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Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

When we make moral judgements and are challenged upon their correctness, the more articulate of us are usually able to support them. If, for example, one of us were to say, in a particular situation, that a dying man had the right to be told that he was dying; that a man who knowingly allows another to be punished for his crime is evil; that discrimination against coloured people is unjust or that abortion, with proper safeguards, ought to be legalized; and if we were challenged upon the correctness of our judgement, we should usually be able to say something in defence of it. And if in turn this defence were challenged, we should normally think it proper to take part in a discussion, an argument, whose purpose was to determine the correctness or otherwise of the original judgement. In doing so, we should be considering reasons for and against it.

Let us, in the first instance, leave judgements about rights, justice, good and evil on one side and confine our attention to judgements of obligation. If we survey the reasons brought forward in support of such judgements, we shall find, apparently, a wide variety of propositions fulfilling this role. As reasons, some of them will no doubt be good and others bad. But when the bad ones are eliminated, a wide diversity is still to be found among those which remain. The point, I believe, does not need labouring. It is enough to think of half a dozen arguments about what ought to be done in a concrete situation to be impressed with the variety in the reasons adduced. There does not appear to be any proposition of which we could say: This is *the* reason for judgements of moral obligation.

It would be naïve to suppose that a distinguished line of moral philosophers have been ignorant of the diversity which a cursory examination reveals. Yet philosophers of a very distinguished line have believed that there is some proposition of which we can say that it is, in a perfectly good sense, *the* reason for such judgements. And a large part of the history of moral philosophy, though by no

means the whole of it, has been an attempt to find this proposition. Utilitarianism, in one or other of its forms, is a good example of the outcome of this quest. In its purest form, Utilitarianism is the thesis that *the* reason for any moral judgement of obligation is that the action enjoined produces more good than any other action open to the agent at the time. Most Utilitarians, it is true, qualify their claim in an attempt to avoid well known difficulties about justice to which it gives rise. But in its purest form, as expounded, for example by G. E. Moore,<sup>1</sup> Utilitarianism is the view that *the* reason for any moral ought judgement is that the action enjoined produces more good than any alternative. A Utilitarian is free to admit that the reasons which appear, in all their variety, in day to day moral argument are reasons in a perfectly good sense of the word. He may say that they are reasons just because they support the proposition which he claims is *the* reason; and that the measure of how strongly they support it is the measure of how good they are as reasons.

Utilitarianism, I shall argue, is a false answer to the question it attempts to answer. But the question, I believe, is a proper one: there is significance in the question, 'What is *the* reason for moral judgements of obligation?' even though, in defending particular judgements of that kind, the diversity in the reasons advanced will be most conspicuous. The question is widened, and expressed in a superior way, by asking, 'What are the grounds of the different kinds of moral judgement: judgements of obligation, rights, justice and good and evil?' It is the central purpose of this work to set out these grounds as elements in a coherent structure which shall be explanatory of the moral demand and of moral appraisal.

#### I. MORAL GROUNDS

Justice, and good and evil, present little difficulty once the ground of judgements of obligation is established, and it is to this task that the major part of this work is devoted. The ground of judgements of obligation is a proposition, making an assertion about doing an action *x*, which implies, whatever action *x* may be, that *x* ought to be done. The word 'implies' will be used throughout in such a way that *p* implies *q* if and only if (1) it is logically im-

<sup>1</sup> *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge).

possible that  $p$  is true and  $q$  is false, and (2) the impossibility is not a consequence of either the impossibility of  $p$  or the necessity of  $q$ . But as thus defined,  $p$  may imply  $q$  without being a ground of  $q$ . For example, the proposition that I know that  $r$  implies that  $r$ , but it is not a ground of  $r$ . If I were to say, 'The editor of the Times caused the last war' and were asked for my ground, I should not be answering if I were to say, 'I know that the editor of the Times caused the last war'. Even though what I now say implies that I have a ground, I have not, in so answering, given a ground.

It would be idle to pretend that I can give a complete and satisfactory analysis of the notion of a ground. But I hope to be able to say enough to enable us to proceed in moral philosophy. The proposition, making an assertion about doing an action  $x$ , which is, as I shall argue, the ground of judgements of obligation, has a characteristic in addition to that of implying that  $x$  ought to be done; it also explains why  $x$  ought to be done. I work with a largely unanalysed notion of explanation, but I think it will be agreed, as we go along, that the thesis presented does have explanatory power in a high degree. Some propositions which imply ought judgements lack explanatory power. For example, ' $x$  is an act of murder' implies, as will readily be conceded, ' $x$  ought not to be done'. But it does not explain why  $x$  ought not to be done. A man is not unintelligible, it seems to me, who says, 'You have shown me that  $x$  is an act of murder, and I am persuaded that it follows logically that I ought not to do  $x$ , but you still have not explained to me why I ought not to do it. Suppose I enjoyed doing murders as, apparently, some people do. If you were to say that I ought not to act in this way, despite the enjoyment it gives me, I think I should be justified in asking you to explain why I ought not to. And you simply have not provided an explanation in showing me that  $x$  is an act of murder and pointing out that " $x$  is an act of murder" implies " $x$  ought not to be done".' Because I sympathise with a man who argues in this way, I do not wish to say that the antecedent of this implication is a ground of its consequent. The ground is a proposition of much greater generality which implies the consequent and which also explains the obligatoriness of the action to which both refer.

It may be conceded by one who argues in this way that ' $x$  ought

not to be done' implies that there are reasons for not doing *x*, and he may express his objection by saying that although we have established that there *are* reasons for not doing murder, we have not told him *what* they are. The point he makes is correct and is seen to be correct provided a certain confusion is avoided. If a man is aiming at avoiding acts of murder, and we are able to show him that an action which he thought was, say, justifiable homicide was in fact an act of murder, then we have given him a reason for not doing that act. Given his aims, there is no great problem in understanding what has to be done to provide him with a reason. But the man we have been considering has, we may suppose, no such aims: he enjoys doing murders. And the problem of giving him a reason for not murdering is a very different and a much more difficult one. Now I shall argue in the appropriate place that the proposition which I propose as the ground of judgements of obligation does, if it is true when asserted of doing *x*, constitute a reason for doing *x*. Consequently the objection cannot be lodged, as it can in the murder case, that in showing that the ground implies the ought judgement, we have not *given* a reason for doing *x*. We *have* given a reason: the truth of the ground *is* a reason for acting in that way. If the ground is true as asserted of *x*, then it is a reason for doing *x*; and if it is true as asserted of not doing *x*, then it is a reason for not doing *x*. Part, but not the whole, of the explanatory force of the ground proposed lies in its constituting a reason for acting. For the remainder, I find I am unable to do more than allow it to emerge as we go along.

In the pages which follow, I hope to show that we may properly speak of *the* reason, or the ground, of judgements of obligation, and of moral judgements of other kinds. It is not possible to make a simple general statement about the relations between the ground and the reasons given for moral judgements in day to day discussion because of the diversity in kind of these reasons. But once the ground is established, we shall be able to see how any individual reason is related to it. And the relations will be seen to explain our discrimination between some reasons as good and others as not so good. Establishing the ground of judgements of obligation is explanatory not only in the way described in the previous paragraph, but in this way also.

## 2. PRICHARD'S MISTAKE

It has been the aim of many, though not all, the greatest moral philosophers to establish the ground of judgements of obligation. No proposal so far made has won general acceptance, and it is inevitable that after more than two thousand years of unsuccessful investigation, the question should arise whether there is or could be any proposition of the kind moral philosophers have been seeking. It fell to the lot of H. A. Prichard to argue that there could not: that the whole subject, as so conceived, asks an improper question and rests therefore upon a mistake.<sup>1</sup> Prichard held that once we ask for the ground of moral judgements of obligation, only three answers are, 'from the necessities of the case', possible:<sup>2</sup>

- (1) Action in the way enjoined is, when all things are considered, seen to be for the agent's own good, or, as he prefers to put it, for the agent's own advantage or, better again, his own happiness.
- (2) That something realised *by* acting in the way enjoined is good, i.e., that such action produces something other than an action, e.g., a state of affairs, which is good. This thesis he calls 'Utilitarianism in the generic sense in which what is good is not limited to pleasure'.
- (3) That something realized *in* acting in the way enjoined is good, i.e., that such an action is good in itself or intrinsically good.

Having stated that these answers 'from the necessities of the case' exhaust the possibilities, he examines each in turn and rejects them all to make way for his own thesis that the truth of moral ought judgements 'can only be apprehended directly in an act of moral thinking'.<sup>3</sup> His view is that there is no possibility of speaking of the ground of moral ought judgements in the way outlined in the previous section; that there could be no proposition of which we could say, 'This proposition is the ground of such judgements'.

It is difficult to believe that any contemporary philosopher who examines Prichard's arguments will think them successful in demolishing the claims made on behalf of the answers he considers.

<sup>1</sup> 'Does Moral Philosophy rest upon a Mistake? *Mind* (1912), reprinted in *Moral Obligation* (Oxford).

<sup>2</sup> *Moral Obligation*, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

But however that may be, it makes no matter, for as I hope to show at length the answers he considers do not exhaust the possibilities. His claim that they do is undefended in his pages and it is false. Argument by the elimination of possibilities breaks down disastrously if the philosopher who uses it fails to envisage all the possibilities. The mistake to which Prichard's paper draws attention is not a mistake made by moral philosophers at large. It is a mistake made by Prichard.

It is now time to introduce an overall qualification to the claim I have been making. In the previous sections, I have spoken of the ground, in the singular, of judgements of obligation. I shall argue in fact that judgements of moral obligation divide into two distinct kinds each of which has its own ground. I shall speak here of judgements of basic obligation and judgements of ultra obligation; and the programme includes setting out the ground of judgements of each of these kinds. The grounds of the two kinds of obligation judgement are quite different; but neither of them is any of the three possibilities envisaged by Prichard.

### 3. THREE IMPEDIMENTS

The search for the grounds of judgements of obligation has been impeded, it seems to me, by two major mistakes and one serious lack of clarity. The first of these mistakes is the failure to notice the distinction between judgements of basic obligation and judgements of ultra obligation. It is a distinction which will occupy us at length, and no more will be said about it at this point. The second mistake is the almost universal assumption that the ground of moral ought judgements must be some quite simple proposition to the effect that something is good. Prichard has already revealed himself as guilty of this assumption in saying that 'from the necessities of the case' the ground of moral ought judgements can only be a proposition asserting of the action enjoined either (*a*) that it is for the agent's own good, or (*b*) that it leads to a state of affairs which is good, or (*c*) that it is intrinsically good. The assumption led Prichard to say that moral ought judgements can have no ground; it has led others to defend either one or another of the apparent possibilities and to look no further. By contrast, Kant wrote:

## THREE IMPEDIMENTS

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The concept of good and evil must not be determined before the moral law (of which it seems as if it must be the foundation), but only after it and by means of it.<sup>1</sup>

In speaking of good and evil, Kant is speaking of moral good and evil, and he is saying that the ground of a judgement that something is morally good or evil must include a judgement of obligation and not vice versa. He is denying that a judgement of obligation must be grounded in a proposition asserting something to be morally good. I believe that on this point Kant is most profoundly right: that if we make Prichard's contrary assumption, we shall not only fail to find the ground of moral ought judgements; we shall fail also to obtain any grasp of the concepts of good and evil. These remarks should not be understood as threatening a deontological theory. The theory for which I shall argue is teleological.

The third impediment is a lack of clarity first on the distinction between a motive and a reason for acting, and secondly on the distinction between a reason for acting and a reason for a judgement. I want to devote a chapter to these distinctions before broaching the main task of setting out the grounds of judgements of obligation. Principally, a clear understanding of the notion of reason for acting makes, I think, for a clear understanding of the notion of obligation, including Sir David Ross's important conception of *prima facie* obligation. But secondly, if the distinctions are not clear, my thesis about ultra obligations may seem to be egoistic, which I believe it is not. Accordingly, we turn first to the distinctions between a motive, a reason for acting and a reason for a judgement, and to the connections between the concepts of reason for acting and obligation.

<sup>1</sup> *Critique of Practical Reason*, ed. Abbott, 1907, p. 154.

## CHAPTER I

## MOTIVE, REASON AND OBLIGATION

Philosophers have only recently become much interested in the concept of reason for acting. Until some fifteen years ago, they were content to use 'motive' (and, of course, 'cause') when speaking of the antecedents of action, and to reserve 'reason' for the grounds of propositions. Indeed, it was generally thought proper to do so and incorrect to do otherwise. The change appears to have begun with the publication of Dr Stephen Toulmin's *The Place of Reason in Ethics* in 1950. In his Critical Notice of this work, Professor C. D. Broad represented the earlier position when he wrote,

... there is no doubt a perfectly good sense of 'reason' in which one can ask, 'What was *X*'s reason for giving that order?' or 'What reason is there why *Y* should obey that order of *X*'s?' But 'reason' here means *motive* for or against acting in a certain way . . .<sup>1</sup>

Does it? Have recent philosophers, in using the term 'reason for acting' introduced an expression which is otiose and whose work is done adequately by 'motive'? Or does the classical position miss a distinction of importance in identifying 'reason for acting' with 'motive'?

Broad would have been right in saying that his predecessors, with a few exceptions, drew no distinction; he would have been right in predicting that some of his successors would use 'reason' when they meant motive; he would have been right again had he said that some later philosophers would use 'reason for acting' when they meant a reason for a judgement. But he was wrong in thinking there was no distinction to be drawn between a reason for acting and a motive. I shall argue that there are three distinct concepts to be isolated in this region: the concepts of motive, reason for acting and reason for judging a proposition true or false. 'Reason for judging' will be used as an abbreviation for the latter.

<sup>1</sup> *Mind* (Jan. 1952), p. 96.



## I. REASON FOR ACTING AND REASON FOR JUDGING

If there is no distinction between reasons for judging and reasons for acting, the use of the expression 'reason for acting' can only be misleading; for what are so described are nothing but reasons for judging. If there is no such distinction, the classical position is right: there are motives and reasons for judging; and 'reason for acting', if it does not mean one of these, means nothing.

It will be argued here that reason for acting and reason for judging are distinct concepts, but that the distinction between them is often concealed by the misapplication of the term 'reason for acting'. Philosophers often apply it to propositions which are not themselves reasons for acting but which provide inductive support for other propositions which are. They apply it, that is, to reasons for judging propositions true. 'The ice is thin', 'It is a beautiful day' and 'There is a restaurant nearby' are typical examples of reasons for acting cited by philosophers. They may be cited as reasons for avoiding the ice, taking a picnic on the river and pulling the car off the main road respectively. At first sight it seems that such reasons are reasons only for a man who wants to do something or wants something. That the ice is thin is a reason for avoiding it for a man who wants to keep dry; for another who wants to see what it is like to fall through it is a reason for going onto it. That there is a restaurant nearby is a reason for pulling off the main road only for someone who wants food, or for someone who wants his companion to have food, and so on. This is the position which first suggests itself and has suggested itself to many philosophers. For example, Professor A. I. Melden writes, '... "there is a restaurant nearby" would be no reason for stopping the car unless there was something wanted and to be gotten by performing that action ...'<sup>1</sup> Professor P. H. Nowell-Smith<sup>2</sup> holds a view which is similar but not identical; that a man cannot have a reason for acting unless he has a pro-attitude towards the action or towards some state of affairs to be attained by the action. Wanting, for Nowell-Smith is one of many pro-attitudes, and although it is not quite fair to say without qualification that he holds the view in question, it is fair to say that his use of the term 'pro-attitude'

<sup>1</sup> *Free Action* (Routledge), p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> *Ethics* (Penguin Books), ch. 8.

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conceals distinctions of importance and makes it difficult to say decisively whether he holds it or not.

This position confuses reasons for acting with reasons for judging, and it also confuses reasons for acting with motives. To take the first point first, the propositions considered are not reasons for acting at all: they are part of the inductive support for propositions which are and are thus reasons for judging. For example, 'It is a beautiful day', has been considered as a reason for taking a picnic on the river. But it is properly understood not as a reason for acting but as part of the reason for judging that the agent would enjoy taking a picnic on the river. It is the latter which is a reason for acting. That a man would enjoy taking a picnic on the river is a reason for doing so; that it is a beautiful day is part of the inductive support for this proposition or part of the reason for judging it to be true. Similarly, 'There is a good restaurant nearby', is part of the reason for judging that by pulling the car off the main road, the agent would be able either to enjoy a good lunch or relieve his hunger; and either of the latter is a reason for pulling the car off the main road.

If there is to be any hope of isolating the concept of reason for acting, it is essential to keep clear the distinction between propositions which are reasons for acting and other propositions which provide inductive support for them. The latter are reasons for judging, and to call them 'reasons for acting' can lead to nothing but confusion. The present discussion of the distinction is far from complete, but it cannot be taken further at this stage. Reason for acting is an elusive concept which can be pinned down only by a series of discussions some of which cannot be completed at the stage at which they have to be introduced. I turn now to the second confusion in the position advocated by Nowell-Smith and Melden.

## 2. REASON FOR ACTING AND DESIRE

It is wrong to hold that a proposition can be a reason for acting only for a man who wants something to be attained by the action. Reasons for acting are logically independent of desires. Suppose James is home from school for the summer holidays. It is a beautiful day and the river is at its best. One of James's delights is punting. His friends, home from other schools, are all going on the river,