationships among different moral judgments and constructs a coherent, internally consistent system of judgments within the framework of certain fundamental principles. (We shall be considering such systems in some detail later in this book.)

In every case, the data of actual morality are of interest to the philosopher only as a starting point for his critical reflection. If he is to be investigating the nature and grounds of *moral* judgments, *moral* standards, and *moral* rules — however ideal they may be — they must have at least some characteristics in common with actual moral judgments, standards, and rules. Otherwise he will not be dealing with morality at all. Furthermore, by understanding how actual moral judgments, standards, and rules come to be accepted by some people and rejected by others; how they change with varying circumstances; how they function as an integral part of a culture's way of life; how they can guide conduct and affect the deliberation and decision-making of individuals; how they are criticized, attacked, and

defended in arguments—by understanding these and similar aspects of actual morality, the philosopher is better able to carry out his inquiry into the nature and grounds of ideal morality in an enlightened way.

As he engages in his reflection about ideal morality, what exactly does the philosopher intend to accomplish? His main purpose may be expressed thus: to show how it is possible to construct a consistent system of moral norms valid for all moral agents. A "moral agent" is any being who is *capable* of thinking, deciding, and acting in accordance with moral standards and rules. A moral agent may not always fulfill the requirements of a moral standard or rule; that is, he need not be morally perfect. But he must have the capacity to judge himself on the basis of such a criterion and to use it as a guide to his choice and conduct. To say that a moral standard or rule is "valid for all moral agents" is to say that it is justifiable to appeal to it in judging any moral agent's character and conduct. An ordered set of such standards and rules is sometimes called a "normative ethical system," and the activity of constructing and justifying such a system is known as *normative ethics.*

Many methods of philosophical thinking have been used in normative ethics, and a number of them will be discussed in this book. In all such cases, the philosopher is concerned with whether a rational gound of moral obligation can be established. He examines the ultimate foundations of morality in order to show that a certain set of moral criteria ought to be accepted as the basis for judging the character and conduct of all who possess the capacities of a moral agent. Thus his fundamental aim is not to describe or explain what moral beliefs people actually have, but to inquire into their truth or falsity. As a result of his inquiry, he hopes to be able to answer the question, Is there a set of standards and rules which *any* rational person would be justified in adopting as guides to his life? Normative ethics is simply the systematic, thoroughgoing attempt to answer this question by means of philosophical thought.

In recent years a distinction has been made between two branches of moral philosophy, of which normative ethics is but one. The other branch is known as *analytic ethics* or *metaethics*. Whether these two fields of inquiry can be clearly separated is a matter of current dispute, but it is worthwhile here to consider briefly what the basis of the distinction is held to be. When analytic ethics is considered as an autonomous field of inquiry, it is thought to have an aim of its own that may be contrasted with that of normative ethics described above. The aim of analytic ethics when so conceived may be stated thus: to obtain a clear and complete understanding of the semantical,

logical, and epistemological structure of moral discourse. The term "semantical" refers to the *meaning* of words and statements, semantics being the study of what words and statements mean as well as the different kinds of meaning they have. The term "logical" refers to the *relations between statements* in an argument, when someone is trying to show that the conclusion of his argument follows from the reasons he gives in its support. The term "epistemological" refers to *knowledge*, epistemology being that branch of philosophy concerned with the question, What is knowledge and how can it be attained? Since a person might claim to know something as the conclusion of an argument, justifying his claim on the basis of the reasons given in his argument, logic and epistemology are closely connected. As applied to analytic ethics, it will be convenient to consider them together. In general, then, two basic tasks of analytic ethics may be distinguished: first, to analyze the meaning of the terms used in moral discourse, and second, to examine the rules of reasoning and methods of knowing by which moral beliefs can be shown to be true or false. The first task of analytic ethics is a semantical one, the second a logical and epistemological one. Let us consider each in turn.

The aim of the first task is to explain precisely how such terms as "good," "right," "duty," and "ought" function in moral language. When people express their moral convictions, prescribe conduct, appraise character and motives, deliberate about what they ought or ought not to do, and evaluate what they and others have done, they are using moral language. Whether they are thinking out a moral issue for themselves or are discussing it with others, they are carrying on moral discourse. We learn the language of morals in our childhood, and we teach it to our own children when we try to bring them up morally. It is the job of philosophy to make a careful and thorough analysis of the meaning of the words and sentences that make up such language. The final aim is to achieve a full understanding of moral concepts (duty, virtue, responsibility, right action, etc.) and how they function in moral discourse. This first task of metaethics may be designated "conceptual analysis."

The second task of metaethics may be called "the analysis of the logic of moral reasoning." Here the philosopher's job is to make explicit the logical principles which are followed (or are intended to be followed) when people give moral reasons for or against doing an act, or when they try to justify their accepting or rejecting a moral judgment. Just as the philosophy of science attempts to show the logical structure underlying scientific method — the process whereby scientists verify their statements and support

their theories by appeal to evidence — so analytic ethics attempts to show
how moral beliefs can be established as true or false, and on what grounds
anyone can claim to know they are true or false. As we shall see later, there
is much dispute, not only about what methods of reasoning are to be used,
but even about whether any method is possible at all. Thus this second task
of analytic ethics is itself twofold. On the one hand is the question whether
there is any such thing as moral truth or moral knowledge. On the other is
the question: *If* there is such a thing, how can we gain it? This double aspect
of analytic ethics may be brought out in the following list of questions, each
pair of which is a way of expressing the basic twofold problem:

Is there a valid method by which the truth or falsity of moral beliefs can be established?	If so, what is this method and on what grounds does its validity rest?
Are moral statements verifiable?	If so, what is their method of verification?
Is there such a thing as knowledge of good and evil, right and wrong?	If so, how can such knowledge be obtained?
Is there a way of reasoning by which moral judgments can be justified?	If so, what is the logic of such reasoning?
Can we claim that the reasons we give in support of our moral judgments are good (sound, valid, acceptable, warranted) reasons?	If so, on what grounds can we make this claim? What are the criteria for the goodness (soundness, validity, etc.) of a reason?

Whenever anyone tries to answer these questions in a clear and orderly
way, he is doing analytic ethics. We are now in a position to see a logical
relation between analytic and normative ethics. Analytic ethics inquires into
the *presuppositions* of normative ethics. If a philosopher constructs a system
of moral norms and claims that these norms are validly binding upon
everyone, he presupposes that there is a procedure whereby moral norms
can be validated and that he has followed this procedure. He claims, in
other words, to have moral knowledge and hence assumes that such knowl-
edge is possible. Now it is precisely this assumption that is brought into
question in analytic ethics. The very use of such words as "know," "true,"
"valid," and "justified" as applied to moral judgments is a problem for
analytic ethics. Such words are used in normative ethics, but are not
explicitly and carefully analyzed. Their analysis is just the task that
metaethics sets for itself. It may therefore be argued that metaethics or
analytic ethics is logically prior to normative ethics. Metaethical questions
must first be answered before the complete development of a normative
ethical system can be successfully achieved. It should be noted, however,

that these two branches of ethics were not distinguished until midway in the twentieth century, so that the writings of moral philosophers before this time tend to cover both the problems of normative ethics and the problems of analytic ethics. In studying these writings it is always helpful to ask oneself, Is the philosopher making moral judgments and trying to show that they are justified, or is he examining what it means to claim that a moral judgment can be justified? In this way we can make clearer to ourselves exactly what questions the philosopher is trying to answer and so be better able to judge the soundness of his arguments.

We may sum up these introductory remarks about the nature of ethics in the following outline:

I. THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF MORALITY (DESCRIPTIVE ETHICS)
Description and explanation of the moral life of man as manifested in any given individual's moral experience and in any given society's moral code.
II. THE PHILOSOPHICAL STUDY OF MORALITY
A. Normative Ethics
Inquiry into the rational grounds for justifying a set of moral norms for all mankind, and the rational construction of a system of such norms.
B. Analytic. Ethics or Metaethics
1. Conceptual analysis
Semantical study of the meaning of words and sentences used in moral discourse.
2. Analysis of the logic of moral reasoning
Study of the methods by which moral judgments can be established as true or false, or whether any such method is possible at all.

CUSTOMARY MORALITY AND REFLECTIVE MORALITY

The ultimate purpose of normative and analytic ethics is to enable us to arrive at a critical, reflective morality of our own. Everyone is brought up with some set of moral beliefs, and every society has some moral code as part of its way of life. But an individual may either blindly accept the moral code of his society, or he may come to reflect upon it and criticize it. If he blindly accepts it, we may speak of his morality as "conventional" or "customary." Such an individual might well have strong moral convictions and might well be a good person in that he lives up to his norms. But he remains a child of his culture and lacks the ability to support his convictions by rational argument. Should he suddenly be confronted by others who have moral beliefs contradictory to his own and who hold them with as much certainty as he holds his own, he will feel lost and bewildered. His state of confusion