PART I
CHAPTER I

PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS

Moral law, taken for granted for centuries, has become increasingly problematical. So long as it was accepted unquestioningly, hardly anybody doubted that it was an absolute law; everyone believed either that it was part of God’s will, or that it was self-evident and self-sufficient, and therefore in no need of further justification. This absoluteness, however, seems to have become unacceptable. It might indeed be best to reserve the concept solely for the past, since in present-day thinking morality is looked upon more and more (at least outside theology) as the product of biological, psychological or social factors. Yet some uneasiness still accompanies this process of making all morality dependent on apparently more fundamental facts; for instance, few people, if any, can be fully satisfied with any teaching which is bound to diminish the feeling of personal responsibility. Nor, to give another example, does the problem of good and evil appear obsolete, despite scientific explanations of human behaviour. Therefore, the claim that there is a moral law which gives to morality an ultimate sanction, a basis which is absolute because it is independent of any further causation, cannot—or should not—be denied without a thorough investigation. It is to this investigation that this book attempts to make a contribution.

Some of the difficulties of the present situation are shown by our use of the word ‘morality’ itself. Sometimes it is simply equated with prevalent social customs; more often, perhaps, it is used whenever personal problems are touched upon, and then it is applied to problems of the most diverse kind, such as the choice between different ways of making money, the punishment of children or of criminals, or chastity and marriage. In a sense this is justified, because there are few personal problems which have no moral implications, but, obviously, these implications should
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be clearly stated to give to the word ‘moral’ a meaning of its own.

Once we try to restrict the use of the word, however, we meet another difficulty—the commonly neglected need to distinguish between fundamental moral law or basic morality and its application in particular circumstances. Marriage, for instance, is often spoken of uncritically and without reference to its personal aspects, as if the fact that marriage takes different forms in different societies were one of the essential problems faced by those who assert the existence of a moral law. It is then argued that, since for the Christian monogamy alone is moral, while in some other religions polygamy is permitted, morality is obviously entirely dependent on external circumstances. In fact the forms of marriage constitute a problem which only arises when morality has to be applied within the framework of society; the fundamental moral question in marriage (as elsewhere) has to do with the human relationship between the persons involved, with their motives, attitudes and actions, with love and trust.

Moral codes may differ as to whether a man may have one wife or four; all are agreed that a man may not have any woman that he likes whenever he likes. Moral codes may differ again where lying is the lesser of two evils, but all are agreed that ordinarily speaking the truth is the right course of action. Such variety as there is in moral codes can often be explained by the fact that these codes are not statements of ultimate moral principles but are applications of such principles to the actual conditions of a particular society... There are certain factors which prevent us from seeing the fundamental resemblances in the different moral codes.*

It is true that moral considerations may convince us that monogamy is a more adequate way of acting according to moral principles; whether or not this is so should be the essential point in any discussion of the moral value of monogamy in our society. But only the principles themselves ought to be called moral, despite the undeniable importance of the existing laws and customs, and even though a proper description of these can help us to come to a moral decision.

To arrive at a clear concept of this basic morality, one could

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perhaps adopt the following definition: that it is a pattern of behaviour based on the absolute value of the good. But even this raises more problems than it solves. What is the meaning of the term ‘good’? Is there anything which we can legitimately call an ‘absolute value’ and is there anything absolutely reliable on which to base our behaviour? What is the exact meaning of the term ‘absolute’? All these problems must be discussed at length, before any definition can be accepted. For the time being I just state that in what follows I use the word ‘morality’ to mean ‘fundamental morality’ and, whenever necessary, pay due regard to the need to distinguish it from any special application of moral concepts, which will also be discussed.

This book, however, is concerned, not with morality alone but with ethics, and this makes it easier to postpone the question of definition until later. Ethics includes morality, but is wider in scope; as well as the foundations and implications of morality, it includes the question of how far we can know for certain and speak about an absolute value at all—that is, the epistemological problem of the limitations of knowledge. We shall therefore investigate the presuppositions of any definition.

The subject-matter of ethics is traditionally circumscribed by the following three questions:

1. What ought we to do?
2. What is the meaning of ‘good’?
3. Are we able to do what we ought to do?*

The first two questions are moral ones, but in their ethical sense they also lead to the investigation of how it may be possible to arrive at an answer, why any answer is valid, and if so, on what grounds we are under the obligation to observe any rules or laws

* See for the first two questions G. E. Moore, Principia Ethica (Cambridge, 1959), (Paperback edition), pp. 3, 115, or A. Wenzl, Philosophie der Freiheit, (Muenchen, 1949), p. 7, where the third question is also mentioned. These two (to which one could add others) have been chosen in order to show that the tradition is still alive today, and that even philosophers belonging to entirely different schools agree in this respect. G. E. Moore also gives some other formulations which are helpful, such as (1) ‘What kind of actions ought we to perform?’ and (2) ‘What kind of things ought to exist for their own sake?’ Ibid., p. viii.
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which we discover. The third question concerns the freedom of will which must be the basis of any such obligation, for commands would be senseless if we were unable to obey.

The significance of these questions may be more fully appreciated if some further details are added.

1. The first question asks whether—beyond the necessary practical considerations of life—there are principles which ought to determine our behaviour, such as ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’, and whether these principles (if they exist and can be discovered and stated) are of general validity. Whether they are valid, that is, under any circumstances, overriding all practical considerations. They might turn out to be a mere guidance for those who want to come near to a cherished ideal. The validity of the sense of unconditional obligation which seems to accompany them must therefore be established and tested.

2. As the word ‘good’ is used in many different contexts, its special moral meaning has to be isolated. This gives rise to the question whether there is something which, in the moral sense, can always be called good, and this demands an inquiry into the nature of value-judgments, of relative and absolute values, which will throw further light on the problem of obligation. To call something good is to make a value-judgment; all moral commandments imply the word ‘ought’. But if the good were ultimately derived from merely arbitrary or conventional requirements or from social or psychological influences, value-judgments would remain dependent on these factors and an unconditional obligation to accept this ‘ought’ would not arise.

3. Morality must be based on freedom of choice, decision and action, for unless one is free to choose and to act upon one’s choice one cannot be held responsible for one’s actions. A sense of responsibility, however, is probably the most clearly recognized expression of morality, so it cannot be dismissed easily. Yet to believe in freedom has become particularly difficult because of the findings of different sciences, particularly psychology. The prevailing tendency is to assume that all our actions are effects of causes upon which we had no influence. Freedom of will is thus denied,
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though the implicit denial of responsibility is not so openly professed and is sometimes not even seen. In fact the survival of the concept and feeling of responsibility appears to be a strong support for the belief in freedom. Science provides theories which could help to shake off responsibility, and responsibility, after all, is more often than not an irksome burden; yet it is still felt, demanded and accepted. The age-old problem of freedom must obviously be reconsidered in the light of present-day thought.

All three questions require an investigation of what it is possible and what it is impossible to know. Without a decision on this, the relevance of scientific theories for ethical knowledge, the problem of human freedom and the status of absolute values could not be judged, nor a valid decision about their conflicting claims be made.

Even this short introductory exposition of what ethics means may be sufficient to show that this is the part of philosophy which is most essential for dealing with actual experience. Here philosophy is concerned directly with practical questions of immediate importance which we can hardly avoid answering—consciously if we want our choices to rest on a proper foundation, unconsciously if we neglect or suppress this inner need, for the questions are answered by our decisions and behaviour, whether or not we make the answer clear to ourselves. Thus ethics is of basic importance, because it will make a difference to our attitudes and actions, which answers to these questions we accept or take for granted, whether we believe in good and evil in an absolute sense, in an ultimate right and wrong, or whether we believe that morality is only of social importance, more or less conventional, determined by needs or custom, by inheritance and psychological make-up.

It is true that many do not take the trouble to come to a conscious decision; even those who accept responsibility often divide their lives into two separate compartments—a private one where morality applies, and a public one where it does not, either because of practical needs or theoretical convictions or because the end seems to justify the means. Family life and friendships are frequently protected in this way from the otherwise accepted
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immorality of, say, the struggle for material or political success. This split may also take another form: influenced by what is commonly believed, some people agree that all morality is merely socially determined, yet they behave in a way which only makes sense as the response to a belief in something like an absolute. They may try to explain this as a subjective survival of old prejudices, but even this does not make sense in the light of what they actually experience and do. They overtly deny, and at the same time tacitly presuppose, absolute standards. Inevitably such inconsistencies must sooner or later harm one’s integrity; these problems should at least be faced. We may not always be fully aware of moral problems when we act, we may even refuse very often to be worried by principles or moral demands, but these will force themselves upon us when we are confronted with difficult situations or decisions of consequence when it will be essential to know whether morality is simply a prejudice, now unmasked by modern science and thus to be subordinated to utilitarian considerations, or whether it is something reliable to direct us, something ultimate to rely upon. If ultimate, the good may require sacrifices, even the sacrifice of life, and such sacrifices have been made. Is it simply foolish to contemplate such a course of action at all; should we not just seek our own advantage? In short, it will be rather difficult to disregard all such questions all the time; they will have to be answered in times of stress, and it is therefore better to face them beforehand. Seen in this light, it is one of the main tasks of the philosopher to help us to do so—that is, to develop ethics. Neither the questions nor the answers may be as simple as this first tentative approach suggests, which makes the need to deal with them systematically even more urgent.

When we look at the development of ethics however we discover an unexpected and surprising fact. Despite its obvious and widely accepted importance and even though most philosophers—at least until very recently—agreed that a philosophy without ethics would be highly unsatisfactory, the place of ethics within the general framework of philosophy has remained uncertain throughout the ages.
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The difficulty arose because philosophers were mainly striving to create a metaphysical system which was intended to provide a full explanation of the universe and man. This system had to be unitary and all-inclusive; therefore the philosopher had to find a common basis for external reality and for the moral law and had to deal with metaphysics and ethics in the same terms. In other words the universe and goodness were explored simultaneously and it was taken for granted that one and the same method could yield results relevant to the knowledge of both. It proved impossible however to include them in the same system without a falsification of either metaphysics or ethics. One of two things always happened and was obviously bound to happen—either goodness came first and prejudiced the explanation of the universe, or attention was concentrated on the external world and this, instead of explaining goodness, reduced it to something much less than itself.

Typical examples of these two kinds of shortcomings are the systems of Plato and Aristotle—typical because they exercised such a profound influence on the development of European philosophy that they remained the models of its two main types right up to the end of the last century.

Plato’s system of ideas—his claim that our world is founded upon the spiritual realm of eternal and unchangeable ‘perfect forms’ and that these are the prototypes and origin of all the changeable things we know—fits the conception of goodness well. When we want to do something good, we are influenced by the idea of perfect goodness; we try to deduce from it what we really ought to do. This conception itself has hardly changed at all, however much its possible applications have. In fact, some of Plato’s own purely moral statements prove it, for they are as valid as they ever were. His assertion, for instance, that it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong, continues to make its impact; it has become neither obsolete nor conventional, but has remained a challenge. T. Haecker, for instance, made the following entry, dated 30.1.1945, in the secret diary which he wrote in Nazi Germany:

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The glory of Europe, its high point, and the sign of its election, is that a sentence in Plato, which says that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it, should touch from afar the divine revelation of Christ. If there is injustice in the world, then the greater worth belongs to him who suffers the injustice, not to him who commits it. That is astounding, and belongs to another world. Injustice! Not power, be it noted, for the good and the wicked can use power, but not injustice.*

It seems justifiable, therefore, for Plato to accept the good as valuable in itself, as being in no need of any further support—that is as an absolute value. But Plato also makes it the highest of all ideas and thus the basis of his whole system. ‘The Idea of good’ is ‘the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in the visible world, and the immediate and supreme source of reason and truth in the intellectual.’† However, this leads to increasing difficulties. While it is one of Plato’s great achievements to have established the connection between the three absolute values—truth, goodness and beauty—it is less convincing to make goodness the source of reason. The connection between the good and the visible, external world—that it creates the ‘lord of light’, namely the sun, remains, at least as a philosophical thought, entirely unconvincing. The attempt to find a unitary and all-inclusive explanation and to base it on ethics prejudices metaphysics.

Aristotle tries to avoid this failure by relying on sense-experience and its logical elaboration. There are, in his later philosophy, no perfect forms. He refers first of all to sense-data and insists that we must judge what we cannot see by the evidence of what we do see. With him, we come down to earth and his system fits external reality well, even though difficulties arise concerning the transcendental aspect of reality which he does not want to dismiss. It is no accident that this kind of philosophy later led to materialism. While Plato’s system can inspire goodness and

*Journal at Night (London, 1949), p. 221. (I have used in the text the word ‘wrong’ which is the literal translation of the word ‘Unrecht’ used by Haecker; but ‘injustice’ is frequently used as well in translations of Plato.)
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kindle love, Aristotle is the master of sober investigation; his
greatness lies in the development of logic, of a systematic and
critical accumulation of knowledge, in leading man a long way
towards scientific thinking. Consequently, however, his ethics is
mainly matter of fact, a collection of practical and political rules;
the good is not considered as such. For him, ‘virtue is concerned
with pains and pleasures’, and the cardinal point is that ‘excess and
deficiency’ are equally fatal; he always tries to find the mean, the
reasonable middle way. If ‘good craftsmen work to the standard
of the mean, then, since goodness like nature is more exact and of a
higher character than any art, it follows that goodness is the
quality that hits the mean. By “goodness” I mean goodness of
moral character, since it is moral goodness that deals with feelings
and actions, and it is in them that we find excess, deficiency and a
mean . . . the first two being wrong, the mean right and praised as
such.’* He compares the effects of excess and deficiency of meat
and drink with those of courage, temperance and other virtues; he
wants neither complete avoidance nor licentious enjoyment of all
pleasures; neither an excess nor a deficiency of truthfulness. The
mean thus becomes a useful practical criterion, but it cannot help
us to decide what the good itself is. Aristotle does not deal with
that good which could be and ought to be done for its own sake.
Emphasis on metaphysics does not allow for a full development of
ethics.

That this is inevitable is shown even by those later followers of
Plato who concentrate more exclusively on metaphysics. Hegel’s
idealist system, for instance, leaves as little room for ethics as
Marx’s materialism. Both agree that ‘such an empty thing as good
for the sake of the good has no place whatsoever in living reality’.†

Other philosophers tried to counteract this trend by writing on
ethics alone and making a special discipline of it, independent of
all other philosophy. But this too is unsatisfactory, the validity
of ethics is obviously doubtful if it is not rooted in our knowledge

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† Hegel’s formulation.