CHAPTER I

Introduction: pluralism and uncertainty

1. ANCIENT WISDOM, MODERN CHALLENGES

For most ancient and medieval thinkers of the Western tradition, theoretical and practical inquiry, fact and value, scientific explanation and purpose, merged in an overall quest for wisdom. Knowledge of facts about the natural world and human beings would tell us what was good and valuable. Theoretical inquiry into the nature of things (*theoria*) would answer practical questions about how to live (*praxis*); and explanations of why things behaved as they do, including humans, would tell us what ends or purposes they should pursue. We know how this worked for the great ancient thinkers. Aristotle held that among the *archai* or explaining causes of all things were final causes or ends that tell us what was worth striving for, for each thing. And for Plato, the intelligible world included not only mathematical forms that inform us about the structure of the natural world, but also ideal forms, such as Justice and Beauty, that tell us what to strive for. As a consequence, for these ancient thinkers, theory and practice, fact and value, explanation and purpose, were inextricably linked.

The modern age, by contrast, is characterized by what Hegel called "sunderings" (*Entzweiungen*) of these and many other contrasts. There has been a tendency in the modern era to pry apart considerations of (1) fact from value, (2) theoretical inquiry from practical inquiry (about the good) and (3) scientific explanation from purpose, with the consequence that the unified quest for wisdom of the ancient philosophers was threatened as well. A chief culprit in this process was the development of modern science. The story is by now familiar. As the modern era evolved, explanation of objective fact about the cosmos increasingly became the province of the new natural sciences of Galileo, Newton and their successors, which described a physical cosmos devoid of values, final causes and purposes.

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The situation was somewhat different for the human sciences (behavioral and social) which came on the scene later in the modern era. Anthropologists, sociologists and other behavioral scientists did indeed have to talk about human values and purposes. But they embraced a kind of value neutrality of their own in the name of scientific objectivity. Social scientists might tell us what persons or societies or cultures *believed* was good or right or wrong, but they could not say what really *was* right or wrong. That would amount to injecting their own values and points of view into their research – an offense against the scientific ideal of objectivity.

So, while objectivity in the modern natural sciences seemed to imply an absence of value in the world described by them, in the human sciences it amounted to something quite different. Objectivity in the human sciences suggested a value *relativism – too much value*, too many cultures, forms of life, views of right and wrong, with no non-neutral way of deciding between them. As a consequence, two other conditions of modernity entered the picture, helping to render problematic the modern search for objectivity about values and ethics. These two further conditions – made more insistent by modern anthropology and other human sciences – were a greater recognition of (4) *pluralism* of conflicting cultures, forms of life and points of view about right and wrong, together with an (5) *uncertainty* about how to show definitively which of the competing points of view was the objectively right one.

It is ironic that ideals of scientific *objectivity* in both the natural and human sciences, which had inspired the ancient search for wisdom about the cosmos and human nature, should have promoted in modern times *subjectivist* and *relativist* views about values and ethics.[1] But that is an important part of the modern story.

2. PLAN OF THE BOOK

The question I want to address in this book may be stated in terms of these modern challenges to the ancient quest for wisdom: How, if at all, can that quest for wisdom about the objective good and right be pursued in the light of these intellectual challenges of the modern era? This is not a new question and there is no scarcity of attempted answers to it. But I want to suggest some new ways of looking at this question in the

[1] Subjectivist views are defined and discussed in Chapters 5–7; relativist views in Chapters 2, 7, 8 and responses to them made in Chapters 2–4 and 9–14.

following pages. The five conditions of modernity just mentioned – the alleged sunderings of (1) fact from value, (2) theoretical from practical inquiry, (3) explanation of fact from purpose, together with a greater recognition of (4) pluralism and (5) uncertainty in matters of value – block certain traditional paths of inquiry into the nature of the objective good. But I will argue that these modern conditions also suggest other paths of inquiry about the good that are as yet unexplored and worth exploring.

I begin here with a brief overview of the book and its aims.

In the second half of this introductory chapter, I take as a starting point two of these five conditions of modernity, pluralism and uncertainty. The chapter considers how these two conditions have conspired to raise doubts about the possibility of objective values and ethical standards in the minds of ordinary persons as well as in the human sciences and philosophy. The diversity of cultures and ways of life, and the conditions of human social life, suggest that our views about good and evil, right and wrong, are formed from particular perspectives, limited by culture and history. The question then naturally arises of how, if at all, we can climb out of our historically and culturally limited points of view to find an objective standpoint above all competing points of view from which to judge what is universally right or wrong?

Chapters 2 to 4 suggest an answer to this question. The argument of these chapters introduces the central theme of the book: Ethical principles about right action and the good life can be seen to emerge *from the philosophical quest for wisdom* itself, as the ancient philosophers believed, but not exactly in the way they believed. The search for wisdom about what is objectively true and good, I shall argue, involves a persistent striving to overcome, to the degree possible, narrowness of vision that comes from the inevitable limitations of finite points of view. When applied to questions of value and the good life, I further argue that this persistent striving to overcome narrowness of vision in the search for wisdom has ethical implications about the way we should treat ourselves and others.

Chapter 2 presents a preliminary statement of the argument for these conclusions and hence an initial statement of the central theme of the book. The argument presented in Chapter 2 raises many questions and is in need of refinement. But it serves thereafter as a template that is progressively refined in subsequent chapters in response to questions and objections.

In Chapter 3, the argument of Chapter 2 is further developed and certain objections to it addressed in terms of a thought experiment involving a "retreat" of peoples representing different cultures, religions, ideologies,

points of view and ways of life, who are given the collective task of deter-mining which of their competing views is the correct one. This retreat will remind readers of hypothetical scenarios characteristic of some con-tractarian and contractualist ethical theories. But it differs from all such scenarios in ways explained in Chapter 3. The goal of the "retreatants," as I call them – unlike the hypothetical contractors of the contractarian tradition – is not to reach agreement, actual or hypothetical (which in fact they fail to do), but to seek wisdom.

In Chapter 4, the argument of Chapters 2 and 3 is refined still fur-ther by comparing its conclusions to features of Kantian moral theory. The argument of Chapters 2 and 3, I argue, leads to a moral principle that is similar to one of Kant's formulations of his Categorical Imperative, namely, his Formula of Humanity: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always at the same time as an end and never as a means only." But there are revealing differ-ences. The principle at which the argument of Chapters 2 and 3 arrives, which I call the "Ends Principle" ("Treat all persons as ends in every situ-ation and no one as means only") is not derived in the rationalist man-ner of Kantian theory, is differently interpreted, and allows in a natural way for exceptions to common moral rules ("Don't steal, lie, cheat," etc.). Nonetheless, the comparison with Kantian theory allows one to spell out in greater detail the implications of the ethical theory arrived at by the arguments of Chapters 2 and 3, which I refer to thereafter as a "moral sphere theory" (MST) of the right (or right action).

The argument for this theory in Chapters 2–4 is incomplete in a num-ber of ways. Subsequent chapters attempt to fill in the gaps by situating the argument of Chapters 2–4 in a broader theory of value (Chapters 5–8) and in a theory about the nature of philosophical inquiry (Chapters 9–11, which spell out the idea of a "search for wisdom"). The first of these two tasks (undertaken in Chapters 5–8) is to situate the moral theory of the *right* (or right action) arrived at in Chapters 2–4 in a broader theory of the *good* (or value).

Taking cues from Aristotle's contention that "'good' is said in many ways," Chapters 5–8 argue that human value can be viewed in four dimensions. The first dimension, the subject of Chapter 5, is *experiential* value. Clues are taken here from Spinoza (who pointed out that our first encounter with good and evil is through experiences of certain charac-teristic kinds, such as joy (*laetitia*) and sadness (*tristitia*)) as well as from other philosophers, including Moore and Ross. Chapter 6 considers a second dimension of value, in which value expands outward from mere

subjective experience to the realm of action and practical engagements with the world. Value in this second dimension is related to John Stuart Mill's seminal notion of "experiments in living," a notion discussed in Chapter 6 that plays a pivotal role in subsequent arguments of the book.

In a third dimension of value, considered in Chapter 7, activities and experiences are not merely viewed practically in terms of what we get from them, but more importantly, in terms of how they define what we *are*. In this dimension, the hunter in a primitive tribe does not merely hunt for food, but takes pride in his skill with the bow because of what it says about his standing as a human being. The activity signifies he is an *excellent* archer, a *good* provider for his family, a *loyal* member of his tribe. In general, the value of activities and experiences in this third dimension derives from their role in *social practices* and *forms of life* which give them meaning; and it involves the pursuit of various *virtues* or *excellences* recognized in, and necessary to the flourishing of, these practices and forms of life.

These first three dimensions of value are familiar to us. We live in them, so to speak, as we live in the three familiar dimensions of space. What I mean by a fourth dimension of value (the subject of Chapter 8) is more elusive, like a fourth dimension of space. Fourth-dimensional value, to put a name on it, is *non-relative* or universal *worth* – not merely what is good from the point of view of some individual or group or in some form of life, but rather what is worthy of being recognized as good by all persons, from every point of view. Relativists about value deny that such a fourth dimension of value exists. The challenge of value relativism is thus considered in Chapter 8. The kind of relativism that troubles most people, I argue, is the denial that we can rise above the particular historically and culturally limited points of view and forms of life of the first three dimensions of value to find an objective standpoint above them all from which to judge what is good period and should be recognized as good from every point of view.

This challenge, as it turns out, is the one faced by the retreatants in Chapter 3. I thus return in Chapter 9 to the retreat for some clues about how to meet it. The retreatants, I argue, are motivated by an "aspiration to wisdom in the ancient philosophical sense." This motivation, which is related to the nature of philosophy as the love (*philia*) of wisdom (*sophia*), is explored in the next three Chapters (9–11). Chapter 9 focuses on the idea of "aspiration," which becomes thereafter a special notion in the book signifying a patient spiritual or intellectual search or "quest" for the true and the good – as in the Socratic dictum, "the unexamined life is not worth living."

Chapter 10 then turns to the object of this quest, "wisdom in the ancient philosophical sense." Taking clues again from Aristotle, who identified "wisdom" (*sophia*) with "first philosophy" in his *Metaphysics*, I argue that there are two ends of ancient wisdom as conceived by Aristotle and other ancient thinkers: Understanding *objective reality* (or what is worth believing about the nature of things), and understanding *objective worth* (or what is worth striving for in the nature of things). (Thus, when I link "ethics" and "the quest for wisdom" in the title of this book, I mean by "wisdom" something more comprehensive than what Aristotle and other ancient philosophers called *phronesis* or "practical wisdom," though practical wisdom plays a role in the overall account of wisdom, as we shall see.[2]) In Chapter 10, I go on to explore the first of these ends of ancient wisdom (understanding objective reality) with the goal of seeking clues about how to achieve the second end (understanding objective worth).

Chapter 11 turns to the second end of ancient wisdom, understanding objective worth. I argue that the notion of "objective worth" involved in this second end is more complicated than is ordinarily realized and explore its nature in Chapter 11 by way of several thought experiments. The chapter also considers how the notion of objective worth is related to the dimensions of value discussed in Chapters 5–8, thus tying together the discussion of value in those chapters and the discussion of wisdom and philosophical inquiry of Chapters 9–11.

Chapters 12–14 then return to complete the argument for the ethical theory of Chapters 2–4 in the light of the intervening discussions of value and philosophical inquiry. I will not attempt to summarize here the arguments of Chapters 12–14 since they depend upon details of the discussions of values of Chapters 5–8 and philosophical inquiry of Chapters 9–11. Suffice it to say that the argument of Chapters 12–14 includes, among other things, an account of human flourishing in terms of the first three dimensions of value of Chapters 5–8. I argue, however, that such an account of human flourishing, though a necessary ingredient in a complete ethical theory, is not sufficient for such a theory. What is missing is spelled out in Chapters 9–11 on aspiration, wisdom and objective worth, which provide the additional ingredients necessary to complete the argument for the ethical theory of Chapters 2–4.

[2] Ryan 1999, 2007 and A. Benedikt (unpublished) provide useful overviews of historical and contemporary conceptions of wisdom. Tiberius 2008, Thiele 2006 discuss the implications of modern scientific research for our understanding of "practical wisdom."

In Chapters 15 to 17, I compare the theory developed in the preceding chapters to a selection of important alternative theories in contemporary normative ethics, arguing for its comparative merits. Chapter 15 considers intuitionist and Kantian ethical theories, Chapter 16, utilitarian and consequentialist theories of both act- and rule-varieties and Chapter 17, contractualist ethical theories. Chapter 15 begins with an overview of the theory of Chapters 1–14 before turning to the discussion of rival theories. Finally, the concluding Chapter 18 discusses practical applications of the theory for social ethics, political philosophy, law and moral education.

While Chapters 15–17 are the longest of the book, the engagement with rival theories is necessarily selective, given the complexity of contemporary ethical theory. A systematic critique of all alternative views would be a task for another book, or maybe several others; and to that extent, the defense of the view presented here is not complete, as I would freely acknowledge. I want to emphasize therefore that I am not claiming the view developed in this book is anything like the last word in ethical theory. I am too respectful of the complexity of modern ethical theory and of the sophistication of its theories to make such a claim. My goal, more modestly stated, is to introduce another option into current ethical debate, different from any familiar alternatives in the field, and to show that this option has sufficient merit to be seriously considered by philosophers as an alternative to existing theories.

The view developed has important Kantian themes, as seen in Chapters 4 and 15, but is not strictly speaking a Kantian ethics or a rationalist theory. Nor is it a version of utilitarianism or consequentialism, nor a contractarian or contractualist ethical theory, though it also borrows ideas from utilitarian and social contract theorists (J. S. Mill, for one, on the utilitarian side, as seen in Chapters 6 and 16). Virtues and excellences play an important role in the theory, as seen in Chapters 7, 8 and 13, but it is also not strictly speaking a "virtue ethics," in either ancient or modern senses of that expression, for reasons given in those chapters. Appeals to human nature also play a role, but the theory is also not a "natural law" theory in any traditional sense – and so on, for other familiar normative ethical views.

Because the theory does not fit neatly into any of the familiar categories of normative ethics, I proceed by developing it on its own terms, answering relevant objections as I go along, contrasting it at appropriate places with other ethical views and showing how it avoids many standard objections to other theories. But the task of defending the theory is only begun here, as noted. The late Robert Nozick remarked that in philosophy "there

is room for words on subjects other than last words"[3]; and the chapters that follow have been written in this exploratory spirit.

3. PLURALISM AND THE MODERN FALL

The starting points of our inquiry are two of the "conditions of modernity" mentioned in Section 1 – namely, *pluralism* and *uncertainty* – which have played a pivotal role in raising doubts about the possibility of objective values and ethical standards in the minds of ordinary persons and in the human sciences and philosophy.

By "pluralism," I mean simply the fact that we live in a world of conflicting opinions, philosophies, religions, ways of life and points of view about fundamental matters, including good and evil, right and wrong. Some philosophers define pluralism about values as the doctrine that more than one view concerning the good, or the good life, is true.[4] But such a doctrine is controversial and is not what is meant by "pluralism" here. Whether a single view about the good and the right is true, and which view it might be, are issues to be addressed by an inquiry such as this one, not something to be prejudged at the outset. By pluralism in the present context, I mean something less controversial – the obvious fact that in our modern cultural environments we are daily faced with conflicting points of view about good and evil, right and wrong – a fact that leads us to *wonder* which view may be true, and whether our own is true.

Such a pluralism is made more insistent by two pervasive features of the modern world: the global village created by modern information-technology and the spread of democratic and pluralist societies. The first puts people in daily contact with views and values different from their own. The second allows and encourages differences of point of view within individual societies. The familiar image of a "global village" may be the wrong one for this new order of things since most villages of the past shared a common heritage of traditions and beliefs. A better analogy would be a global *city* in which different cultures and ways of life mingle and are forced to confront one another. In Nietzsche's image, seeing a thousand different tribes beating to a thousand different drums, we become the first people in history who do not believe we own the truth.[5]

How such wonder in the face of conflicting alternatives leads to doubts about which view of the good may be true is nicely illustrated by a scene

[3] Nozick 1974: xii.
[4] See, for example, Berlin 1965 and also Kekes 1993 for a sophisticated defense.
[5] Nietzsche 1966: sections 5, 749, 1011. Thanks to Kathleen Higgins for these references.

from C. S. Lewis's fantasy novel, *Perelandra* (1962), to which I will refer in subsequent arguments. Lewis describes the journey of a man named Ransom to the planet Venus – called "Perelandra" in the novel and described as an Eden-like world of islands floating on water and covered by exotic foliage. There Ransom meets a solitary human-like creature, a woman who tells him that her god, Maleldil, has commanded her to search for a man of her own kind who also inhabits this planet. Ransom's conversations with the woman are interrupted one day when he says that the floating islands on which they stand are making him feel queasy. He suggests they move over permanently to the "fixed land" – the land that does not float on water.

The woman is horrified by this suggestion, telling him that the one thing her god Maleldil has forbidden her or anyone to do is to stay over-night on the fixed land. Ransom's response then confuses the woman. For he says that in his own world, on Earth, everyone lives on the fixed land, night and day, and no one thinks it is wrong. In her confusion, the woman wonders whether there are different meanings of good and evil, right and wrong, and whether God may command one group of people to live one way and others to live a different way. In her confusion, she is tempted to go with Ransom over to the fixed land: If others can do it, she reasons, why can't she?

The thoughtful reader suddenly realizes that these two figures are reen-acting the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden, with Ransom playing the serpent, tempting this new Eve in her alien Eden to do the one thing her God has commanded her not to do. In the original Biblical story, the command is to not eat of the fruit of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Eve eats of this fruit and Adam also; and by succumbing to temptation they come to "know good and evil" and are banished from the Garden. But in *Perelandra*, Lewis is suggesting a different, distinct-ively modern, version of the knowledge of good and evil. The new aware-ness that tempts and confuses us is the awareness that there may be more than one right way of living and that our way may not be the right one or the only right one. Like the woman on Perelandra, we may then say: If others can do it, why can't we?

Thus ends moral innocence – the secure feeling that the rights and wrongs learned in childhood are the only correct or true ones, unchal-lengeable and unambiguous. By knowing other ways of life and entertain-ing doubts about our own, we learn something about the complexities of good and evil. But the learning comes with a bitter taste. Having bitten into the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in this distinctively

modern fashion, we live "after the modern Fall," so to speak. We have lost our moral innocence.

Not everyone lives in this condition of lost moral innocence, even in the modern world. Many persons, especially in traditional societies, still live (and many more wished they lived) before the modern Fall – never doubting that their own views are absolutely right and unchallenge-able. The difference between those who still believe in this absolute and unchallengeable way and those who do not is one of the great water-sheds separating modern from pre-modern modes of thought. These dif-ferent ways of thinking, the pre-modern and the modern, are now on a collision course throughout the globe, like geological plates scraping against one another, resulting in confusion and fear – and in our own time erupting into new kinds of violence. Yet those who live after the modern Fall, those who can no longer believe without hesitation that their own views are absolute and unchallengeable, can no more go back to pre-modern modes of thought than they can go back to believing the earth is flat or is at the center of the Universe. The question is: how do they go forward?

4. UNCERTAINTY AND THE DEEPER PROBLEM

The new "knowledge of good and evil" that tempts and confuses us, as it did the woman on Perelandra, is the awareness of different and com-peting ways of life and views of good and evil. But the experience of such pluralism alone is not the whole story. For the mere existence of diversity and disagreement, no matter how pervasive, does not rule out the possi-bility that one view is right and others wrong.[6] Pluralism in the sense of cultural and religious diversity was not unknown to ancient peoples. But the recognition of diversity did not lead in those times to a loss of faith or moral innocence (save among certain sophisticated thinkers such as the sophists of ancient Greece). Competing gods and ways of life were simply denounced as false or idolatrous.

Something else has happened in modernity. Realizing in the abstract that diversity and disagreement do not rule out the possibility that one view is right does not allay fears of pluralism, if we are also uncertain about how to show which of the competing views is right. In sum, the

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[6] Shafer-Landau in his defense of moral realism (2003) argues persuasively that diversity and dis-agreement in moral matters, no matter how pervasive, does not necessarily rule out the existence of objective values or moral truths. See also Tersman 2006 on the implications of persistent moral disagreement for debates about moral realism.