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PART I  
THE PROBLEM

## CHAPTER I

## FACT AND VALUE

The central problems of moral philosophy may be regarded as arising from the gap between questions of fact and questions of value, between 'is-statements' and 'ought-statements'. It will be convenient, then, to approach the problems with which this book is concerned by discussing that gap and its implications. As usual in philosophy, however, this approach at once confronts us with the fact that there are some philosophers who deny that any such gap exists. It will, therefore, also be necessary to consider their case.

We may note, to begin with, that the problems of moral philosophy are not quite the same as the problems of morals. Should *Lady Chatterley's Lover* be banned? Should unhappy married couples get divorced, whether or not they have young children? Should I join the army or go to prison instead? Should I conceal some of my earnings when I fill in my income tax form, if I know that the authorities are not likely to find out about them? Should we go on making nuclear weapons? These are all moral problems. Moral philosophers may not always agree about whether it is their business, as philosophers, to try to answer such questions. A good many of them would be shocked at the very idea. All of them would, however, agree that any systematic attempt to answer such questions will raise some peculiarly difficult problems of method, and that it is with these methodological problems that the moral philosopher is principally concerned. Most philosophers nowadays will add that they are his sole concern.

What are these methodological problems? We may see what they are if we contrast the questions cited above with some others which are plainly not moral ones. Is a young girl who reads *Lady Chatterley's Lover* more likely to have sexual experience outside marriage than if she does not read it?

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Is divorce more common in the towns than in the country? If I go to prison will I find it hard to get a job afterwards? Can I be sure that my tax evasion will not be found out? If we abandon nuclear weapons, will Russia attack us? These are questions of fact. They may not be easier to answer than the moral questions, but at least we know how we could set about getting the answers, even if we have doubts about whether we would succeed.

Take the easier questions first. The one about divorce could obviously be settled by getting particulars of all the divorces granted and noting where the parties lived. Official records would make it fairly easy to do this for some countries during some periods: say Australia over the past fifty years. For some countries and some periods this information would be unobtainable; so that the question as it stands, in its completely general form, could not be answered with certainty. But the difficulty is a practical and not a theoretical one: how to get the necessary information. We know exactly what information would be needed to settle it.

Much the same is true of the other questions. The question about prison could be answered with complete certainty by going to prison, waiting till you got out, and then seeing whether or not you got a job. In the same way we could try the experiment of abandoning nuclear weapons and then waiting to see whether Russia did, in fact, attack us or not. The trouble with these procedures is, of course, that we want to know the answers to these questions beforehand: we want to be able to predict what will happen. We can do this fairly accurately by observing what happens to other prisoners after they have been released, and asking whether there are any factors in your case that would be likely to make your experiences different from theirs. In much the same way you should be able to estimate your chances of deceiving the taxation authorities. In answering both these questions we feel justified in making inferences from similar cases, and making allowances for any relevant differences there may be between these cases and the one that

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we are investigating. The question about Russia is much harder to answer just because there are no sufficiently similar cases to go by; but here again we do follow this procedure as far as we can, by examining the behaviour of Russian statesmen in the past and asking ourselves how closely the situations they were then in resemble the one we are supposing. In general, we base our predictions of future events on our observations of what causes have had what effects in the past. There are, it is true, theoretical difficulties about the concept of cause: we are, however, fairly confident about the kind of data needed to enable us to say that *A* causes *B*.

The question about the effect of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* on young girls is obviously the hardest to answer, but it is, like the others, a causal question, and the difficulty involved is the practical one of getting the necessary information, rather than the theoretical one of procedure. We can hardly perform the experiment of exposing a group of girls to *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and then carefully comparing their subsequent activities with those of a precisely similar control group which has not been exposed to Lawrence; because, apart from the many other difficulties that will occur to the reader, we could never be sure that the two groups were exactly similar in the relevant respects. So many different factors are relevant here that we could never be sure that any differences that did occur were due to the reading of Lawrence's book.

The question is, however, like the others one of fact: whether something did occur, and whether as the result of this something else occurred. Questions of this sort can be settled by observation. In the final analysis we appeal, in answering them, to the evidence of the senses: to what we have observed to be the case in given situations.

Moral questions are not like this. Even if we could know with complete certainty just what the effects of banning a given book would be, there might still be room for argument about whether or not it should be banned. There might be difference of opinion about whether a given consequence (the

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loss of virginity before marriage, for example) was a bad one or not. Nor is this always due to difference of opinion about the further consequences of consequences. One can well imagine someone maintaining that no consequences, however beneficial, could possibly justify depriving the world of a literary masterpiece, or forcing unhappy couples to stay together against their will, or evading one's responsibility to the State, or allowing oneself to be the instrument by means of which the horrors of modern war are unleashed on the world.

If someone does take one of these stands, it is hard to see by what procedure we could show him to be either right or wrong. There certainly do not seem to be any observations that would settle the question one way or the other, in the way that the sight of the first Russian bombers overhead would settle the question: Will Russia attack us?

Moral questions, then, present philosophers with a problem which is quite different from the problem of knowing what the right answers to them are. It is the problem of knowing what would count as evidence for the rightness of one answer rather than another: the problem of knowing how such questions are to be settled.

It may be objected that this is, after all, quite an unreal problem. We do actually settle moral questions in one way or another every day of our lives. Very often we are quite sure of the rightness of one answer rather than another. We do, in fact, adopt some procedures for answering such questions: why, then, should the philosopher profess puzzlement about what our procedures are? All he needs to do is to examine carefully the way in which we actually argue about morals. We can best consider this objection by examining a typical example of an everyday argument about morals. Consider the following dialogue:

- A. Divorce is always wrong, under all circumstances, whether there are children or not.  
B. Why?  
A. Because a sacred promise has been made, which should on no account be broken.

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B. It is certainly wrong to break a promise when that means disappointing or deceiving the person to whom the promise was made, but married couples make their promises to one another. If, then, both parties wish the marriage to be dissolved, there seems no reason why they should not release one another from this promise. It is mere superstition to suppose that any action, whether or not it is the breaking of a promise, is wrong when no harm whatsoever is done to anybody as a result.

Whether this question has been settled or not depends entirely on whether *A* is prepared to accept the general principle that *B* has laid down. *B*'s principle is that no action can be wrong if it causes no one any harm. If *A* accepts this, and if a suitably precise sense can be given to 'harm', the question becomes one of fact. But it may well be that *A* refuses to accept this principle. He may insist that what he calls 'sacred promises' should not be broken on any account and that the consequences for human suffering or happiness do not affect the wrongness of breaking such a promise. In practice, *B* will no doubt say something like 'Surely you don't really believe that?' and will try to make *A* change his mind by citing harrowing examples of human suffering. But this is merely to try to find out if *A* really is prepared to take this stand or not. If he does sincerely believe this, it is hard to say how he could be proved wrong.

A secondary imaginary dialogue may reinforce this point:

- X. Slavery is of course wrong today, but it was right in fourth-century Athens.
- Y. You mean, don't you, that it was thought right?
- X. No. I mean that it was really right then.
- Y. How could it possibly be right then and wrong now?
- X. Very easily. The circumstances are quite different. Under modern conditions there is no excuse for slavery, but in Greece at that time it would not have been possible for there to be a leisured class without the labour of large numbers of slaves. Without a leisured class it would not have been possible for the Greeks to reach the very high level of culture that they did reach, with the consequent enrichment of western civilization ever since. These results more than justify the institution of slavery.
- Y. I don't agree. Human liberty is of far more importance than even the highest possible achievements in literature, art or philosophy.

Here there is no disagreement about the facts. Both *X* and *Y*

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may agree that without the institution of slavery Greek civilization would not have been possible. The difference of opinion is whether slavery could ever be justified by these considerations. Here again it is hard to see how this argument could be settled one way or the other.

The general point is that we settle moral questions by appealing implicitly to some general principle, such as that no action is wrong if it does not cause human suffering. If this principle is granted, then it is possible to decide whether, for example, divorce by mutual consent is right or not. The difficulty comes if this implicit assumption is questioned, or when two conflicting principles are both put forward. The central problem for moral philosophers is how it is possible to justify relying on one such principle rather than another. It is this that distinguishes moral questions from questions of fact, where the appeal is ultimately to the evidence of the senses.

The point may be put as a logical one. Suppose *Y* in the dialogue above were to go on to argue: 'Slavery causes human suffering; therefore it is wrong.' It is clear that this argument is logically valid only if we assume some such major premise as: 'Whatever causes human suffering is wrong.' *X*, on the other hand, may argue: 'Slavery was necessary in Greece for the promotion of civilization; therefore it was right.' Here again the argument is only valid if we assume some such major premise as: 'Whatever is necessary for the promotion of civilization is right.' In each case the minor premise makes an assertion about a matter of fact, which may be tested, but the major premise makes an assertion about what is right. There does not seem to be any way of testing this except by an appeal to some further principle about what is right or what ought to be the case. Moral conclusions cannot be drawn from factual premises alone: there must always be a major premise which is itself a moral proposition. How can we know whether these moral propositions are true or false?

This contrast between questions of fact and questions of right may be reinforced by considering the different kinds of asser-

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tion that may be made about a lie. We may say of a lie that it is cruel, that it is clumsy, that it is unnecessary, that it is wrong. The first three of these are assertions of fact. The cruel lie is one that causes misery to the person to whom it is told; and this is a question of fact which can be verified by observation. A clumsy lie is one that is easily found out, and this again can be verified by observation. To say that a lie is unnecessary is to say that the liar's purposes could have been achieved without telling the lie, and this too can in principle be verified by observation. But what sort of observations would we make, what would we look for, if someone said 'I want you to investigate and find out if the lie was wrong'?

The last question was meant to be a rhetorical one, but one may imagine someone trying to answer it. He might say: Well, there isn't any real difference here at all. If I wanted to find out whether a lie was unnecessary, I would try to find out the liar's purposes and whether he could have achieved them in some other way. Purposes of course cannot be observed directly, but you have agreed that whether a man has certain purposes or not is a question of fact. And certainly we know well enough what sort of behaviour would lead us to say 'X's purpose is such and such'. Again, how these purposes could be achieved is a question of fact. We can find out by observing what usually happens when people do this or that. For example, suppose that the liar is a small boy whose purpose is to escape punishment. We say 'He could have told the truth, said he was sorry and relied on pleading to avert punishment'. We judge whether this would have succeeded or not by observing his parents' behaviour on other occasions.

Now, our objector goes on, my test of the wrongness of the lie also involves looking for the purpose of the liar. If his purpose was to save himself trouble, I say that the lie was wrong. Since the small boy lied to save himself from being punished, this action was in fact wrong. But if he had lied, for example, to save his friend from getting into trouble I might say that the lie was not wrong. The test is the selfishness or otherwise of the



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purpose of the liar, just as the test of the needfulness of the lie is the possibility of achieving that purpose by some other means. Both these are questions of fact.

There is, however, still an important difference between the needfulness of the lie and its wrongness. For, suppose somebody says 'I don't agree that the small boy's lie was necessary even if there was no other way of avoiding punishment'. What would we say? We might say 'Well, in a sense this is true. He could have taken his punishment and not tried to dodge it. He wouldn't have killed him.' But of course the word 'necessary' is elliptical. It means 'necessary for some purpose'. That is why one step in finding out whether the lie was necessary was to find out the purpose of the liar. We were assuming that 'an unnecessary lie' meant 'unnecessary for the liar's purpose', whatever it was. But of course 'unnecessary' might mean something different. It might mean 'unnecessary to preserve life'. If we mean this then the test is certainly whether the punishment would have killed him or not. The question here is simply one of the sense in which the word 'unnecessary' is used.

But suppose our objector says 'I didn't mean that. I am using the word "necessary" to mean "necessary for his purpose"'. I agree that his purpose is to avoid punishment. I agree that he couldn't have avoided punishment in any other way. I still say that the lie wasn't necessary.'

What could we say in reply to this? Obviously, what the objector is saying does not make sense. To say that the lie is necessary to avoid punishment *means* that punishment cannot be avoided except by lying. If you agree to one of these you must agree to the other, simply because there are not two separate assertions here but just one. The two sentences mean the same.

Now contrast this with 'the lie is wrong'. Here our proposed test was the selfishness or unselfishness of the motive. And we have agreed that that is a question of fact. Now suppose someone says 'I agree about the facts. I agree that his motive was unselfish: to save his friend. But I don't agree that it was not

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wrong. For I think that it is always wrong to lie, even with a good motive.' Now is this obviously absurd, in the way that 'he can't avoid punishment without lying, but it is not necessary to lie in order to avoid punishment' is absurd? No, it is not. We cannot say that 'wrong' simply *means* 'from a selfish motive', because 'this action was wrong but it was not done from a selfish motive' or 'this action was done from a selfish motive, but it is not wrong' makes sense. We may disagree with either of these assertions, but we can see what they mean. Certainly no contradiction is involved in asserting them.

In practice, of course, when we try to decide whether a given action is wrong or not we do ask ourselves such questions as: Was it done from a selfish motive? Did it result in harm to anybody? But 'wrong' does not *mean* 'acting from a selfish motive' or 'resulting in harm to anybody'. If we use these criteria this is because we accept some such general principle as that all acts done from selfish motives are wrong.

Moral reasoning, then, can get going only if we take as our starting-point some major premise which is itself a moral proposition. The question for moral philosophy is how such major premises can be justified. We know how to justify the empirical assertions that are the starting-point of reasoning about matters of fact. We justify these by reference to observation, the evidence of the senses. Moral propositions cannot be verified by the evidence of the senses. Are we then ever justified in making them? Moreover, what do such assertions mean? If words like 'ought', 'good', 'right' do not refer to anything that can be observed, what do they refer to?

That is the way in which the contrast between questions of fact and questions of value may be said to generate the traditional problems of moral philosophy. But, it may be argued, this whole case rests on a mistaken view about empirical reasoning.

Empirical statements, it has been contended, depend on the evidence of the senses, and any apparent disparity between that evidence and the conclusion drawn from it may be removed by