Introduction

The scope of 'Ethics' has been very variously defined. Without prejudging any of the questions which it will be necessary to discuss hereafter, it may be stated summarily that the subject of the present essay is an enquiry into the nature of that which we denote by the terms 'good' or 'what ought to be'. It may, perhaps, be well to confine the term 'Ethics', as does Professor Sidgwick, for example, to 'the science or study of what is right or what ought to be, so far as this depends upon the voluntary action of individuals'.[a] Such a view is often roughly expressed by defining Ethics as 'The Science' or 'Art of Conduct';[b] and such is the scope of Aristotle's Ethics, the book from which the term has been derived. 'Ethics' would thus take its place beside 'Politics', in the sense in which the latter is distinguished by Professor Sidgwick from Political Philosophy on the one hand and Political Science on the other. It is, perhaps, best on this view of its scope, to adopt Professor Mackenzie's term and call it a 'Normative Science'[6]; for the term 'Art' would seem to be most properly confined to the actual pursuit of some end or group of ends, in so far as such pursuit involves a systematic use of certain definite means, and not to include any statement of or enquiry into the rules by which such end or ends may be attained. If, for example, a book be entitled 'The Art of Music,' that title seems to denote the subject-matter described, just as does the title 'Origin of Species'[7] or 'The

[a] *ME* p. 4.

[b] Professor Sidgwick's own view (*ME* p. 4) that his definition, as including Intuitionist conceptions, can not be brought under the notion of Art, seems inconclusive, since any intuitionist who pretends to have a system, and therefore an Ethics at all, must admit the subordination of means to end *in some cases*, and the assumption of several ultimate ends, not intimately connected, seems in no way contrary to the notion of an Art.

[6] Cf. J. S. Mackenzie, *Manual of Ethics*, London: W. B. Clive, 1897, p. 4.

[7] Moore slightly misstates the title of Darwin's famous book, *On the Origin of Species*, London: Murray, 1859.

Cray-fish',[8] not the description or inquiry itself. Such an inquiry, in so far as it described the rules by which music of certain definite sorts, assumed to be the ends pursued in the Art, is actually to be produced, would rather itself be termed 'Rules of the Art of Music' or, in so far as it tried to give a reasoned connection between the rules by subordinating the various assumed ends to one main end, assumed to be the most general definition of the object pursued in the Art, 'Theory of the Art of Music'. In this sense, the inquiry or the knowledge resulting might be termed a Normative Science, and such a 'Normative Science' Ethics as defined by Professor Sidgwick and as expounded by Aristotle, seems to be.

The distinction between Art and Science may seem almost too obvious to need mention; but it seems to be almost uniformly overlooked, and to lead to a misapprehension of the relation of Theoretical to so-called Practical Philosophy. E.g., if Art be defined as a 'scientific discipline' whose aim is 'the moulding of things by man's activity' while the aim of Science is said to be knowledge,[a] it becomes plausible to treat Practical [Philosophy] as a study really coordinate with Theoretical Philosophy. But though Art, as the actual doing of things, in which sense alone the moulding of things can be its direct aim, may really be treated as so coordinate with knowing – the distinction being that between volition and cognition in psychology; when Art is treated as a 'scientific discipline' its direct object becomes 'knowing' just as much as that of science. The object of Ethics, 'what ought to be', is certainly different from that of any science, but in as much as the direct aim of Ethics is to know this and not to do it, it becomes pure theory and is subordinate to the general conditions of knowledge. This common confusion between doing and knowing what to do has not a little connection with Kant's distinction between Theoretical and Practical Reason. It is from this confusion, too, that Professor Sidgwick was able to say[b] that Practical Philosophy including 'the *study* of the fundamental principles of Ethics and Politics' . . . 'seems to hold a position in reference to Arts in general,.. similar to that which Theoretical Philosophy holds with reference to Sciences in general;' although he subsequently defines

[a] F. Paulsen *System der Ethik* (Hertz, Berlin 1889) p. 1. [Friedrich Paulsen (1846–1908) was a professor of moral philosophy at Berlin.]

[b] Printed lecture on 'Scope of Philosophy': 1897, p. 11. [This lecture is reprinted in H. Sidgwick, *Philosophy: Its Scope and Relations*, London: Macmillan, 1902; the passages Moore cites come from p. 28.]

[8] Moore here alludes to Thomas Huxley's classic introduction to zoology, *The Crayfish*, London: Kegan Paul, 1879.

Arts (rightly, as I think) as 'all departments of human activity, carried out systematically with reasoned adaptation of means to ends, for the attainment of some particular end, *other than the knowledge applied*[a] in the Art'.

But it is to be noted that in 'Normative Sciences' or 'Theories of Art', the end, for the attainment of which rules are given, is itself merely *assumed* to be good. All the imperatives laid down are merely hypothetical. Aristotle, for instance, assumes that εὐδαιμονία is the end which both the individual and the state *ought to* pursue; and that Ethics and Politics are therefore only concerned to define what is meant by εὐδαιμονία and to lay down the rules by which it may be attained. Professor Sidgwick makes it an axiom that pleasure alone can be an end in itself. But if the ultimate end to the attainment of which all Arts are only means (the Art of Conduct like the rest) be itself made the object of enquiry; if it is attempted to discover not even what it is we ought to pursue, but why we *ought* to pursue anything at all; or what is meant by saying that a thing is good or 'ought to be' – this enquiry seems to be different in kind from that of a Normative Science, and, since it is the subject-matter of the present essay, I have preferred to entitle it 'The Metaphysical basis of Ethics' or 'Metaphysics of Ethics', although authority might have been found for calling it 'Ethics' simply. The ground to be traversed will thus correspond to that covered by Kant in his Critique of Practical Reason, and to the province which Professor Sidgwick would assign to Practical Philosophy; but it will appear later why I prefer not to use the word 'Practical' in the title of my subject.

It may perhaps be doubted whether such a subject-matter exists at all; but, pending proof, the meaning of the distinction drawn between Metaphysics of Ethics and Ethics may be elucidated by the analogy of the following distinction between Science and Metaphysics. Science is wholly occupied in ascertaining the laws which obtain among data immediately given as existent. In so far as it answers the question 'What exists?', it only points to what may be called the 'matter of knowledge', and ascribes to it the predicate of existence, without inquiring what that predicate means in itself. For Metaphysics, on the other hand, approaching its problem through epistemology, the stress must lie on the meaning of the predicate:[b]

[a] Italics are mine.

[b] All so-called Metaphysics does not perhaps approach its problem through epistemology; but in so far as it can claim to be rational knowledge, it would seem that it must not assume any type of existent as the ultimately real; and, if it proceeds to justification of its assumption, no other method seems open to it.

its ultimate strength against Scepticism lies in the impossibility of making any proposition that shall not involve an assertion of 'being' and the validity of certain logical laws. For it therefore the question 'What exists?' must be answered by a reference to the only possible tests of the validity of knowledge – tests which can never guarantee the *necessary existence* of the 'matter of knowledge.' Hence Kant, with his conception of a Ding an Sich, and the later Idealisms, have spoken of an ultimate reality, however little they have succeeded in fully defining its content, in comparison of which all the matter dealt with by Science can be condemned as mere Appearance.

A similar distinction seems possible in the region of 'the good'; we can not only ask 'what is good' with the meaning 'Tell us what are the data of experience to which we may apply the term "good"'; but it is at least possible that just as the question 'what is being?' cannot be answered by pointing to anything which is, or even to the whole world which seems to be, so the question 'what is good?' may involve a metaphysical enquiry to which no identification of the good with any one empirical datum, such as pleasure, or with that which under certain conditions leads to it, can ever by the nature of the case furnish an adequate answer. It is possible pleasure may be good, and that a maximum of pleasure may be what we ought to aim at; and yet nevertheless to identify 'the good' with pleasure or 'what ought to be' with a maximum of pleasure may involve a fallacy like that of identifying a chair or a table, because they are, with 'being', or matter, when it is held to be real, with reality. Indeed such definitions must become tautologous, unless (1) either it be maintained that by 'A maximum of pleasure is the good' is meant 'A maximum of pleasure, or that which is productive of a maximum of pleasure, is what is meant whenever the word good is used' – a statement which is flagrant contradiction with the facts. For it is impossible to take refuge in the hypothesis that people have erred as to what they meant, since error implies that some definite meaning is attached to each of the terms falsely conjoined. Hence it must be admitted people meant something definite by 'virtue', when they said it was the good; and as the error, if error there be, can only lie in the identification of it with good – not in mistaking it for maximum pleasure.[9] (2) Or[10] else it must be allowed that good has a meaning of its own, not exhausted by any empirical concept or any definition involving such. The same dilemma

[9] Moore's MS has a detached comment which appears to apply here: 'Is pleasure "what I ought to pursue". What does "ought to" mean ?'

[10] Russell: 'The disjunction is not obviously exhaustive.' (Russell added a few marginal comments to Moore's manuscript; we have included these comments among our notes with the prefix 'Russell'.)

may be put with reference to Aristotle's definition of the good – ἐνεργεία κατ' ἀρετήν[11] etc. Is this a significant proposition? If so, then something other than ἐνεργεία κατ' ἀρετήν must have been meant by 'good'. But it is impossible that that something other can have been any other empirical definition of good; since the significance of Aristotle's doctrine rests on his refusal to identify ἐνεργεία etc. with any such ordinary conception, e.g. pleasure. Good, in short, must have some meaning of its own, apart from any reference to empirical concepts, unless we are to mean e.g. by 'pleasure is the good' only that we shall limit the word good to pleasure; and in that case the question 'Is pleasure good?' must be meaningless.

Perhaps the fallacy involved in all empirical definitions of the good may be quite plainly exhibited as follows. One party, let us suppose, holds that the good is pleasure, another party holds that it is self-realisation, it being admitted that self is to be defined as in psychology by reference to the results of empirical enquiry. Our contention is that if each party is to hold that the other is wrong, each must presuppose 'the good' to have some other meaning than that which by their definition they assign to it. Either the controversy must be of the same nature as if one party maintained that light was ether-waves and the other that it was air-waves, in which case it is plain that each must have some direct knowledge of what they mean by light as distinct either from ether-waves or from air-waves; or else it must be sought to maintain that the controversy is merely 'about words' – about the definition of the term 'good'. But in this latter case, either each party must be content to allow that the other may also be right – in which case both propositions become insignificant; or else there must be some reference to a standard by which the *right* meaning of words can be determined. And this latter contention involves the term that is to be defined: the argument is circular. Nor can this conclusion be escaped by the contention that we should have said the *true* meaning of words. For mere words have no *true* meaning, in the only sense in which truth can be established without reference to an ethical standard. Truth or error consist only in the consistency or inconsistency of the relations thought to hold between real objects, with those which actually obtain. The true meaning of a word can only be the sense which *it ought* to convey either absolutely or because it is usually used to convey it. But (1) it is impossible for either party to contend in the present instance that 'pleasure' or 'self-realisation' are what the term good is usually employed to convey. For in the first instance their propositions would be palpable contradiction with the facts;

[11] 'Activity of soul in accordance with virtue', *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098a16.

and in the second place they would not be ethical but purely lexicographical, and in order to bring them into the former sphere they would be forced to consider whether the vulgar notion of good was a true one or not; for which purpose the contention that good is a mere term must be wholly given up. If on the other hand (2) it is maintained that the word 'good' *ought absolutely* to be used in this or that sense; the moral standard implied, if it is not the lexicographical one of ordinary usage, must be that of truth, and truth, as said above, implies the assertion of a relation between real things, in which case 'good' must have a meaning other than that assigned to it. In other words, if the discussion what a word ought to be used to be[12] mean or what it *really* does mean is to be of philosophical importance, it must always be implied that there is some real object or relation, perhaps not sufficiently disengaged by former analysis, for which a fixed term is required for the purposes of scientific discussion, and to which the term in question has always had reference, although perhaps confusedly. There can be no true meaning of words in a strict sense; but, if we are to discuss the truth about reality, it may be necessary to confine a word to one meaning; and when the word is already in common use, it must be shewn that the meaning proposed has been usually attached to it. It is in this sense that the present essay proposes to discuss the meaning of 'good' and 'ought to be': and it is maintained that there is a real object or relation corresponding to them, and to which they have always had more or less definite reference, and the identification of which with anything empirical always involves a tautology.

We may, then, I think, fairly consider it proved that 'good' must have a meaning other than an empirical one; though freely admitting that the discovery of the empirical objects to which the term may be truly applied is highly important. All that we contend is that the proposition 'This or this directly given object, or that which stands in such and such a uniform relation to this object, is the good' is not capable of empirical[13] verification. It is not of the nature of empirical or scientific propositions, which uniformly include some particular phenomenon in a larger class – but a class of phenomena only: e.g. when we say man is an animal, where the two notions conjoined are both of them defined by directly given empirical characteristics. To take a final instance: if it be said that the good is only that which pleases, that proposition is certainly significant, for we know what it is to be pleased, and it tells us that all things which cause us to have that feeling of pleasure are good. But if the proposition is to remain

[12] Sic; this second occurrence of 'be' is clearly a slip.

[13] Russell: 'Purely empirical?'

significant and not to become tautologous, it must not be maintained that good is a merely empirical conception. It may be attempted by pointing e.g. to a virtuous man: it may be said 'See, he is good; and he does produce a balance of pleasure over pain.' But this tells us no more than that the virtuous man is to be included in the class of things that produce more pleasure than pain: it tells us nothing whatever about the good except that where we apply that predicate it can be shewn that a balance of pleasure is produced. But our whole question was of whether we were justified in applying that predicate and the present answer is a mere *petitio principi*.

The justice of the above criticism seems to be tacitly implied in any ethical system which coordinates 'what ought to be' with 'what is' as if they were two fundamentally opposed conceptions; but its importance for speculative purposes seems much too generally neglected.[14] It is only if the object of Ethics is conceived to be purely practical, to tell you 'what you ought to do', as is definitely announced by Aristotle, that there can be any excuse for assuming an Ethical axiom. If the object of the enquiry is knowledge for its own sake no axiom the denial of which would not involve an affirmation can be admitted; and though the results so obtained may be very inadequate to tell us how to live, quâ knowledge, their value depends upon their truth and not upon their use. The main object of the present essay, then, is a purely speculative one; though it will be attempted later to shew how the theory here to be developed is connected with the Normative Science of conduct.

So far I have been engaged in defining what I mean by Metaphysics of Ethics or the attempt to give a 'transcendental' meaning to good. This serves to distinguish the present enquiry from all such as start from an empirical definition of the good, and are only further concerned with the attempt to shew how their principle may be consistently applied and what are the means of attaining their end. It is Kant who seems most clearly to have recognised this distinction and to have done most towards a systematic exposition of the nature of the concept 'good';[a,15] but since he states the problem in a different way some preliminary statement of my grounds of dissent may not be out of place.

[a] Pref to P. V.

[14] Russell: 'This point should be explained'.

[15] It is not obvious which passage Moore is here referring to; presumably it is Kant's discussion of the concept of the good at AK 5: 9ff. (MG 143ff.) despite the fact that Kant's account of this concept is very different from Moore's.

Kant considers the discussion to fall within the province of Practical Reason, just as Professor Sidgwick would assign it to Practical Philosophy: and this nomenclature has been so universally adopted, that a discussion of it seems necessary, to avoid misunderstanding, at the outset of the present essay. In its more restricted sense Practice seems to have an essential reference to human nature; when some might even think that this exhausted its significance. On this understanding, Practical Philosophy should be confined to the determination of what 'we ought *to do*' in Ethics and Politics. But most would admit that a complete answer to this question implied primâ facie a discussion of 'what ought to be', whether we can do it or not.[a] And when this further problem is taken into account, as by Kant it certainly is, the meaning of 'Practical Philosophy' must necessarily be extended beyond the sphere of mere human action, and embrace the discussion of what Nature 'ought to' produce, or the 'end' of the whole process of things in time. With this widened conception of 'Practice', the discussion would however still assume that what ought to be necessarily was not; that it was only something which might be in the future. And this contrast between 'what is' and 'what ought to be', as involving a distinction in time, is generally assumed to be fundamental. But from the point of view of the present essay no distinction involving Time can be assumed as fundamental. Time seems to be a merely empirical datum which, as such, must be discarded, when a logical test of reality is set up.[16] It seems therefore necessary that a discussion which professes to deal with the most fundamental conceptions of Ethics, should start without prejudging the question whether 'what ought to be' really is or not. In other words, the conception of 'good' seems logically more fundamental than that of what ought to be if the latter is understood to imply anything empirical – in short, than any conception in which 'practice', by the largest extension of its meaning, can be involved. On the other hand it will be attempted to shew that what 'ought to be' may rightly be taken as identical with 'good,' the limitation of the former term being only due to a confusion between 'being' as existence in time and 'being' in a transcendental sense; for what only 'ought' to exist in time certainly may primâ facie, and (as will appear if

[a] Cf. Professor Sidgwick p. 33 [*ME* 7th edn, p. 35]. I do not however accept his restriction, that 'ought' in the wider sense '*merely* implies an ideal or pattern which I 'ought' – in the stricter sense – to seek to imitate as far as possible (see later fn.). [There is no later footnote relevant to this issue; but Moore does discuss it on pp. 45–6.]

[16] Russell: 'At this point you might refer to your remarks at the Arist' i.e. Moore's paper 'In What Sense, if any, do Past and Future Time exist?' which was read to the Aristotelian Society and then published in *Mind*, n.s. 6 (1897) 228–40.

the present discussion is successful) *must*, 'be' in the transcendental sense – or, to adopt the language of modern Idealism, must be real. It will follow indeed that what ought to be includes also what we 'ought to do' or what ought to be done; but that because it is 'what ought to be', and not vice versâ. That this rejection of 'practice' is justified seems proved by the mere conceivability of a 'good' which is not merely *to be*: the wider notion is always logically the more fundamental.

On our view, then, the distinction between 'what ought to be' and 'what is' is not such as to justify a fundamental division of Philosophy or of the Reason into the two parts 'Theoretical' and 'Practical'. The persistence of this division is probably to be ascribed to Aristotle, whose Ethics, however, are professedly not metaphysical. In fact the distinction between 'what ought to be' and 'what is' is not as great as the distinction between what is and what exists; and the 'practical' is so far from representing 'what ought to be' that it is inextricably bound up with mere existence. It does indeed *imply* the transcendental concept; our very first point is that it necessarily leads thereto: but as soon as it is recognised that this concept to which it leads is of a wider nature than itself, it appears as much a misnomer to call the inquiry into that concept 'practical', as to call any branch of science 'metaphysics'. So far therefore as general philosophical scheme goes, the standpoint here taken up seems to agree most with that of Plato. The 'good' is to be considered as an Idea ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας[17] perhaps – (the meaning that can be attached to such a phrase will be subsequently considered):[18] but the really essential distinction is between ὄντα and γιγνόμενα[19] and the 'practical', by its very notion, belongs to the latter class.

Kant, however, is a much more convenient starting-point for a Metaphysic of Ethics than Plato: partly because his exposition is so much fuller and more systematic; partly because he was able to make use of so much more speculation; and partly because his direct influence upon modern thought seems so much greater. And much of what he said seems to lead directly to the view above expressed. He himself says that 'freedom' of the will rests upon 'transcendental freedom', which latter is a speculative notion, though, according to him, not demonstrable by speculative means; and the fault in his statement seems to proceed largely from his not sufficiently distinguishing between the relation of reason to consequent and

[17] The phrase comes from *Republic* 509b, and is often translated as 'beyond being'.
[18] Moore returns to this theme on p. 83.
[19] This distinction, usually interpreted as a distinction between 'being' and 'becoming', is drawn in various ways in *Republic* e.g. 521d, 525b, 525c, 526e (there is no canonical context in which Plato directly contrasts ὄντα and γιγνόμενα).

that of cause to effect. Our will, as he defines it, is a power of being cause;[20] but what he calls a 'pure will' cannot be a 'will' at all, since by his own definition of causality as applying only to relations of phenomena it must be put out of court by the mere fact of its 'purity'. This is the old objection raised against his statement of the relation between phenomena and things in themselves – an objection which seems fatal to the basis of Schopenhauer's professedly Kantian system.

He himself, in answer to a critic of the 'Grundlegung', gives his reason for not taking 'the good' as the fundamental conception in his Metaphysic of Ethics. This however seems to amount to no more than that 'the good' necessarily implies an 'object' to which it may be applied.[a] Now an 'object' must, according to the 'Pure Reason',[21] be given in intuition. The 'good' must therefore either contain some empirical notion or it must refer to the object of an 'Idea', the existence of which we cannot ratify. But in the 'Practical Reason', he proceeds to infer the existence of 'objects' of Ideas from the moral law. His insistence, then, on making the 'law' and not the 'object' the fundamental notion of his ethical philosophy seems to be due to the fallacy of mistaking the datum from which you infer, for the logical ground of the inference.[b] There is nothing in what he says to shew that the notion 'good' is not logically more fundamental than the moral law: he only insists that if it were not for the moral law we should know nothing of that notion. In short he seems to confuse the ratio cognoscendi with the ratio essendi, a confusion against which he himself gives a warning elsewhere.[c] It is the latter which in philosophy must always form the basis of distinctions; and therefore it would be more appropriate to distinguish the 'Critique of Practical Reason' as 'philosophy of the good' from 'philosophy of that which is', than by means of the 'practical law', which is only the datum from which it sets to work.

Enough has perhaps been said in preliminary justification of our subject matter. As Kant himself says, philosophy differs from Mathematics in that it cannot start with definitions because it has no intuition whereon to base them: a philosophical treatise must justify and explain itself by its whole course. I propose, therefore, in this essay, to criticise Kant's Metaphysics of

[a] P. V. p. 67 [AK 5: 63, MG 191].
[b] He seems himself to recognise this, P. V. p. 31 [AK 5: 29, MG 163].
[c] P. V. p. 4 note [AK 5: 5, MG 140].

[20] Sic – presumably 'being a cause' is intended. Moore provides no reference for this imputed definition, but the opening of section III of *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* is characteristic: 'Will is a kind of causality of living beings' (AK 4: 446, MG 94).
[21] I.e. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.