

The Logic of Moral Discourse

PAUL EDWARDS

with an introduction by
SIDNEY HOOK

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Paul Edwards

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of
Moral Discourse*

With an Introduction by Sidney Hook

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To Ernest Nagel

"The search after the unit is the delusion."

(A. B. Johnson)

"All argument is not deduction, and giving reasons in support of a judgment or statement is not necessarily, or even generally, giving logically conclusive reasons."

(Stuart Hampshire)

Contents

Preface	11
Introduction, by Sidney Hook	13
I Preliminary Clarifications	19
II Naïve Subjectivism	49
III The "Error Theory"	67
IV Intuitionism	85
V "The Steak at Barney's Is Rather Nice."	105
VI Imperatives and Their Justification	123
VII The Logic of Moral Discourse (I)	139
VIII The Logic of Moral Discourse (II)	161
IX The Logic of Moral Discourse (III)	199
X Some Concluding Remarks	225
Bibliography	243
Index of Names	247

Preface

The Logic of Moral Discourse was originally written during the academic year of 1950/51. Doubts about the soundness of my theory made me refrain from any attempts at publication at that time. After an interval of four years, however, my views are the same and I have been urged by several persons whose judgment I highly respect to publish my book with some small changes and additions. For the reader's convenience I have brought the bibliography up to date, but in the body of the work there is no reference to literature which has appeared after 1950.

In the last two chapters I am taking to task some of the critics of the so-called emotive theory who, I am sure, would be equally opposed to my views. I regret to note the recent death of Dr. C. E. M. Joad at whom some of my most sustained attacks are directed. I should like to make it clear that my hostility to Dr. Joad is of a purely philosophical character and that I never had any hard personal feelings towards him. This comment is superfluous as far as professional philosophers are concerned. But the emotive theory has been widely discussed in non-professional circles and I wish to make sure that my attitude will not be misunderstood anywhere.

I am indebted to my friend, Mr. Albert Hofstadter, of Columbia University, for countless major and minor ideas, as well as for constant encouragement while I was writing this book. I also wish to thank Mr. Charles Frankel, of Columbia University, with whom I had many stimulating conversations. I believe that these conversations led to several significant improvements in my book.

I have done my best to present my discussions not only lucidly, but also with some liveliness. This will explain the somewhat unusual nature of many of my illustrations.

PAUL EDWARDS

New York City, March 1955

Introduction

IT IS NOT OFTEN that a book in philosophy is a contribution of the first importance to fundamental theoretical questions, is argued with skill, incisiveness and erudition, has wider bearings of concern to all reflective persons and not merely professional philosophers, and is written with a delightful and piquant vivacity. Mr. Paul Edwards' *The Logic of Moral Discourse* is such a book.

I wish briefly to say something about all four of these points.

The Logic of Moral Discourse is an important contribution to ethical theory because it is the soundest and most systematic fusion, in the study of metaethics, of the emotive and objective naturalistic points of view. Mr. Edwards restates the central contentions of the emotive theory persuasively and at the same time shows that it does not imply the paradoxical conclusion that moral judgments are never true or false. His analysis establishes that moral judgments do indeed express attitudes, chiefly those of approval and disapproval, but they are at the same time assertions about the *objects* of these attitudes. Moral judgments are thus seen to possess objective meaning and Mr. Edwards develops in considerable detail the ways in which this objective meaning tends to vary from situation to situation. In consequence, such a theory enables one to admit that moral expressions are indefinable without having to concede either that they are descriptively meaningless or that they designate some mysterious "non-natural" qualities.

Mr. Edwards takes as his point of departure distinctions that are commonly recognized whenever human beings seriously discuss what actions should be done or left undone insofar as they affect others. Then by introducing a set of his own distinctions, useful in describing or talking about ethical judgments, he shows how many of the perplexities, bewilderments and violent paradoxes which

have always dogged ethical theories may be avoided. The result is more than a triumphant vindication of common sense attitudes toward the descriptive meaningfulness of ethical assertions. It is an illuminating clarification of the viewpoint of common sense, and proof that common sense is rather more sophisticated than philosophers from Plato to G. E. Moore had assumed. Because of the importance of these distinctions, it is strongly recommended that the chapters be read in the order in which they are published.

Another way of putting the main point is that Mr. Edwards has shown that knowledge makes a relevant difference to the moral judgments we utter and especially to those we believe true or false, and that a scientific approach to the resolution of moral conflict is therefore intelligible and likely to be fruitful. Although arrived at independently and from a different methodological approach, Mr. Edwards' position is close to that taken by John Dewey. The chief difference between them, so far as I can see, is that Mr. Edwards exempts what he calls "fundamental moral judgments" from his claim that all moral judgments have a descriptive meaning as well as an emotive one, and therefore in principle can be confirmed or disconfirmed. If I understand Dewey, he would be prepared to show that whenever such moral views are introduced in relation to a concrete problem, they have "referents" which may or may not sustain their claim to validity. At any rate, I would be so prepared to show. Thus, when I say, to use some illustrations suggested by Mr. Edwards' own discussion, "We should go down fighting rather than live under the regime of a Hitler or Stalin," or "An innocent man should never be punished," "It is better to be kind than cruel," I am, to be sure, expressing something about my own attitude or choice, but I am also prepared in the concrete situation in which I utter these judgments to give reasons and grounds which, if shown invalid or false, would seem to me to affect the truth of my judgments. If such sentences are considered expressions of non-fundamental moral judgments, it would seem that "fundamental moral judgments" are not only very rare but hardly justify characterization of them as "moral."*

* For a further discussion of this point see my "The Emotive and Desirable" in *John Dewey: Philosopher of Science and Freedom*.

The second meritorious feature of Mr. Edward's work is its analytic keenness. This is not achieved by ignoring other views or difficulties in his own position. His is the first comprehensive reply to all of the best-known objections to the naturalistic and/or emotive theory which have been urged by critics. And he considers them in their strongest form, scrupulously recognizing the empirical facts about ethical language and moral behavior to which they call attention. Particularly noteworthy in this connection is his discussion of the alleged "naturalistic fallacy," a hurdle which must be cleared by everyone who wishes to undertake serious analysis of ethical issues without departing from the framework of naturalistic empiricism; and his demonstration that there is a perfectly clear sense in which "ought"-judgments may follow from statements of fact, so that the latter become as relevant to the truth or falsity of the former as they do to hypotheses in other fields. This outflanks the absolute separation which Kant makes between categorical and hypothetical imperatives.

This is a book not merely for philosophers but everyone concerned about understanding the nature of moral disagreement. And what feature of our modern world is more conspicuous than the facts of moral disagreement? They are not the sole or even always the most important cause of violent conflict between nations and classes and individuals but they are almost always a contributory factor.

Most men philosophize more naturally about the meaning of "good" and "bad" than about other themes which engross professional philosophers. Now from the *theory* that moral disputes or conflicts cannot in principle be capable of mutually satisfactory resolution by investigations of the grounds and reasons on which our moral judgments of approval are based, together with an envisagement of the probable consequences of the actions proposed to give effect to our judgment, it does not follow *as a matter of fact* that we must settle conflicts by counting noses or bashing in heads. It is possible to apply one sense of the maxim *de gustibus non disputandum est* to all things including moral approvals and, if our taste does not run to violence or propaganda, live peacefully with each other, tolerating each other's quaint conceits and appe-

tites. Nor, on the other hand, if a belief like Mr. Edwards' is true and therefore moral disputes and conflicts *are* capable of resolution by discovering the truths which bear on conflicting claims, does it necessarily follow that human beings actually will resolve the conflict of claims by scientific inquiry. For men may not love the truth or seek to find it. If men, however, can be educated to seek the truth, to become more reasonable—and in some fields they already manifest such a disposition—then the belief that it is possible to resolve moral disagreement by discovery of the relevant facts will undoubtedly contribute to strengthening the habits of inquiry and investigation as methods of fixing moral belief and resolving moral disputes. Whether the theory of moral intuitionism is accepted or rejected, I do not believe it would make the slightest difference to human behavior, for nothing is indicated as to any procedure which must be followed in setting about to resolve disagreements by the discovery of the relevant truths—no matter what our will to do so. On the type of emotive, naturalistic theory developed by Mr. Edwards, the indications as to how one should proceed are quite plain—if we have the will to do so. If we believe that the truth *can* be found, we may look for it. If we believe there is no truth to be found, we certainly won't look for it.

Finally, I wish to comment on Mr. Edwards' refreshing style, apt illustrations, and autobiographical references. These are the only elements he has in common with some Existentialist writers who use them in a spirit utterly different from Mr. Edwards' passion for clarity. They should not be left to those who make a cult of obscurity. Here and there an illustration or a joke may appear odd or out of place but nothing in Mr. Edwards' argument depends upon it. That in the main they lighten and brighten his pages the reader will discover for himself. So much of philosophical writing in the past has made for dreary reading that we ought to welcome the new mode established by Mr. Edwards. The reader will find that without being less serious in substance than duller written books, this work in philosophy is also fun.

SIDNEY HOOK