

① New pt.

Ch. 5, § 8-
p. 10. A for
Socrates et
critique of Plato

p. 101- ~~§ 6.6~~
be silent or -
- estopped
- Barrett

- particularizing -
- § 6.8. (107)

- On a ~~read~~ discussing simultaneity of
self-contradiction, see § 6.9

§ 1.7 (216) "Universalizability"
- quote in art. near
Kloppe quotes

FREEDOM AND REASON

BY

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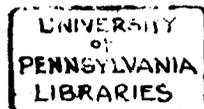
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PREFACE

THE function of moral philosophy—or at any rate the hope with which I study it—is that of helping us to think better about moral questions by exposing the logical structure of the language in which this thought is expressed. When I wrote my first book, which was a study of the chief moral words, I had no more than a dim notion of what account of moral reasoning would develop out of this study—only the conviction that, if it were well done, our understanding of moral questions would be increased. In the years since, this hope has not proved entirely vain; and, although I am still far from clear on many matters, I think it worth while to publish this progress report, if only to enlist the help of others in becoming clearer.

My views have been the subject of a great deal of controversy; but any reader who is looking in this book for a full-scale rebuttal of my critics will be disappointed. I did, indeed, in preparation for writing it, draft about fifty pages of polemical matter in answer to the most widely canvassed objections; but, having thus convinced myself that they could be answered, I came to feel that the answers to them were less exciting than the positive things which I had to say, and possibly of less durable interest; I therefore put them aside, to appear elsewhere. I have profited greatly from these discussions; but I am obstinate enough to believe that, though they have added much to what I thought before, they have not taken much away.

There will be found, therefore, in this book, only passing allusions to these wrangles. Lest they should be thought to be directed at the views of particular people, I must make clear that, in all cases except where names are mentioned, the

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PART I

DESCRIBING AND PRESCRIBING

He to whom thou was sent for ease, being by name *Legality*, is the son of the Bond-woman . . . how canst thou expect by them to be made free?

BUNYAN, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

1 · INTRODUCTION

1.1. I ASK the reader to start by supposing that someone (himself perhaps) is faced with a serious moral problem—one that calls forth all the powers of thought, imagination, and feeling that a man possesses. He will have to supply his own example; for I cannot say for any one of my readers what moral question has troubled him most. If he cannot think of an example, he will not understand this book, and may as well postpone the reading of it until he has lived a little longer.

I wish to draw attention to two features which any such serious moral problem will have, the combination of which seems to confront us, as philosophers, with a paradox, or even an antinomy. The first is that a man who is faced with such a problem knows that it is his own problem, and that nobody can answer it for him. He may, it is true, ask the advice of other people; and he may also ascertain more facts about the circumstances and consequences of a proposed action, and other facts of this sort. But there will come a time when he does not hope to find out anything else of relevance by factual inquiry, and when he knows that, whatever others may say about the answer to his problem, *he* has to answer it. If anyone were to suggest that the answer must be such and such, because everybody says so—or that, even, he would be abusing the English language if he gave any other answer—he will, if he understands what moral questions are, feel that to accept

very difficult question of what *would* constitute a misuse of the word 'it'.

Having explained how the class of descriptive *terms* is to be defined, we can now go on to do the same for the class of descriptive *judgements*.¹ A judgement is descriptive if in it the predicate or predicates are descriptive terms and the mood is indicative. The latter restriction is required because imperative sentences also normally contain descriptive terms (for instance in 'Be quiet' the expression 'quiet' is a descriptive term); and we do not want to have to call imperatives descriptive judgements. I am using the word 'predicate' to cover not only what are sometimes called 'one-place' predicates but also predicates (such as relational terms) which can take more than one subject. Thus my account is intended to cover not only subject-predicate propositions in the narrow sense, but also relational ones. For example 'hit' is a two-place predicate, expressing a relation; the sentence 'John hit James' expresses a descriptive judgement because in it this two-place predicate, which is a descriptive term, is predicated, in the indicative, of the ordered pair of subjects John and James.

2.2. We must now notice the connexion between the fact that some judgements are descriptive and another feature which it has become the custom to call, when we are speaking of moral judgements, *universalizability*. It is important to emphasize that moral judgements *share* this feature with descriptive judgements, although the differences between them in other respects are, as we shall see, sufficient to make it misleading to say that moral judgements are descriptive. Nevertheless, in so far as moral judgements do have descriptive meaning, in addition to the other kind of meaning which they have, they share this characteristic, which is common to all judgements which carry descriptive meaning.

¹ I have used the term 'judgement', here and in *LM*, in an artificially general sense, in order to avoid subscribing to the fiction that all indicative sentences express statements, and in order to leave *some* questions unbegged.

If a person says that a thing is red, he is committed to the view that anything which was like it in the relevant respects would likewise be red. The relevant respects are those which, he thought, entitled him to call the first thing red; in this particular case, they amount to one respect only: its red colour. This follows, according to the definitions given above, from the fact that 'This is red' is a descriptive judgement. 'This is red' entails 'Everything like this in the relevant respects is red' simply because to say that something is red while denying that some other thing which resembles it in the relevant respects is red is to misuse the word 'red'; and this is because 'red' is a descriptive term, and because therefore to say that something is red is to say that it is of a certain kind, and so to imply that anything which is of that same kind is red.

The proposition 'Everything like this in the relevant respects is red' is not, indeed, formally and in the strictest sense a universal one; for it contains the singular term 'this'. But, as I have explained elsewhere,¹ when a singular term is governed by the word 'like' or its equivalent, it has the property of being turnable into a universal term by substituting for 'like this' a term which describes the respects in which the thing in question is being said to be like this. If no suitable word exists, it is always possible to invent one. And so if a person who says 'This is red' is committed also to the proposition 'Everything like this in the relevant respects is red', then he is, further, committed to the proposition that there is a property such that this has it and such that everything which has it is red. And the second part of this proposition contains no singular terms, and can therefore be called properly universal.

It may be observed that the proposition 'There is a property such that everything which has it is red' is a very trivial one, since the property in question is redness, and we know that there is such a property, once we know what sort of word

¹ *Aristotelian Society*, lv (1954/5), 397.

'red' is (i.e. a descriptive word). But note that there are in fact other properties such that everything that has them is red (e.g. the properties of being scarlet, or of being a ripe tomato of the commonest variety). We may admit, however, that, since this proposition, even if it were not non-trivially true, would still be trivially true, 'red' being the sort of word that it is, the thesis that descriptive judgements are universalizable is a quite trivial thesis. It is put forward here only because it will help us to shed light on the thesis, which is itself not so trivial, that moral judgements are, in the same sense, universalizable.

2.3. For the moment, however, let us merely observe that in an apparently trivial, but at any rate unobjectionable, sense, any singular descriptive judgement is universalizable: viz. in the sense that it commits the speaker to the further proposition that anything exactly like the subject of the first judgement, or like it in the relevant respects, possesses the property attributed to it in the first judgement. Let us now raise against this thesis some of the objections that are often raised against the corresponding thesis about value-judgements. First (it may be said) if, in the formulation of the thesis, we say 'exactly like', then the thesis becomes trivial and not worth stating. Nothing, it may be said, ever is exactly like anything else—whether this be regarded as analytic or not need not concern us. On the other hand (the objection goes on) if we say 'like in the relevant respects', we have on our hands the problem of how to determine and formulate what are the relevant respects. And if we cannot do this, it is alleged that the thesis is again valueless.

To this it may be replied, first, that it is wrong to take too narrowly utilitarian an attitude towards philosophical theses; let it suffice that they are true, and let it be left to the future to determine whether any useful results follow from them. Secondly, the thesis has indeed an important impact on the theory of meaning, just as the corresponding thesis about

value-judgements has momentous consequences for ethics. The thesis enables us to illuminate the problem of what is meant by 'descriptive meaning'. This is not surprising; for we derived the thesis from a consideration of what it was for a term to be descriptive. One of the features of descriptive meaning, as opposed to other sorts of meaning, is that it relies upon the concept of similarity. We might restate what we noticed above about descriptive meaning by saying that a descriptive meaning-rule is one which lays it down that we may apply an expression to objects which are similar to each other in certain respects. It is a direct consequence of this that we cannot without inconsistency apply a descriptive term to one thing, and refuse to apply it to another similar thing (either exactly similar or similar in the relevant respects). At any rate a person who admitted that two things were exactly similar, but applied some descriptive term to one while refusing to apply it to the other, though he claimed to be using the term unambiguously, would be showing that he either did not understand that the expression was a descriptive term, or did not understand what a descriptive term was.

It thus turns out that the universalizability of singular descriptive judgements is a consequence of the fact that the meaning-rules for the descriptive terms which they have to contain are universal rules, and universal rules of a certain type. The difficulty of formulating precisely the respect in which the two objects have to be similar is simply the difficulty of determining the precise meaning in which the speaker was using the term. For example, suppose that I say that *X* is red; I am committed to holding that anything which is like *X* in the relevant respect is also red. But suppose that I am asked what is the relevant respect. I shall be able to answer this question only by giving an indication, vague or precise, of what it was about *X* that made me call it red; i.e. by explaining what I meant by calling it red. This explanation, if I can give it, will determine in what respect another object has to

resemble *X* before it becomes possible to, and impossible not to, apply to it the descriptive term 'red', in the sense in which I was using that term. In this particular case an ostensive explanation (possibly a very elaborate one) will be required.

I must emphasize again that I am not making language out to be more rigid than it is. It is, of course, true that the concept 'red' is one whose boundaries are ill-defined. One man might call an object red which another said was not red—and that, not because there was a difference in their colour-vision, but because they had learnt to use the word 'red' in slightly different ways. Colour-cards from different manufacturers of paint often vary in this way; one card may, for example, classify as green a shade which is called on the other some sort of yellow. And a person might *change* his use of the word 'red' slightly; he might come to include in red, shades which previously he included in purple. The history of the word 'purple' itself illustrates this sort of change; the dye from whose name the word 'purple' is derived would now be classified by almost everybody as a red. All I am saying is that on any one occasion of the use of the word 'red' the speaker must have *some* feature of an object in mind as that to which he is drawing attention in using the word. He may be very unclear about the precise boundaries of the concept he is employing (we can use 'red' without having decided what we would say about border-line cases); but there must be *something* about the object in question which, if it were repeated in another object, he would (provided that he went on using the word in the same sense) treat as entitling him to call that object red too. If this were not so, what he said would have no descriptive meaning at all. Thus (if I may be allowed to anticipate my future argument) the alleged difficulty of *formulating* the universal rule which is implied in any value-judgement is simply the same sort of difficulty which is encountered when we try to explain the meaning of a descriptive term as used on a particular occasion.

2.4. Let us now consider a further objection, also on grounds of triviality. It might be said that the universal proposition which is generated, in the way described above, by any singular descriptive judgement is merely a matter of the *meaning* of the descriptive term contained in the judgement; that it cannot be a matter of substance. If I say that *X* is red, I am committed to holding that anything which is like *X* in a certain respect is red too. In using the descriptive term 'red' I must be employing *some* universal rule; but, it might be objected, this rule is only that which gives the meaning of 'red'; it is a purely verbal matter of how the word 'red' is used. Now this I do not wish to deny, in the case of purely descriptive terms; as we shall see, evaluative terms differ in this respect. The universal rules which are involved in the use of all descriptive expressions are meaning-rules; and since these are obviously in some sense universal (in what sense, I have tried to make clear), it seems hardly worth saying that singular descriptive propositions commit the speaker to universal propositions. And perhaps in most philosophical contexts it would not be worth saying. But in the present context it is most important; for I am going on to speak about the universalizability of value-judgements (upon which a great deal hangs in ethics), and it is most necessary that it should be understood what I mean by this. The way which I have chosen of explaining what I mean is by saying that the feature of value-judgements which I call universalizability is simply that which they share with descriptive judgements; namely the fact that they both carry descriptive meaning. It thus becomes very important to elucidate accurately this feature of descriptive judgements.

If I call a thing red, I am committed to calling anything else like it red. And if I call a thing a good *X*, I am committed to calling any *X* like it good. But whereas the reason in the former case is that I must be using the word 'red' in accordance with some *meaning*-rule, the reason in the latter case is

much more complicated. For a naturalist, indeed, it would not be any more complicated; for naturalists hold that the rules which determine to what we can apply value-words are simply descriptive meaning-rules, and that these rules determine the meaning of these words completely, just as in the case of descriptive expressions. For him, a value-word is just one kind of descriptive expression. We may go further than this; for a naturalist is not the only sort of 'descriptivist'—if we may use this term for one who holds that value-words are simply one kind of descriptive word. It is true also of non-natural descriptivists such as Moore that for them value-words are descriptive terms whose meanings are completely determined by the sort of descriptive meaning-rules that I have been discussing. The difference between natural and non-natural descriptivists is important for our argument. The non-naturalist holds that the feature which has to be present in a thing before a value-word can be applied to it is something which can be described only by using that or some other value-word; it is *sui generis*. On the other hand, according to the naturalist such a feature is also describable, though perhaps at greater length, in non-evaluative (usually empirical) terms.

2.5. For the sake of a name, let me refer to the type of doctrine which I put forward in *The Language of Morals*, and still hold, as 'universal prescriptivism'—a combination, that is to say, of universalism (the view that moral judgements are universalizable) and prescriptivism (the view that they are, at any rate typically, prescriptive). It will be useful to make clear at this point that it is not easy with consistency to attack both sides of the doctrine at once. For, as we have seen, it follows from the definition of the expression 'descriptive term' that descriptive judgements are universalizable in just the same way as, according to my view, moral judgements are. It is impossible consistently to maintain that moral judgements are descriptive, and that they are not universalizable. To put

the matter even more starkly: a philosopher who rejects universalizability is committed to the view that moral judgements have no descriptive meaning at all. Though there have been, no doubt, philosophers who are willing to go as far as this, they certainly do not include many of those who have declared themselves against universalizability.

The matter can perhaps be made clearer in the following way. Let us call the thesis that moral judgements are universalizable, *u*, and the thesis that they are prescriptive, *p*. Now there are two theses about the descriptive character of moral judgements which require to be carefully distinguished. The first and stronger of these (*d*) is that moral judgements are a kind of descriptive judgements, i.e. that their descriptive meaning exhausts their meaning. This is descriptivism. The second and weaker (*d'*) is that moral judgements, though they may possess other elements in their meaning, do have descriptive meaning. I wish to affirm *p*, *u* and *d'*. These three theses are all mutually consistent. As we have seen, *d'* entails *u*. *p* is consistent with *d'*, because to say that a judgement is prescriptive is not to say that prescriptive meaning is the only meaning that it carries, but merely that it does carry this element in its meaning among others (2.8). Now, as I hope to show, the combination of *p* and *u* (or *d'*) is sufficient to establish the rationality of morals, or the possibility of cogent moral arguments—it is important that *p*, as I shall show, so far from being an obstacle to establishing this, is actually a necessary condition for it (6.3, 9.4, 11.7): But there are those who think that they require for this purpose not merely the weaker theses *u* or *d'* but the stronger thesis *d*. Now *d* is indeed inconsistent with *p*; and therefore these descriptivists think it necessary to deny *p*. But, because *p* has been affirmed by myself and others in conjunction with *u*, and because the connexion between *d'* and *u* has not been noticed, *u* has perhaps acquired, in the minds of some descriptivists, a kind of guilt by association: 'Some wicked prescriptivists have affirmed *u*,'

they seem to be saying, 'therefore it must be attacked.' But since *d*, which the descriptivists affirm, entails the weaker thesis *d'*, and this in turn entails *u*, it is impossible with consistency to affirm *d* and deny *u*. The major task of moral philosophy is to show how *p* and *u* are consistent. This task is not furthered by those who are so convinced that *d* is required as the basis of the rationality of morals that they reject out of hand *p*, because it is inconsistent with *d*; nor is it helped by those others who are so convinced of the truth of *p* that they reject *u* (which they wrongly think to be inconsistent with *p*). The subject will be understood when it is realized how *p* and *u* are both mutually consistent and jointly sufficient for establishing the rationality of morals; and that *d* is not only not necessary for this purpose, but actually prevents its realization, since it entails the abandonment of *p*, which as we shall see, is an essential factor in moral arguments.

I shall argue shortly that a naturalist in particular cannot consistently deny the thesis of universalizability. But the non-natural descriptivist has, it must be allowed, a way of escape from this *argumentum ad hominem*. According to him, a word such as 'good', though descriptive, has meaning-rules which are logically independent of the meaning-rules of other, non-evaluative words. It is thus possible for him, if he wishes, to admit that moral judgements are, like other descriptive judgements, universalizable, but to admit this in such a trivial and innocuous way that he comes to no harm thereby, even if he wants at the same time to be, in substance, a particularist (if I may use that name for the opposite of a universalist). For suppose that we say to him: 'If you call *X* a good *Y*, you are committed to the judgement that anything which is like *X* in the relevant respects is also a good *Y*.' He can reply, 'Certainly; but the relevant respect is simply the possession of the *sui generis* non-natural property of goodness; an object might be like *X* in every other respect, and I could still refuse to call it a good *Y* if it had not got this property.'

Such a philosopher could indeed embrace, at any rate for all practical purposes, the extremest sort of particularism. He would be maintaining a thesis which is obviously false (for the reasons given in *LM* 5.1 ff.); but the argument which I have just put forward would not touch him. He could maintain a view similar in its effects to one attributed (wrongly, as we shall see) to the Existentialists by some of their British admirers: he could say that we have to examine every object in its uniqueness for the property *goodness* and other moral properties; and that by attributing a moral property to one object we are not committed to attributing it to any other object, however similar in other respects. Of course, if we find another object possessing just this property, we shall have to say so; but since this property varies quite independently of the other, non-moral, properties, this commitment is the reverse of onerous. Everything that the particularist wishes to say can be said—in substance—in these old-fashioned terms without denying anything that I have established in this chapter, provided only that he sticks to non-naturalism.

There is, it is hardly necessary to point out, another kind of non-naturalist who thinks (quite correctly) that moral properties do *not* vary quite independently of non-moral properties, but are in some sense consequential or supervenient on them. *This* kind of non-naturalist will be, so far as the present argument goes, in the same position as the naturalists.

For the naturalist, the way of escape which I have just described is not open. For he is wedded to the view that when we apply a moral predicate to an object, we do so in virtue of a meaning-rule which lays it down that this predicate can be applied to objects of a certain kind; and that the question 'What kind?' is answered, not by pointing to a *sui generis* moral property, but by indicating *other, non-moral, properties* of the object (including perhaps *negative properties*—for the *absence* of properties may be as relevant as their presence).

These are the properties which constitute *that* about the object which makes it a suitable subject for the application of this moral predicate. It follows that the kind of universalizability to which the naturalist is committed is not the relatively innocuous kind which, as we saw, the particularistically inclined non-naturalist can safely admit. For let us suppose that we are having the same argument as before, only with a particularist who wishes to be a naturalist. 'If you call *X* a good *Y*', we say to him, 'you are committed to the judgement that anything which is like *X* in the relevant respects is also a good *Y*'. He cannot, like the non-naturalist, while admitting this, claim that 'the relevant respects' are simply the possession of the *sui generis* non-natural property of goodness. They have to be, rather, some set of non-moral properties.

The effects, therefore, for the naturalist of his involvement in universalism are much more awkward for him, if he is inclined towards particularist views. For he is committed to the admission that, if he makes a moral judgement about one object, this must be in virtue of the possession by the object of certain non-moral features (*what* features is determined by the meaning-rule for the moral word in question); and that therefore any other object which possesses these features must also have the same moral judgement made about it. Thus it is quite impossible for a naturalist to be, consistently, any sort of particularist.

In the preceding paragraphs I have confined my attention, for the sake of simplicity, to the word 'good'. To avoid repetition, the reader who is in doubt as to whether the same remarks apply to other moral words is invited to go through the argument again, substituting other moral words for 'good', and confirming that it still carries conviction. For example, if 'right act' or 'wrong act' are substituted throughout for 'good object of a certain kind', all the same things can be said; and, in view of the very close connexion in meaning between

ought and wrong

'ought' and 'right' and 'wrong', it will require only small modifications to carry through the same argument about 'ought'; this is clear from the fact that, for example, 'He ought not to do that' means the same as 'It would be wrong for him to do that'.

2.6. An illuminating way of approaching the thesis which I am maintaining (namely universal prescriptivism) is to look upon it as retaining what is sound in descriptivism (natural and non-natural), and adding to it an account of the other essential element in the meaning of moral judgements, the prescriptive. The truth in naturalism is that moral terms do indeed have descriptive meaning. It is not the only element in their meaning, and it is therefore misleading to refer to it, as do the naturalists, as *the* meaning of a moral term; but in virtue of possessing this descriptive meaning moral judgements are universalizable, and naturalism has the merit of implying this.

Another way of putting the point is this: both naturalism and my own view lay great stress on the fact that, when we make a moral judgement about something, we make it *because* of the possession by it of certain non-moral properties. Thus both views hold that moral judgements about particular things are made for reasons; and the notion of a reason, as always, brings with it the notion of a rule which lays down that something is a reason for something else. Both views, therefore, involve universalizability. The difference is that the naturalist thinks that the rule in question is a descriptive meaning-rule which exhausts the meaning of the moral term used; whereas in my own view the rule, though it is very analogous to a descriptive meaning-rule, and though, therefore, it is quite legitimate to speak of the 'descriptive meaning' of moral terms, does not exhaust their meaning (*LM* 7.1 ff). For a naturalist, therefore, the inference from a non-moral description of something to a moral conclusion about it is an inference whose validity is due solely to the meaning of the words in it.

The rule permitting the inference would be simply the descriptive meaning-rule for the moral term used, and to accept such a rule would be simply to accept a meaning for the moral word. Conversely, if the meaning of the moral word be once understood, there can, for the naturalist, be no departing from the inference-rule; it is impossible to refuse the conclusion of the inference without altering the meaning of the word. But for me the position is different. Since the 'descriptive meaning' of moral terms does not exhaust their meaning, the other element in their meaning can make a difference to the logical behaviour of these terms in inferences. This is the point at issue in the controversy about whether an 'ought' can be derived from an 'is'.

2.7. It is now time, therefore, to ask what effect the introduction of the additional, prescriptive element in their meaning has upon the logical character of moral words.¹ I shall not try at this stage to define the word 'prescriptive'. Its meaning will not become clear until much later. But let us start by supposing that we have a word which carries the descriptive meaning of some value-word, but lacks its prescriptive meaning. Such a word would be, in its logical character, just like an ordinary descriptive word. To know how to use it, we should have to know to what kind of things it was properly applied, and no more. Now let us suppose that we try to *add* prescriptive meaning to such a word, thereby, according to my theory, recreating the original value-word. Let us, to take the same example as I used in *LM* 7.2, coin the word 'doog' to carry the descriptive meaning of the word 'good' as used in the

¹ It must be emphasized that it is not part of my thesis that moral words are used prescriptively *in all contexts*; and it makes sense to call them 'moral' even when they are not so used. But on the prescriptive uses the other uses depend (4.2, 5.6 ff.; *LM* 7.5, 9.3, 11.3). 'Prescriptive' is to be understood here in a wide sense to include permissions (10.5). Thus the statement that an act is morally permissible is in this sense prescriptive. The logical relations between prescriptions and permissions are too complex to be dealt with here.

sentence 'He is a good man', without its prescriptive meaning. Let us first notice, as before, that the statement 'X is a doog man' will be universalizable. Anybody who makes it will be committed to the view that some man who was exactly like X, or like him in the relevant respects, would also be a doog man; and the relevant respects would be simply those which the descriptive meaning-rule for the word 'doog' specified.

Now what happens if we try to add prescriptive meaning to such a word? The inevitable consequence of such an addition is that the descriptive meaning-rule becomes more than a mere meaning-rule. Since our value-word 'good' is to be used with the same descriptive meaning as 'doog' the *content* of the rule will remain the same; but its logical character will change. The rule will still say that it is proper to apply the word 'good' to a certain kind of man; but in saying this (in enunciating the rule) we shall be doing more than specifying the meaning of the word. For in saying that it is proper to call a certain kind of man good (for example a man who feeds his children, does not beat his wife, &c.) we are not just explaining the meaning of a word; it is not mere verbal instruction that we are giving, but something more: moral instruction. In learning that, of all kinds of man, this kind can be called good, our hearer will be learning something synthetic, a moral principle. It will be synthetic because of the added prescriptiveness of the word 'good'; in learning it, he will be learning, not merely to use a word in a certain way, but to commend, or prescribe for imitation, a certain kind of man. A man who wholeheartedly accepts such a rule is likely to live, not merely talk, differently from one who does not. Our descriptive meaning-rule has thus turned into a synthetic moral principle.

This change brings other consequences with it. To illustrate them, let us consider the context of the words' use in more detail. I have so far been assuming that the society which is using these expressions 'good man' and 'doog man' has very inflexible standards of human excellence, and that

Prescriptive
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therefore no question arises of the descriptive meaning of either word changing. But in the real world standards of human excellence change (for example, on the wrongness of wife-beating);¹ and therefore, if the expression 'good man' is to be used (as it is) to express changing standards, its logical character has to be such as to allow for this. This is done by making the prescriptive meaning of the word primary, and its descriptive meaning secondary.

It is not necessary that a value-word should be treated in this way. There are other moral words whose prescriptive meaning is secondary to their descriptive: for example 'industrious' (*LM* 7.5), 'honest', and 'courageous'. Let us imagine a society which places a negative value upon industry; there seem to be such societies in the world, in which the industrious man is regarded as a mere nuisance. Such a society could never (if it spoke English) express its moral standards by using the word 'industrious', like us, for commending people, only with a totally different descriptive meaning—i.e. commending them for totally different qualities, for example that of doing as little work as possible. If they did that, we should say that they had changed *the meaning* of the English word 'industrious'. The descriptive meaning of 'industrious' is much too firmly attached to the word for this sort of thing to be allowed; these people would be much more likely to use the word in its normal descriptive meaning, but neutrally or pejoratively; i.e. to give it no, or an adverse, prescriptive meaning.

But it is not so mandatory, though it is possible, to treat the word 'good', like the word 'industrious', as one whose descriptive meaning is primary (*LM* 7.5). If we came to disapprove of industry, we should not stop calling the industrious man industrious; but, if we had previously called him a good man

¹ See G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History*, p. 65: 'But the "lordship" was held [in the fifteenth century] to be vested in the husband, and when he asserted it by fist and stick, he was seldom blamed by public opinion.'

because, among other virtues, he was industrious, we should, if we came to disapprove of his industry *very much*, stop calling him good. This is because the commendation which is the prescriptive force of the word 'good' is more firmly attached to it than any part of its descriptive meaning; we should therefore be likely to keep the word 'good' as a prescriptive word (part of our vocabulary of commendation), and alter its descriptive meaning.

It is useful to have in our language both secondarily evaluative words like 'industrious' and primarily evaluative words like 'good'; and we should therefore be suspicious, if any philosopher seeks to persuade us that we ought in the interest of concreteness to neglect the study of words like 'good' and concentrate on words like 'industrious' and 'courageous' (10.1). The object of such a manoeuvre might be to convince us that *all* moral words have their descriptive meaning irremovably attached to them; but, fortunately for the usefulness of moral language in expressing changing standards, this is not so. To take this line would be to give an account of moral language which is, so far as it goes, true, but not sufficiently general (in the sense in which Newtonian mechanics is not sufficiently general). The account would suffice for the moral language of an irrevocably closed society, in which a change in moral standards was unthinkable; but it does not do justice to the moral language of a society like our own, in which some people sometimes think about ultimate moral questions, and in which, therefore, morality changes. Orwell's Newspeak in 1984 was a language so designed that in it dangerous thoughts could not be expressed. Much of Oldspeak is like this too—if we want, in the Southern States, to speak to a negro as an equal, we cannot do so by addressing him as a nigger; the word 'nigger' incapsulates the standards of the society, and, if we were confined to it, we could not break free of those standards. But fortunately we are not so confined; our language, as we have it, *can* be a vehicle for new ideas.

2.8. It must be noticed that the mere fact that the descriptive meanings of moral words can alter does not distinguish them from ordinary descriptive words. All words can alter their meaning; dictionaries are full of sub-headings which begin 'Obs.'. And even in the case of words in current use their meanings vary from occasion to occasion within at times quite wide limits. And there is 'family resemblance' and 'open texture' and all that. Some people have been misled into thinking that, since descriptive words have these features, and since what has caused a lot of the trouble with value-words is their shifting descriptive meanings, the trouble can be cleared up without distinguishing between the two classes of words. The premisses of this inference are perfectly true, but the conclusion misses the point./Value-words *are* indeed like descriptive words, both in that they have descriptive meanings, and in that the descriptive meanings of both are alterable, flexible, and so on. So, if we cared to concentrate on the resemblances between the two classes of words, and ignore their differences, we could call them all 'descriptive words', meaning by this 'words having descriptive meaning'. But to do this would be to neglect an important (indeed essential) part of the meaning of moral and other value-words; and the philosopher who wishes to do justice to this will have to be more careful in choosing his terminology.

The terminology to which I have myself tried to be consistent is the following. An expression which, in a certain context, has descriptive meaning and no other, I call a descriptive term, word, or expression, as used in that context; one which has prescriptive meaning (whether or not it also has descriptive meaning) I call a prescriptive term; and one which has both kinds of meaning I call an evaluative term. A value-judgement or evaluative judgement is a judgement in which such a term is used; on the other hand the mention of an evaluative term inside quotation marks, or similarly 'insulated', does not make a judgement evaluative. Not all moral judgements

are value-judgements (*LM* 11.3). In *The Language of Morals* I used the words 'evaluative meaning' for the prescriptive meaning of evaluative expressions. This had some advantages, as being a less question-begging expression which did not presuppose that what gave these terms their evaluative meaning was their prescriptivity; but in the end it turned out to be in the interests of clarity to make this, in effect, true by definition (*LM* 11.2; 5.7); and so in the present context I feel at liberty to use the words 'prescriptive meaning' which do carry this presupposition, and are somewhat clearer in that they avow it. To give examples of the use of these terms: 'red', in most contexts, is a descriptive term (though not when used of communists by conservatives); 'good' is, as typically used, an evaluative term, and so are 'right' and 'ought'.¹ These terms are primarily evaluative; words like 'industrious', 'honest', and 'courageous' are, as explained above, secondarily evaluative. All words which are evaluative (whether primarily or secondarily) are also prescriptive; but there are expressions which are prescriptive but not evaluative (because they do not carry descriptive meaning as well). The ordinary singular imperative—or rather, to be strictly accurate, its 'neustic' (*LM* 2.1)—is of this kind.

Now the philosophers to whom I referred just now point out (rightly) that value-words are like ordinary descriptive words in that they both have descriptive meanings, which are, moreover, alterable and flexible in both cases. But the purpose of using the term 'evaluative' is not to deny that

¹ Some writers use the words 'evaluative' and 'value-judgement' in a narrower sense than this. They call judgements containing the word 'good' and some similar words 'evaluative' or 'value-judgements', and distinguish these from judgements containing the words 'right', 'wrong', 'ought', and the like, which they call 'normative judgements'. These two classes certainly need to be distinguished for some purposes, as we shall see; and this is a useful way of doing it. But since I have used the word 'evaluative' in its wide sense hitherto, it would be confusing to use it in a different sense from now on; I shall therefore continue to use it to cover 'ought' and 'right' as well as 'good'.

value-words have descriptive meaning; that is readily admitted, and arguments which seek to prove that they have descriptive meaning are not arguments against my position, which allows this. Nor are arguments designed to show that we can use the words 'true' and 'false' of value-judgements, or that we can speak of 'describing' somebody as a good man. We can say these things of any judgement which has descriptive meaning, provided that it is its descriptive meaning that we are adverting to. Nor do I wish to deny that the descriptive meanings of value-words are alterable and flexible; that this is so fits in very well with my thesis. I am not asserting that value-words are in this respect different from descriptive words. What I am asserting is that the character of what happens when the descriptive meaning of a value-word changes is profoundly affected by the fact that it has prescriptive meaning as well as descriptive.

This can be clarified by means of a simple example. Let us suppose (to use an example which is current) that two people differ in where they draw the line between a 'bush' and a 'tree'. It is possible to imagine situations (for example if bushes are to be cut down but trees left standing) in which such a verbal difference might lead to important misunderstandings. But these misunderstandings could be cleared up quite easily by means of an agreement on the use of the word. In agreeing to draw the line in a certain place they would not be settling anything except a question of meaning—a verbal question. Wherever the line is drawn, the same instructions as before can be unambiguously given: e.g. 'Cut down all bushes below 15 ft. high with the lowest branch less than 3 ft. from the ground'. So classifying something as a bush does not *by itself* entail a prescription to cut it down.

I wish to contrast such a case of purely verbal difference with a case of a *moral* difference, thereby showing that typical moral disputes are not purely verbal, as on a naturalist account they would be, provided that the non-moral facts were agreed.

Let us suppose that two people know all about the income-tax laws, and know, specifically, that a certain method of tax avoidance is perfectly legal; and let us suppose that they know all about the precise tax situation of somebody who is proposing to use this means of avoiding tax. One of them may say 'That would be wrong; it would be going too far; there are ways of avoiding tax that are morally perfectly legitimate (for example by claiming deduction on account of a dependent relative, if you have one); but this proposal goes beyond what I can condone'. But the other may say, 'In my view this proposal cannot be condemned on moral grounds; there *are* methods of tax avoidance which, though legal, I would condemn, but this is not one of them; in my view there is nothing wrong about it'. Now it is obvious that these two people cannot clear up their difference, as in the 'red' case, by a verbal agreement to use the word 'wrong' to cover certain cases and not others (*LM* 3.5). It follows that the rules which these two people are using for determining the application of the word 'wrong' cannot be merely descriptive meaning-rules, although they do, among other functions, determine the descriptive meaning of the term. They are rules having moral substance; in accepting one or the other of them the disputants would be committing themselves, not merely to a certain use of a word, but to a matter of moral principle. So when we 'flex' our moral words, we have regard, not merely to matters of mere convenience in communication, but to substantial questions of morality.

Universalizability
SUM 3

3 · PRINCIPLES

3.1. I SOUGHT in the preceding chapter to explain in what sense moral judgements are universalizable. The explanation may be summed up as follows: they are universalizable in just the same way as descriptive judgements are universalizable, namely the way which follows from the fact that both moral expressions and descriptive expressions have descriptive meaning; but in the case of moral judgements the universal rules which determine this descriptive meaning are not mere meaning-rules, but moral principles of substance. In this chapter, I am going to consider various other ways in which moral judgements might be said to be universal or universalizable—mainly in order to avoid future misinterpretation by indicating to which of these views I subscribe and to which I do not.

It is, first of all, most important to distinguish the logical thesis which I have been putting forward from various *moral* theses with which it is easy to confuse it. I said above (2.7) that, because of universalizability, a person who makes a moral judgement commits himself, not merely to a meaning-rule, but to a substantial moral principle. The thesis of universalizability itself, however, is still a logical thesis. It is very important not to confuse the thesis of universalizability with the substantial moral principles to which, according to it, a person who makes a moral judgement commits himself.

By a 'logical' thesis I mean a thesis about the meanings of words, or dependent solely upon them. I have been maintaining that the meaning of the word 'ought' and other moral words is such that a person who uses them commits himself thereby to a universal rule. This is the thesis of universalizability. It is to be distinguished from *moral* views such as that

everybody ought always to adhere to universal rules and govern all their conduct in accordance with them, or that one ought not to make exceptions in one's own favour. The logical thesis has, as we shall see, great potency in moral arguments; but for that very reason it is most important to make clear that it is no more than a logical thesis—for otherwise the objection will be made that a moral principle has been smuggled in disguised as a logical doctrine (10.3). In order to clarify this point I am going to take the two moral views just mentioned and show that they do not follow from the logical thesis, unless they themselves are interpreted in such a way as to be analytic (i.e. not to enjoin any one line of conduct rather than another). In the latter case, obviously, there would be no objection to deriving them from the logical thesis, because the accusation of smuggling in substantial moral principles could not then be raised.

3.2. Let us first consider the moral principle that everybody ought always to adhere to universal rules and govern all his conduct in accordance with them. The nature of this principle is best examined by asking what would constitute a breach of it. On one interpretation, it is impossible to break such a principle; for, given a description of a person's life, it is always, analytically, possible to find *some* universal rules according to which he has lived—if only the rule 'Live thus: . . .' followed by a minute description, in universal terms, of how he has lived.

To avoid this trivialization of the principle we are considering, let us stipulate that a man is not to be said to have *adhered* to a rule, nor to have *governed his conduct in accordance with it*, unless he has in some sense had the rule before his mind (at any rate from time to time) and unless his conduct has in some sense been motivated by the desire to conform to it. Now on this interpretation, a man would be breaking the principle that everybody ought always to adhere to universal rules, and govern all his conduct in accordance with them, if

he did something on some whim without considering any rule involved in the action. Does it follow from my logical thesis that such a person acts wrongly? Not in the least, it would seem; for the thesis does not say that a person who maintained that one ought always, in this man's circumstances, to act as he did, would be committing any logical fault, and still less does it say that the man himself is committing any *moral* fault. If, on a whim, I give a blind beggar a coin, this does not, according to the logical thesis of universalizability, stop my action being right; for it may be that one ought always to give alms to blind beggars—or even that one ought always to give alms to them without reflection. I do not wish to argue for or against such rules, but only to point out that they do not contravene my logical thesis. A person who acted thus without reflection could not, indeed, be thinking that this was the right thing to do; for that would involve consideration (in some sense) of a rule or principle; but he could do the right thing all the same. In the same way, one may use a word rightly without thinking whether it is the right word; but if one does think whether it is, one has thereby raised a question of principle: Is this the way the word is rightly used?

Offences against the thesis of universalizability are logical, not moral. If a person says 'I ought to act in a certain way, but nobody else ought to act in that way in relevantly similar circumstances', then, on my thesis, he is abusing the word 'ought'; he is implicitly contradicting himself. But the logical offence here lies in the *conjunction* of two moral judgements, not in either one of them by itself. The thesis of universalizability does not render self-contradictory any single, logically simple, moral judgement, or even moral principle, which is not already self-contradictory without the thesis; all it does is to force people to choose between judgements which cannot both be asserted without self-contradiction. And so no moral judgement or principle of substance follows from the thesis alone. Furthermore, a person may act, on a number of different

occasions, in different ways, even if the occasions are qualitatively identical, without it following from the thesis that all, or that any particular one, of his actions must be wrong. The thesis does not even forbid us to say that *none* of the man's actions are wrong; for it is consistent with the thesis that the kinds of actions he did in the kind of situations described were morally indifferent. What the thesis does forbid us to do is to make different moral judgements about actions which we admit to be exactly or relevantly similar. The thesis tells us that this is to make two logically inconsistent judgements.

We might conceivably interpret the principle that one ought always to govern one's behaviour in accordance with universal rules as simply a denial, *en bloc*, of all such self-contradictory conjunctions of moral judgements. So interpreted, the principle becomes, like all denials of self-contradictions, analytic. It does not make much difference whether we say that it is a second-order statement about the logical properties of moral judgements, or that it is a first-order, but analytic, moral judgement. It could be put in either of these forms without substantially altering its character.

The same treatment can be given to the principle that one ought not to make exceptions in one's own favour. If this is interpreted merely as a denial that it can be the case that I ought to act in a certain way, but that others in relevantly similar circumstances ought not, then the principle is analytic (a repetition in other words of the logical thesis), and no moral judgement of substance follows from it. But if it is interpreted to mean that a man who acts in a certain way, while maintaining that others ought not so to act, is always *acting* wrongly, then not only is the principle synthetic, but most of us would dissent from it; for the man may well be acting rightly, though the moral judgement that he makes about other people's actions is inconsistent with the judgement (if he makes it) that his own action is right. At any rate, the man's *action* cannot be a breach of the thesis of universalizability, although what he

says may be; and this is what we should expect if, as I have been maintaining, it is a logical thesis and not a substantive moral principle.

I shall not go into detail concerning other possible moral principles which might be confused with the thesis of universalizability. Two famous ones may, however, be just mentioned. The first is the 'Golden Rule', if put in the form of a moral principle: One ought to treat others as one would wish them to treat oneself. If this were rewritten to read '. . . as others *ought* to treat oneself', then the same sort of account can be given of it as of the principles we have just discussed. By suitable interpretation, it can be made analytically true according to the universalist thesis; on other interpretations it becomes synthetic, but does not then follow from the thesis. If the word 'wish' is left in, the principle is obviously synthetic, and equally obviously does not follow from the thesis (6.9).

The second principle which may be mentioned is the Kantian one, which we may put in the form: 'I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law.'¹ This, too, is capable of different interpretations; but it will be wisest, in a book of this character, while acknowledging a very great debt to Kant, to avoid becoming entangled in the spider's web of Kantian exegesis. If Kant is interpreted as meaning that a man who says that he ought to act in a certain way, but says 'Let others not act in this same way' is guilty of an implicit contradiction, then the Kantian principle is a way of stating a consequence of the logical thesis of universalizability. In this interpretation, *willing* (which is one of Kant's most elusive notions) is treated as roughly equivalent to *assenting to an imperative*, in the sense, not itself entirely clear, of *LM* 2.2. There is also a problem about the word 'can'; what I should wish to say

¹ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, 2nd ed., p. 17 (tr. H. J. Paton, p. 70).

Golden
rule

Kant

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about this will become apparent later (6.9, 10.4 f.). But it is a difficult enough task to make my own views clear to the reader, without trying to do the same for Kant's.

In general, I may anticipate my future argument by saying this: it looks at first sight as if we have a choice between two positions: (1) that the thesis of universalizability is itself a moral principle and therefore can have substantial moral consequences; and (2) that it is only a logical principle from which nothing of moral substance can follow, and that therefore it is useless for purposes of moral reasoning. It is the last clause ('it is useless . . .') which is here mistaken. Later, I shall try to show that, though the thesis is not a substantial moral principle but a logical one, and though, therefore, nothing moral follows from it by itself, it is capable of very powerful employment in moral argument when combined with other premisses (6.3 ff.). So the dilemma is a false one—though this has not prevented its being often used.

3.3. Having made it clear that universalism, as I am maintaining it, is a logical and not a moral thesis, I shall now try to remove certain sources of confusion as to its precise import. First of all, it may very well be asked whether this is a doctrine about *moral* uses of words only, or whether it is a doctrine about evaluative words in general.¹ The answer which I wish to give to this question is a somewhat complicated one, since we have to steer between at least two errors. It is a doctrine about evaluative words in general, but one which requires careful qualification. If we take as an example the word 'ought', it seems to me that, whatever the type of 'ought'-judgement that is being made (moral, aesthetic, technical, &c.) the judgement is universalizable (8.2).

This is one reason why the word 'ought' cannot be used in making legal judgements; if a person has a certain legal obligation, we cannot express this by saying that he *ought* to do such

¹ I must admit that what I said on this point in *Aristotelian Society*, lv (1954/5), 298, was worse than misleading.

and such a thing, for the reason that 'ought'-judgements have to be universalizable, which, in the strict sense, legal judgements are not. The reason why they are not is that a statement of law always contains an implicit reference to a particular jurisdiction; 'It is illegal to marry one's own sister' means, implicitly, 'It is illegal in (e.g.) England to marry one's own sister'. But 'England' is here a singular term, which prevents the whole proposition being universal; nor is it universalizable, in the sense of committing the speaker to the view that such a marriage would be illegal in any country that was otherwise like England. It is therefore impossible to use 'ought' in such a statement. The moral judgement that one *ought* not to marry one's sister is, however, universal; it implies no reference to a particular legal system.

It is even more necessary to distinguish 'ought'-judgements from ordinary *imperatives* in respect of universalizability. If, when the squad gets to the end of the parade-ground, the serjeant says 'Left wheel', this does not commit him (on pain of being accused of having changed his mind) to giving the same order, rather than 'Right wheel', on similar occasions in the future. But if, in a tactical exercise, the instructor says 'The situation being what it is, you ought to attack on the left', he will have changed his mind if, the next time this same exercise is gone through with a new group of cadets, he says 'The situation being what it is, you ought to attack on the right'. By 'changed his mind', I mean 'said something which is inconsistent with what he said before'.

Though, however, some philosophers have gone much too far in assimilating 'ought'-judgements (of all sorts) to simple imperatives, it may be that some people do sometimes use the word 'ought' when they should more properly have used a plain imperative, in order to give an instruction without any thought of reasons or grounds. Plain imperatives do not *have* to have reasons or grounds, though they normally do have; but 'ought'-judgements, strictly speaking, would be being

Legal
vs
Moral

misused if the demand for reasons or grounds were thought of as out of place—though the reasons need not be ulterior ones; some universal moral judgements already incorporate all the reasons they need or can have (*LM* 4.4).

Nevertheless, it may be that there is a debased use of 'ought' in which it is equivalent to a simple imperative (though I must confess that I have come across such a use only in the writings of philosophers). Just in case, however, there is such a use, it is convenient to put the matter in the following way: in by far the majority of judgements containing the word 'ought', it has the sense that requires them to be universalizable; there *may* be some peripheral cases where it does not have this sense; but at any rate in its *moral* uses (with which we are chiefly concerned) it always does. The word 'moral' plays here a far smaller role than I was at one time tempted to assign to it. It is the logic of the word 'ought' in its typical uses that requires universalizability, not that of the word 'moral'; the word 'moral' needs to be brought in only in order to identify one class of the typical uses, and that with which as moral philosophers we are most concerned. This means that the ambiguity of the word 'moral', which is notorious, need not worry us at this point. For in whichever of its current senses the word is being used, it suffices to exclude those peripheral uses of 'ought' (if they exist), in which it is not universalizable.

3.4. I now turn to the most serious of the misinterpretations to which universalism is subject. It is common to hear objection made to it on the ground that it implies that there are certain rather simple general moral principles which, in some unexplained sense, *exist* antecedently to the making of any moral judgement, and that all we have to do whenever we make such a judgement is to consult the relevant principle and, without more ado, the judgement is made. Such a doctrine would be that of a very hidebound moralist, whose moral principles were a set of copy-book headings.¹ This

¹ See further *Aristotelian Society*, lv (1954/5), 309 f.

account of the matter differs from that which I wish to give in a number of respects. First of all, it is not clear what is meant in this context by speaking of moral principles 'existing'; but even if they (in some sense) exist, I am sure that they do not always exist *antecedently*, so that all we have to do is to consult them. This is made sufficiently clear by considering almost any case of serious moral perplexity—for example Sartre's well-known case of the young man who was in doubt whether to join the Free French forces or to stay and look after his widowed mother.¹ Sartre uses the example in order to make the point that in such cases no antecedently 'existing' principle can be appealed to (*qui peut en décider a priori; aucune morale inscrite ne peut le dire*).² We have to consider the particular case and make up our minds what are its morally relevant features, and what, taking these features into account, ought to be done in such a case. Nevertheless, when we do make up our minds, it is about a matter of principle which has a bearing outside the particular case. Sartre himself is as much of a universalist as I am, in the sense in which I am, to judge by the little book in which this example occurs.³ He has also on occasion himself given his public support to universal moral principles.⁴

Secondly, the principles which are adhered to in making moral judgements are seldom very simple or general, at any rate when the judgements are made by intelligent people who have had any wide experience of life. It is most important here to distinguish between what may be called *universality*

¹ J.-P. Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme* (1946), pp. 39 ff. (tr. in W. Kaufmann (ed.), *Existentialism*, pp. 295 f.)

² Op. cit., p. 42 (Kaufmann, p. 296); cf. p. 47 (Kaufmann, p. 298), where the point is the same.

³ Cf. op. cit., pp. 31–32, 70–78 (Kaufmann, pp. 293, 304–6): 'I bear the responsibility of the choice which, in committing myself, also commits the whole of humanity'; 'In this sense we may say that there is a human universality, but it is not something given; it is being perpetually made'; '[The young man] was obliged to invent *the law* for himself' (my italics).

⁴ See *The Times*, 21 Sept. 1960, p. 10.

and *generality*, although these terms are often enough used interchangeably. The opposite of 'general' is 'specific'; the opposite of 'universal' is 'singular'—though the existence of the term 'particular', contrasted with both 'universal' and 'singular', introduces complications into which we do not need to enter. It will suffice for our purposes if we explain the terms informally in the following way. It will be remembered that we explained the notion of universalizability by reference to the term 'descriptive meaning'. Any judgement which has descriptive meaning must be universalizable, because the descriptive meaning-rules which determine this meaning are universal rules. But they are not necessarily general rules. A descriptive meaning-rule says that we can use a certain predicate of anything of a certain kind. And it is obvious that in the case of some descriptive predicates we shall have to go into a great deal of detail in order to specify what kind—if indeed this is formulable in words at all. Let the reader try specifying exactly what he means by a word like 'primitive', even in some particular context, and he will see what I mean. He will find that in order to distinguish it from other words such as 'archaic', 'unsophisticated', &c., he will have to enter into a great deal of detail, and may end up by having recourse to examples. Yet these are properly universal predicates. Other expressions create somewhat different difficulties owing to their complexity; in order to define the word 'barquentine' it is no use saying that it is a kind of vessel, nor even a kind of sailing-vessel; 'barquentine' is a very much less *general* term than 'vessel'; yet both are, equally, *universal* terms. Now universalism is not the doctrine that behind every moral judgement there has to lie a principle expressible in a few general terms; the principle, though universal, may be so complex that it defies formulation in words at all. But if it were formulated and specified, all the terms used in its formulation would be universal terms.

If I make a moral judgement about something, it must be

because of some feature of the thing; but this feature may be one which requires much detail for its specification. It must be noticed that generality and specificity are, unlike universality and singularity, matters of degree. This enables us to put the difference between the two pairs of terms quite simply by means of examples. The moral principle 'One ought never to make false statements' is highly general; the moral principle 'One ought never to make false statements to one's wife' is much more specific. But both are universal; the second one forbids *anyone* who is married to make false statements to his wife. It should be clear from these explanations that the thesis of universalizability does not require moral judgements to be made on the basis of highly general moral principles of the copy-book-heading type. As I explained in *LM* 3.6 and 4.3, our moral development, as we grow older, consists in the main in making our moral principles more and more specific, by writing into them exceptions and qualifications to cover kinds of case of which we have had experience. In the case of most people they soon become too complicated to admit of formulation, and yet give tolerably clear guidance in familiar situations. It is, indeed, always possible for a situation to arise which calls for a qualification of the principle; but, unless a person is plunged suddenly into an environment quite different to that in which he has grown up, this is likely to happen less and less as he grows older, because the situations which he encounters will more often resemble ones which he has encountered, and thought morally about, before.

3.5. The logic of moral language is not restrictive with regard to the generality or specificity of our moral principles. It allows them to be highly general and simple, or highly specific and complicated, according to the temperament of the person who holds them. This may be seen by considering some extreme cases. There might be one man who acquired early in life a few very short moral prohibitions, and stuck rigidly to these, while regarding everything not falling under

them as equally permissible. Another man might accumulate a series of moral principles as complicated as the Law of Moses (whether or not he could formulate them), and still be adding qualifications until his dying day.

There is a great difference between people in respect of their readiness to qualify their moral principles in new circumstances. One man may be very hidebound; he may feel that he knows what he ought to do in a certain situation as soon as he has acquainted himself with its most general features, without examining it at all closely to see whether it has any special feature which would call for a different judgement. Another man may be more cautious (some people are even pathologically cautious in this respect); he will never make up his mind what he ought to do, even in a quite familiar situation, until he has scrutinized every detail of it to make sure that he can really subsume it under the principles that seem at first sight most relevant.

If some British admirers of the Existentialists were to be followed, we should all be like the latter person; we should say to ourselves that people, and the situations in which they find themselves, are unique, and that therefore we must approach every new situation with a completely open mind and do our moral thinking about it *ab initio*. This is an absurd prescription, only made plausible by concentrating our attention, by means of novels and short stories, on moral situations of extreme difficulty and complexity, which really do require a lot of consideration. It is important to realize that there are moral problems of this kind; but if *all* moral questions were treated like this, not only should we never get round to considering more than the first few that we happened to encounter, but any kind of moral development or learning from experience would be quite impossible. What the wiser among us do is to think deeply about the crucial moral questions, especially those that face us in our own lives; but when we have arrived at an answer to a particular problem, to crystallize it into a

not too specific or detailed form, so that its salient features may stand out and serve us again in a like situation without need for *so much* thought. We may then have time to think about *other* problems, and shall not continually be finding ourselves at a loss about what we ought to do.

3.6. We have here, as so often in philosophy, to steer between two mistakes. It is unfortunate that terminological confusions tend often to drive us into one or the other. The expressions 'moral principle', 'moral rule', and the like are often interpreted in such a way that the rules or principles referred to have to be highly general. There are two main ways of achieving this. One is that of confining 'principles', as so restricted, to a relatively minor role in our moral thought. A man may make most of his moral decisions on grounds or for reasons which, though falling under the definition of 'universal principle' that I have been using, are insufficiently general to be called 'principles' in the restricted sense. He may reserve this word for what he calls 'matters of principle'—as when we say 'I make it a matter of principle *never* to come between husband and wife'. The purpose of making something a matter of principle, in this sense, is to avoid doing any moral thinking about particular cases.

There are sometimes justifications for this. It may be that the situations falling under the principle are such as leave no time for careful consideration of their particular features. It may be that such consideration is thought of as itself wrong (as perhaps in the instance just quoted; we may feel that to delve into other people's marital relations, as would be necessary if we were going to form a just judgement on them, would be an intolerable piece of interference). Or it may be that we have learnt from experience that, while we are engaged in a situation of a certain kind, moral thought is subject to recurrent pitfalls which in the heat of the moment it is difficult to avoid. For example, our natural kindness of heart, or desire to avoid scenes, may lead us to decisions which we

subsequently come to think wrong. Or, in cases where we are in authority, we may think that arguments for treating a particular case in an exceptional way can always be devised by the ingenious; and that for this and other reasons, if an exception is made in one case (even though, because it is a hard one, there are reasons for doing so) there will be no end to the exceptions that will have to be made in less deserving cases. To use a frivolous example from a recent broadcast programme: if the hotel manager allows the old lady to have her Pekinese on her lap in the lounge, then there will be no stopping people bringing in Great Danes and Wolfhounds and knocking over the tables; so he makes it a matter of principle to allow no dogs in the lounge.

A more serious example is provided by the question, whether it is ever legitimate to use torture in police interrogations. A police officer might determine as a matter of principle never to use it; and I should approve of his doing so. This is not, however, because I think it logically impossible that situations should arise in which, by a form of moral reasoning such as I can now accept (similar to that outlined later in this book), I could satisfy myself that torture ought to be used. It is in fact very easy to imagine such situations: suppose, for example, that a sadistic bacteriologist has produced and broadcast an infectious bacillus which will cause a substantial part of the world's population to die of a painful disease; and that he alone knows the cure for the disease. I should certainly not condemn the police if they tortured him to make him reveal it. But when I say that I approve of a police officer accepting it as a matter of principle not to use torture, I do not mean to deny that fantastic cases could be thought up in which it would be legitimate; what I mean is that, although a completely watertight set of moral principles covering all logically possible circumstances (if there could be such a thing, which is unlikely) would include a clause to allow an exception in such cases, it is unlikely to be possible in practice

for a police officer (however intelligent and sensitive) to do the moral thinking which would be necessary to distinguish such cases from others, superficially similar, in which the principle forbidding torture ought to be adhered to; and it would be dangerous for him to try, because in the sort of circumstances in which torture is sometimes advocated and practised it is extremely difficult to think clearly and to consider all sides of the case. Moreover, in cases which actually occur—as contrasted with those which are logically possible—I hold, having seen the sort of things that happen, that the ill effects on society of this insidious evil are always such as far to counterbalance any good that might come of it, even if the most important consideration, the suffering of the victim, be left out of account. I have, therefore, no hesitation at all in saying that police officers, however desperate the circumstances, ought to make it a matter of principle never even to contemplate such methods.

The sort of consideration of hypothetical and fantastic cases which I have implicitly condemned is to be distinguished from that quite different use of hypothetical cases in moral reasoning which we shall later see to be both necessary and useful (6.8, 9.4, 11.7). It is always legitimate, in order to apply to moral argument the requirement of universalizability, to imagine hypothetical cases which really are, apart from the fact that the roles of the people concerned are reversed, precisely similar in the relevant respects to the actual case being considered; and this may properly be done, however fantastic the assumptions that have to be made, in matters which do not affect the moral issue, in order to make the hypothetical case seem possible. This perhaps holds even for people faced with urgent practical problems, provided that they have time to think at all; and most of us should, when we have time to think, think more about such matters. Indeed, there is nothing to prevent moral philosophers in their studies considering cases which fall outside even this limit—which,

that is to say, are in their morally relevant particulars quite dissimilar from cases which are likely actually to occur. It may not be so useful to do this, as to consider cases in which the morally relevant features of actual cases are reproduced; but it may all the same be instructive. But for people in situations which expose them to a particular moral danger, it may sometimes be best to put altogether out of their minds the possibility of exceptions to a principle. It is a very difficult matter to decide just when it is right to make something 'a matter of principle' in this way—it depends so much on the circumstances and on the psychology of particular people. But we cannot say that it is never right.

We clearly do sometimes use the word 'principle' in this sense, though it should be equally clear that this is not the way in which I have been using it. Burke, strangely to our ears, uses the word 'prejudice' ironically in a favourable sense for the same kind of thing: 'Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, sceptical, puzzled and unresolved. Prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit, and not a series of unconnected acts. Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature.'¹ All but a few philosophers would commend a man for making some of his decisions in the way Burke advocates; but few of us (and probably not Burke) would think it right for *all* decisions to be made in this way.

Another, and less laudable, way of achieving generality in our moral principles is to treat them as a set of general maxims to which, in some sense (perhaps only verbally) we subscribe; we may as often as not, in our actual particular moral judgments, depart from them, but they form the background of our moral thinking (its mythology, we might almost say). Perhaps, though, a man whose moral 'principles' are like this is

¹ *Reflections on Revolution in France* (1815 ed.), vol. v, p. 168.

freed from the charge of hypocrisy (at the cost of incurring another charge of woolly thinking) by the fact that his principles are expressed in very vague terms, so that by judicious interpretation of them he can square his set of moral principles as a whole with any moral judgement that he finds himself making. As a practical guide to action such a set of principles has small value, because, at any rate in difficult cases, a wide variety of actions can be called conformable to them. Another expedient is to interpret the principles themselves strictly and precisely, but to adjust and vary (how?) the 'weight' which we give to them in particular circumstances. It is not, however, as a guide to action that such principles are attractive, but rather because they give a certain 'tone' to the moral life; a man can call himself a man of principle, while making his actual moral judgements in particular cases in the way that most of us do.

3.7. It is very easy, in revulsion from this caricature of moral thinking, to fall into the opposite error of abandoning principles altogether. Sometimes this idea is put in the form of a proposal to abandon *morality*; 'morality' and 'moral principles' and 'moral rules' seem somehow tainted; a young man, especially, may see in them the Victorian furniture that he has inherited from his grandparents, to be discarded as soon as convenient. This reaction is very understandable, and in itself praiseworthy. In so far as moral principles are thought of as something inherited and external—as not accepted by a man himself as a guide to his actions (with the responsibility for fitting them to new situations), they are dead things. The mistake lies in supposing that moral principles have *got* to be like this. The remedy for it is to be clear about the sense in which we are using the words; and I shall therefore now set out the way in which I think they can most helpfully be used, if we are to make morality again (as the military writers say) 'operational'.

First of all, let us be clear that a moral principle has not got

to be highly general or simple, or even formulable in words, though it has got to be universal (in the sense already explained). Secondly, let us insist that a man is not to be said to accept a moral principle unless he is making a serious attempt to *use* it in guiding his particular moral judgements and thus his actions. These two requirements are, as will be recognized, the two central theses of this book—that moral principles have to be universal, and that they have to be prescriptive. The latter of them compels us to look for principles that we can sincerely adhere to; the former insists that these should really be moral principles and not the *ad hoc* decisions of an opportunist. It will be seen in Chapter 6 how these two features taken together supply us with a most powerful lever in moral arguments. And this is the sort of principle that we all actually use in our moral thinking, the more so as we gain experience.

Let us consider for a moment what it is for a man to be *wise*—to be the sort of person to whom we naturally turn for advice when faced with a moral difficulty. The word 'wise' is obviously evaluative; we shall not, on reflection, call a man wise unless we agree with the content of the moral advice he has given us—after we have seen the consequences of carrying it out, or disregarding it. But what is it in a man which leads us to expect that we shall be able, after the event, to say that his advice was wise? If I were seeking for advice in such a situation, I should look first for a man who had himself experienced difficulties of an analogous sort to mine. But this would not be enough; for the quality of the thought that he had given to these situations might have been poor. I should look also for a man of whom I could be sure that in facing moral questions (his own or mine) he would face them as questions of moral principle and not, for example, as questions of selfish expediency. This means that I should expect him to ask, of his own actions, 'To what action can I commit myself in this situation, realizing that, in committing myself

to it, I am also (because the judgement is a universalizable one) prescribing to *anyone* in a like situation to do the same—in short, what can I will to be a universal law?' (5.5, 6.2). If I could find a man whom I knew to have been confronted with difficult choices, and whom, at the same time, I could expect to have had the courage to ask moral questions about them (not, to use Sartre's words, to 'conceal from himself the anguish'¹ of universalization), then that would be the man whose advice I should gladly seek, if it were moral advice that I wanted. And I should not expect him to produce quickly some simple maxim; he would, no doubt, find it extremely hard to formulate in words any universal proposition to cover the case. But I should be sure that he would consider the particular case carefully and sympathetically in all its details, and after doing that try to find a solution to which I could commit, not only myself, but, as Sartre again puts it, 'the whole of humanity'.²

3.8. This is perhaps the best point at which to guard against another common misinterpretation of universalism. It is thought that a universalist must inevitably be a busybody; for if, as he maintains, a moral judgement about my own case implies a similar judgement about similar cases in which other people are involved, then must not a universalist be a person who is always passing moral judgements on other people, and is not this a pretentious and insufferable thing to do? But first of all, to make a moral judgement about somebody else's action is not necessarily to go about proclaiming to him and to other people that he has acted well or ill. It is possible, and usually tactful, to keep one's moral opinions to oneself. But this answer to the objection does not go deep enough. A more important answer is that all the universalist is committed to in making a moral judgement is to saying that *if* there is another person in a similar situation, then the same judgement

¹ Op. cit., p. 32 (Kaufmann, p. 293).

² Op. cit., p. 74 (Kaufmann, p. 305); see above, p. 38, n. 3.

must be made about his case. Since we cannot know everything about another actual person's concrete situation (including how it strikes him, which may make all the difference), it is nearly always presumptuous to suppose that another person's situation is exactly like one we have ourselves been in, or even like it in the relevant particulars. If the other person asks us for advice, what we shall do, if we are sensible, is to question him very carefully about his situation; and if, after this careful and sympathetic inquiry, it appears that his situation has a *good deal in common* with one which has faced us, or if we are imaginative and sympathetic enough to be able to enter into his situation even without such previous experience, then we may have something in the way of moral advice that we can give him. And this advice, though based on careful examination of the specific details of the case, will have to be such as we could give in *any* similar case.

3.9. I wish, lastly, to clear up a pair of more elementary confusions. The first is that of taking 'universal' to mean 'universally accepted'. A moral principle would be universal, in this sense, if everybody in the world subscribed to it. It will be obvious that at any rate not all moral principles are universal in this sense, since there is widespread disagreement about many important moral questions; and I hope that it will be equally obvious that it is not in this sense that I am using the word. In any case, it is far from clear what relevance it has for moral philosophy whether or not there are moral principles which are universally accepted; it seems to me that *securus judicat orbis terrarum* is a pernicious maxim in morals, because it combines the vices of relativism with a plausibly absolutist ring. But to discuss this would be to digress.

The second confusion is more difficult to clear up. Suppose that somebody argues as follows: according to the universalist, when a man makes a moral judgement he is committed to saying that anybody who says something different about

a similar case is wrong; therefore, according to the universalist, toleration in moral matters is impossible. In order to understand this matter clearly, it is necessary to distinguish between thinking that somebody else is wrong, and taking up an intolerant attitude towards him. The universalist is committed to a denial of relativism (which is in any case an absurd doctrine);¹ he holds that if anybody disagrees with me about a moral question, then I am committed to disagreeing with him, unless I change my mind. This appears a harmless enough tautology, and need hardly trouble the universalist. But the universalist is not committed to persecuting (physically or in any other way) people who disagree with him morally. If he is the sort of universalist that I am, he will realize that our moral opinions are liable to change in the light of our experience and our discussion of moral questions with other people; therefore, if another person disagrees with us, what is called for is not the suppression of his opinions but the discussion of them, in the hope that, when he has told us the reasons for his, and we for ours, we may reach agreement. Universalism is an ethical theory which makes moral argument both possible and fruitful; and it enables us to understand what toleration is, as we shall later see (9.6).

¹Relativism, subjectivism, emotivism, and other such doctrines (none of which I hold) have become so inextricably confused with one another in philosophical writings as to make the term 'objectivism'—which is used indiscriminately to contrast with all these views, in all of their many forms—totally useless as a tool of serious inquiry. The confusion is increased by supposing, as many do, that anybody who is not what I have called a 'descriptivist' cannot be an 'objectivist' and must therefore be a 'relativist' or a 'subjectivist' or an 'emotivist', or all three—which, or in what senses, is seldom clear. For a crude and elementary attempt to sort matters out, see my article 'Ethics' in *Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers*, ed. J. O. Urmson.

4 · 'OUGHT' AND 'CAN'

4.1. We have seen that one of the distinguishing features of evaluative, including moral, language is its prescriptivity, as typically used. In this chapter I shall be drawing attention to the reasons, in our situation as men, for our having a set of terms with this feature. These reasons are connected with the fact that we, unlike stones, have to make choices and decisions about what to do. If stones were able to talk and describe their environment, they would not require any prescriptive language, except in so far as even talking is an activity which can be done right or wrong, well or ill.

It is because I *can* act in this way or that, that I ask, 'Shall I act in this way or that?'; and it is, typically, in my deliberations about this 'Shall I?' question that I ask the further, but related, question, 'Ought I to do this or that?' Thus it is because they are prescriptive that moral words possess that property which is summed up, perhaps over-crudely, in the slogan ' "Ought" implies "can" '. If descriptivism were a complete account of evaluative language, this slogan would never have arisen. We shall see that imperatives also imply 'can', in the same sense of 'imply', and for the same reasons, as does 'ought'; and when we have understood those reasons, we shall have explained sufficiently what are the similarities between moral judgements and imperatives which make me call them both 'prescriptive', to distinguish them from ordinary descriptive judgements which do not have this property.

The position is not, however, quite so simple as the above remarks, and the slogan ' "Ought" implies "can" ' itself, might seem to indicate. For it is not universally true that 'ought' (let alone other moral words) implies 'can'; that is to

say, there are many uses of 'ought' in which it is by no means inconsistent with 'cannot'. This gives us another reason for distinguishing, as I have elsewhere and as I shall again below, between different kinds of uses of these words (*LM* 11.2; 5.6 ff.).

4.2. Let us consider some examples. Suppose that I say 'I ought to go and see him, but I can't, because I don't know where he is'. There need be nothing inconsistent in such a remark; and yet there would be if 'ought' always implied 'can'. But there are, in fact, various ways in which 'ought' can be, as it were, weakened, so as no longer to possess the property which makes 'ought' and 'cannot' disagree. It is important to distinguish between various ways in which this can happen, because it sheds light on other topics besides that with which we are at present concerned.

First, there are the cases mentioned in *The Language of Morals*: I may be meaning by 'I ought to go and see' merely that there is, as a matter of sociological fact, a moral convention that people in my circumstances should go and see the man in question; or I may be thinking simply that I have, or shall have, as a matter of psychological fact, feelings of guilt, remorse, &c., for not seeing him. So used, 'ought' by no means implies 'can'; for in many cases people are unable to do what moral convention requires, and in many cases they feel guilt or remorse for their failure to do actions which they know to have been impossible. That it is irrational to have these feelings is beside the point; Jocasta was not stopped from hanging herself by the thought that her 'crime' was fated. Neither is it true that if one has been unable to observe a moral convention, one has not broken it; Jocasta had certainly broken Greek moral conventions by marrying her son Oedipus.

In these cases, 'ought' fails to imply 'can' because it is not prescriptive in meaning at all; that is to say, it is consistent with its meaning, as used in this context, not to be intended

to serve as a guide to anybody's actions. But these are not, perhaps, the most interesting or the commonest cases. Commoner are instances in which a man who says 'I ought but I can't' is, indeed, prescribing and seeking to guide conduct, but falls short of intending a *universal* prescription which would apply to his own case. He is, that is to say, prescribing in general terms, but exempting himself because of the impossibility, in his case, of obeying this general prescription.¹ This kind of quasi-universal prescription is, as we shall see, very characteristic of our actual moral language (5.6). I have argued that moral judgements, when intended seriously and with their full force, must be taken as committing the speaker to some universal judgement applying to anyone in a relevantly similar situation. As we shall see, there are various declensions which, to match the human weakness of their users, moral judgements commonly undergo; and the most important of these is where a corner of the net is, as it were, lifted to allow the speaker himself to escape. I prescribe, that is to say, for everyone in such and such a situation, *except myself*; in my own case, I substitute for the prescription something weaker.

We have here an excusable example of such a declension. When I say 'I ought but I can't', I am prescribing in general for cases like mine; I certainly think that a man in my situation ought, *if he can*, to do the act in question; but the prescription fails to apply in my case because of the impossibility of acting on it. It is as if I said 'If I were able, it would be the case that I ought (full force); but since I am not able, that lets me out'.

4.3. The sense of 'imply' in which 'ought' implies 'can' is not that of logical entailment. It is a weaker relation, analogous

¹ 'Ought' will, however, even in this case retain its descriptive meaning, and thus remain universalizable, though the *prescription* implied in it is not universal; hence these remarks are consistent with 3.3. The word 'general' is used here, not (as in 3.4) in the sense opposite to 'specific', but in that in which we say that a rule holds in general, but not universally: i.e. it has exceptions.

to that which Mr. Strawson has claimed to exist between the statement that the King of France is wise, and the statement that there is a King of France.¹ If there is no King of France, then the question whether the King of France is wise does not arise. And so, by saying that the King of France is wise, we give our hearers to understand that we think, at least, that the question arises to which this is one possible answer, and that, accordingly, there is a King of France. And similarly, if we say that somebody ought to do a certain thing, and 'ought' has its full (i.e. universally prescriptive) force, then we give our hearers to understand that we think that the question arises to which this is a possible answer, which it would not, unless the person in question were able to do the acts referred to.

Now it must be noticed that imperatives also imply 'can' in the same way as 'ought' does when used with its full force. If I tell or ask someone to do something (whether by way of advice, request, instruction, order, or even prayer does not matter), I give him to understand that I think that the question to which I have given him an answer arises—i.e. that a decision is open to him. It would not do to tell a soldier to pick up his rifle if it were fixed to the ground. And the question which has to arise, if either a decision or the utterance of an imperative is to be in point, is the question which a man is asking himself when he is wondering what to do—the question that is answered, either when one tells someone else what to do, or when he decides for himself. Let us call this kind of question a *practical* question.²

The answer to the question 'What shall I do?' is not normally expressed in words when the agent answers it, though it is (in the imperative) when someone else answers it by way of

¹ P. F. Strawson, *Mind*, lix (1950), 330 (also in *Essays in Conceptual Analysis*, ed. A. Flew, p. 34). See also Collingwood, *Essay on Metaphysics*, pp. 38 ff.

² The phrase 'wondering what to do' is a translation of Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1113^a5; and 'practical' is derived from the word there used for 'do'.

instruction, advice, &c. Instead, the agent just acts (hence Aristotle's doctrine that the conclusion of a practical syllogism is an action).¹ But in order to discuss, metalinguistically, the logic of the answer that the agent gives (without which it is impossible to give a satisfactory account of moral reasoning) we shall require an expression in words of what he leaves unuttered. I shall later use for this purpose the form 'Let me do *a*'—though this has also other and commoner uses. A man who is wondering, in a game of chess, what move to make, may say to himself 'Let me try moving Q to KB 4', and act accordingly. It is in this sense that I shall be using this form of expression—in the sense, that is, in which it is the first-person analogue of the second-person 'Try moving . . .' and the first-person-plural 'Let's try moving . . .', and not in that in which it is the equivalent of 'Allow me to try . ..'. The uncommonness of this use is explained by the fact that, as Aristotle implies, we usually act without saying anything to ourselves. This is not the only case in which a thought's logical character and relations can be made clearer by expressing it in words, though normally it is not so expressed—enthymemes provide another example.

We may, then, give the following account of the reason why decisions and imperatives 'imply "can"'. They are both answers to practical questions—and sometimes (though not always) the fact that a man cannot but do what he is going to do stops any practical question arising for him; and therefore there is no place for a decision or an imperative. We shall have later to discuss the difficult question, just when this is so and when it is not. This is one of the central issues in the 'problem of free will'. But for the moment I am content to have established this important analogy between 'ought' and imperatives and decisions; they all imply 'can' for the same reason, that without 'can' a practical question cannot arise.

I ask the reader to note carefully that I have not said that

¹ *Movement of Animals*, 701^a7 ff.

'ought' itself is used in giving answers to practical questions, in the narrow sense just explained. The question to which 'ought' gives an answer is not that asked by a man who is wondering what *to* do, but that asked by a man who is wondering what *he ought* to do. These are different questions; and to keep them distinct I shall confine the term 'practical question' to the former, and use the wider term 'prescriptive question' to cover both it and the 'ought'-question, when that is prescriptive. The two questions are nevertheless related, in the following way: unless the practical question arises, the 'ought'-question cannot arise, if 'ought' has its full force (as it must have, if it is to imply 'can'). And the reason for this is that, when the word is being used in this way, its function is to offer help and guidance in answering the practical question (though not directly to answer it); and so, naturally, there is no point in asking the 'ought'-question when the practical question does not arise.¹ Thus the prescriptivity of 'ought', when so used, serves both to account for the commonly accepted notion that 'ought' implies 'can', and to discriminate the cases where this is indeed so from those in which it is not. There is, therefore, an important similarity and relation between 'ought' and decisions and imperatives, which distinguishes them all from ordinary descriptive judgements. We have already seen that there is also another important and contrary analogy between 'ought' and *descriptive* judgements, which distinguishes both of them from imperatives and decisions—namely that 'ought' is universalizable and they are not. It is the existence of both these analogies, and the need to keep them both in focus at the same time, which makes moral philosophy so difficult and so fascinating a subject.

4.4. We have next to discuss in more detail what could be meant by the puzzling phrase 'the question arises whether . . .'. As we shall see, it is disputable whether the phrase 'the question arises' is the happiest one for the concept we are

¹ See further *Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. xxv (1951), 205 f.

employing; but, since it has acquired a certain currency, I shall continue to use it.

There are many things that might be meant by this phrase. First of all, it might mean that the answer to the question was *not already obvious or known*. We might say 'The question simply does not arise whether Jones is trustworthy; he obviously is not'. It is clear that this is not the sense with which we have to deal. Secondly, it might mean that the question is *actually raised by somebody*; we might say 'Yesterday, in the Finance Committee, the question arose whether Jones was being paid enough'. This sense is subdivisible into three, according as we mean by 'raised', that somebody asked it out loud; or that somebody, without saying anything out loud, let the words of the question pass through his mind; or that somebody, without putting the question into words even mentally, wondered whether something was so or not. As an example of the last case, suppose that I see the flash of a mortar, apparently fired in my direction; I may, in an intelligible sense, wonder whether I shall be hit, or whether to duck beneath the parapet, although there is no time for any words to pass through my mind. It is clear that these senses, too, are irrelevant to our discussion; for, to use the previous example, by saying that the question whether the King of France is wise does not arise if there is no King, we mean more than that nobody is actually raising it.

By saying that a question arises, we seem sometimes to mean that it *could* be raised; the difficulty is to interpret the word 'could'. We might mean by it 'could be actually uttered,' whether out loud or mentally; but with this sense we cannot be concerned, since it is always possible, provided that one has learnt to talk, and is not gagged or the victim of aphasia, to *utter the words* 'Is the King of France wise?' in a questioning tone of voice, and even easier to let these words pass through one's mind. We seem to mean, rather, something like 'could appositely, appropriately, reasonably, significantly,

or comprehensibly be raised'; and it is very important here to distinguish exactly which of these things, if any, we mean, and in what sense. There are clearly cases in which it would be inappropriate or inapposite to ask a question, but in which, nevertheless, it arises, in the sense we are after. For example, if we were in audience with the King and discussing some momentous question of state, it might be highly inappropriate—indeed downright impertinent—to ask whether he was wise; but it might still be said that the question, in the required sense, arose. At least, it would seem that if we are to use this phrase for the concept which is relevant to our discussion, we shall have to say this (even if the phrase is not entirely a happy one); for it is commonly said that if the question does not arise whether the King is wise, then it is neither true nor false that the King is wise; but in the case just mentioned it might be true that he was wise.

Here, as in so many other places in philosophy, it is very important to distinguish between things which it would be ridiculous, inapposite, inappropriate, or even misleading to say, and things which would be false or incomprehensible or inconsistent. It is only when it would be false or incomprehensible or inconsistent to say something that philosophers should be professionally interested. For example, it has been correctly maintained that, in a normal case, to say of something 'It looks red' when one *knows* it to *be* red is to speak misleadingly, and that such a remark is inapposite and inappropriate. But not so much can be argued from this as has been thought; for it tells us little about the logical properties of the propositions 'It looks red' and 'It is red'. What little it tells us, it tells us in virtue of a general rubric which applies to all speaking, that it is often misleading to say something weaker when one is in a position to say something stronger. That this is a case falling under this rubric shows that in some sense 'It looks red' is a weaker statement than 'It is red'—but that is all. For, though misleading and inappropriate,

it may be perfectly comprehensible and indeed true to say of a thing which one knows to be red that it looks red. And while there may not be any point, on most occasions, in saying 'It both looks and is red', it is not inconsistent or incomprehensible. And it is the inconsistency or incomprehensibility or falsity of some utterance on some occasion that tells us about the logical properties of the words used—not mere misleadingness or inappropriateness.¹

In our present case similar considerations apply. The sense in which we require to use the phrase 'The question arises whether the King of France is wise', if it is to help us in our discussion, is the following: a question arises if, and only if, supposing that somebody did ask it (i.e. utter the words), it would be comprehensible what he was asking. Note that the 'what' here is an indirect interrogative (*quid*), and not a relative (*quod*). The point is that, for a question to be said to arise in the required sense, it must be the case that, if asked, we should be able to understand it in the sense, not merely of knowing what the words mean in their normal acceptation, but of not being driven to ask, with an air of bafflement, 'What on earth is being asked?' If a question is, in a certain situation, incomprehensible in this sense, then it does not (in the sense required) arise in that situation.

4.5. Let us now illustrate the way in which the impossibility, or the inevitability, of doing something stops the question of whether to do it arising. Suppose, to adapt an example of Aristotle's,² that I am in a boat sailing in the English Channel, and that it is fair weather. I can then ask 'Shall I land in France?', and this can be a practical question; somebody can say, by way of advice, 'Yes, land in France; we can get a good meal in Dieppe'. But suppose, on the other hand, that I am being driven on the French shore by a gale and that

¹ Cf. H. P. Grice, *Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. xxxv (1961), 124 ff.

² *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1110^a3.

it is obvious that whether I shall land in France is out of my control; then, if I ask 'Shall I land in France?' this cannot be understood as a practical question, but only as a request for a prediction, equivalent to 'Am I as a matter of fact going to land in France?' Sometimes the very form of words makes it impossible to understand a question as a practical one; for example, it is clear that 'Shall I *be driven* on the French shore?' could not be a practical question. The reason is that the event referred to is described in such a way that it could not be the subject of a decision, order, request, or piece of advice, and therefore could not, either, be the subject of a question which asks for these things. Similar questions are 'Shall I fall downstairs by accident?' and 'Shall I go to the wrong room by mistake?' We cannot ask these questions comprehensibly, because the answers to them would be incomprehensible. If somebody said 'Fall down the stairs by accident' or 'Go to the wrong room by mistake', we should be at a loss to know what he was telling us to do, and should have to look for peculiar senses in which to take his words (as, e.g., by understanding 'by mistake' to mean '*pretending* to have made a mistake').

These illustrations could also be used to show that, in similar circumstances, an 'Ought I?' question would be equally incomprehensible, provided that 'ought' was alleged to be being used with its full force. When the word is being so used, it is impossible to understand what a man could be asking if he says 'Ought I to be driven on shore by the gale?' or 'Ought I to fall downstairs by accident?' or 'Ought I to go to the wrong room by mistake?' Here again, there are contrived interpretations that would make sense of these utterances; for example, the man might mean 'Ought I to be the sort of man who makes this kind of mistake; ought I not rather to take a course in Pelmanism to correct my absent-mindedness?'; but this need not concern us. It seems to be true in general that if a description of an action is such as to rule out

a practical 'Shall I?' question, then it will also rule out, for the same reason, the corresponding universally prescriptive 'Ought I?' question. It is, in fact, the impossibility of deliberating, or wondering, whether *to* do a thing which rules out asking whether one *ought* to do it.

4.6. I am not so ambitious as to hope, in this short chapter, to solve any of the tangle of problems that go under the name of 'the problem of free will'. Anyone who thinks that he can clear up these problems in less than a complete closely reasoned book shows himself unaware of their complexity. My aim is the more modest one of showing how the fact of moral freedom is what gives moral language one of its characteristic logical properties; it is because we have to make decisions that we have a use for this sort of language. Nevertheless, what has been said so far does perhaps suggest a useful approach to the traditional problem, which it will be worth a digression to explain.

It is commonly thought that if human actions can be predicted, and especially if they can be predicted by means of 'causal' laws, then it is impossible to make moral judgements about them. This, indeed, is one of the chief sources of philosophical perplexity about free will. The perplexity might perhaps be lessened if we could establish that it is only in a certain class of cases that predictability rules out moral judgement, and that the mistake is to assimilate all cases to these. If we had a clear way to distinguish these different cases from one another, the problem would become easier. And it is possible that such a criterion is provided by the test 'Does the question "What shall I do?" arise for the agent?'

This test serves, at any rate, to distinguish from each other the clear cases, in which nearly all of us would be inclined to say, either that predictability ruled out moral judgement, or that it did not. In the case just described of the man who is wrecked on the French coast, we have a clear case where the

predictability of the event makes it impossible to ask a prescriptive moral question. Let us contrast this case with another in which this seems not to be so. Suppose that there are two cashiers, one of unexampled probity and the other the reverse, and that the dishonest one says to the honest one, 'You need some money for your holiday; why not take it out of the till?' Now it might be possible for someone who knew this honest man to predict with certainty that he would reject the suggestion—with as much certainty, that is to say, as any contingent event can be predicted. We may even suppose that, with advances in neurology, it may become possible to examine such a man's brain with an encephalograph and predict on the basis of an assured scientific law that nobody with a brain so formed will ever steal money from the till in this man's circumstances. But this does not make me want to stop saying that the man does as he ought—and I must ask the reader whether he does not agree with me. The reason why this case is different from the 'gale' case seems to be the following. In the 'gale' case there was no question of the man asking himself 'Shall I be wrecked?' or 'Ought I to be wrecked?' if these are understood prescriptively. But in the 'cashier' case these questions not only arise—what the man does depends on what answers he gives to them. He actually considers the question 'Shall I take the money?'—he must consider it, since he understands the other man's suggestion, and rejects it; one cannot even reject a suggestion that one has not, at any rate for a moment, considered. And *if* he were to answer, 'Yes, I'll take the money', then he would take the money; only it is predictable that he will not give this answer.

The same can be said about the 'ought'-question. The question 'Ought I to take the money?' certainly arises for him; only he unhesitatingly and predictably answers, 'No, I ought not'; and it is because he gives this answer that he acts as he does. It would be absurd to say that because it was predictable that these questions would arise for him and that

he would answer them in a certain way and act accordingly, therefore the questions did not really arise; this contains a manifest contradiction.

There are those who say that if, with the progress of science, we come to be able in principle to predict any action, we shall have to give up making moral judgements. We may suggest that they have perhaps been misled by the apparent analogy between cases of the 'gale' type and cases of the 'cashier' type. The real difficulties of the subject, however, arise when we take what seem to be intermediate cases, and try to decide to which of the two extreme cases, if either, they are to be assimilated. There is a great variety of cases which seem to be like neither of these—both cases which occur normally, and cases, such as those which are the result of post-hypnotic suggestion or brain-surgery or mental disease, where there are abnormal factors at work. So various are these cases, even within a single class (e.g. the hypnotic), that the proper discussion of them would take us too far away from our subject. I am reasonably sure, however, that if we are clear about the extreme cases, and are not misled by the analogy between them into espousing the naïve kind of determinism which says 'All is predictable; therefore moral judgements are out of place', we shall be able to avoid the more elementary confusions.

4.7. The absurdity of what I have called the naïve determinist view can be seen if we ask what a person who accepted it could possibly do about it—how it could affect his actual behaviour, linguistic and other. This question is best examined in the context of moral education, which so often illuminates questions in moral philosophy. Even if naïve determinism were true, it would not alter the position that we find ourselves in when we are trying to bring up our children. So long as people go on having to make up their minds what to do, they will have need of principles (including moral principles) to help them to do it. So long, therefore, as we know

that our children will have in the course of their lives to make up their minds on questions which make a great difference to their own and other people's futures, we shall seek to give them, during their upbringing, something by way of a moral outlook which will help them in making these choices. The fact that the whole process was predictable—or even, for that matter, actually predicted by some clever psychologist, provided that he kept quiet about his predictions—would make no difference to our situation. If a naïve determinist were to come to us and say that we need not take any trouble with our children's education, because what they are going to do in the course of their lives is in principle predictable, we should be unlikely to take his advice. For even if our children's actions are in principle predictable, *we* do not know what they are going to be (if we did know, we might change our methods of education, and thus falsify the prediction).

If it is suggested that, because naïve determinism is true, we cannot but educate them as we are going to, then it must be answered that in that case the acceptance of naïve determinism can make no difference to us in any case. But it is to be doubted whether this follows from the doctrine; for according to it, presumably, the acceptance of determinism is as capable of determining our behaviour as any other stimulus. Let us therefore suppose that, as is manifestly the case, we are left, by the acceptance of the determinist doctrine, in the position of having to decide how to bring up our children; and let us ask what changes in our methods we might be led to introduce.

I have said that, even if our children's futures are in principle predictable, *we* do not know what they are going to be. But whatever they are going to be, one of the causes of their being as they are will be the sort of education which we give them. If the determinist were able to produce, at birth, a kind of horoscope predicting all a child's future conduct, then we might give up the task of educating the child. But this is in

principle impossible, since one class of data which the determinist requires in order to compile his predictions consists in the environmental influences which affect the child in its formative years. If, therefore, on his advice, we were to abandon or alter the child's education, this part of the data would be altered, and the predictions would then be based on false data and therefore themselves possibly false.

We may conclude that that very large part of morality which is concerned with the education of children would not be rendered futile, though its content and methods might be altered, by any logically possible advances in the predictive power of psychology. But education is continued by self-education (*LM* 4.3). It would therefore seem that, if a person is trying to build up for himself a body of moral principles which becomes more solid as his experience of life increases, his endeavour is no more rendered futile by advances in psychology than is that of a parent who is helping his children along the earlier stages of the same process. For example, suppose that I am devoting thought to the question of whether one ought ever, through the possession of inherited wealth, to take for oneself advantages which the less fortunate cannot have (a serious enough question, partly similar to one which we know occurred to Wittgenstein, and which he answered in the negative); even if somebody else can predict what conclusion I shall come to, and on what principle I shall act (whether I shall give all my money away or not), this does not in the least absolve me from considering the question and making up my mind about it. For I have to act in *some* way, and therefore have to answer the question, 'What shall I do?'; and since predictability does not stop me doing this, neither does it stop me asking the question of principle, 'What *ought* one to do in a case like this?'

So the essential part of moral thought, that which consists in trying to form for oneself and others principles of conduct, is not made futile by any advance in our powers of prediction

that could possibly take place. The ability to predict and explain will not curtail the freedom which engenders moral thought, though it will, by increasing our knowledge and power, greatly increase both the potential effectiveness and the burdensomeness of that thought. It may also make us more charitable; but charity and the making of moral judgements are not incompatible.

5 · BACKSLIDING

5.1. THE ethical theory which has been briefly set out in the preceding chapters is a type of prescriptivism, in that it maintains that it is one of the characteristics of moral terms, and one which is a sufficiently essential characteristic for us to call it part of the meaning of these terms, that judgements containing them are, as typically used, intended as guides to conduct. Now there is one objection to all kinds of prescriptivism which is so commonly made, and is of such intrinsic interest, that it requires a chapter to itself. This is the objection that, if moral judgements were prescriptive, then it would be impossible to accept some moral judgement and yet act contrary to it. But, it is maintained (in Hume's words), 'tis one thing to know virtue, and another to conform the will to it';¹ people are constantly doing what they think they ought not to be doing; therefore prescriptivism must be wrong.

There are two points from the preceding chapter which are relevant to a consideration of this objection. The first is that, there too, we saw that there was a problem for prescriptivists where there ought to be no problem for descriptivists—namely the problem raised by our feeling that 'ought' implies 'can'. We saw that if 'ought' were always, as it is sometimes, purely descriptive, there would be no question of 'ought' implying 'can', and therefore no problem; the problem arises because of the fact that in some, and those the typical and central, of their uses moral judgements have that affinity with imperatives which makes me call both prescriptive. To this extent, the very existence of the problem—the fact that ordinary people feel that 'ought' implies 'can' and that

¹ *Treatise*, iii. 1. i. For a recent development of this objection, see A. C. Ewing, *Second Thoughts in Moral Philosophy*, ch. 1.

this creates philosophical difficulties—is *prima facie* evidence against descriptivism. If a descriptivist were to argue that moral judgements are purely descriptive, and thus do not imply 'can', and that therefore a moralist can happily accept the extremest form of determinism, his argument would not be plausible. Now it must be pointed out that the same sort of manœuvre is possible here: if moral judgements were not prescriptive, there would be no problem about moral weakness; but there is a problem; therefore they are prescriptive. In fact, the argument from moral weakness is very much of a two-edged weapon in the hands of the descriptivist.

The second point to be remembered from the preceding chapter is that, as we saw, not all moral judgements have the full, universally prescriptive force that the perfect specimen has. There are a great many kinds of 'off-colour' moral judgement which do not, like the perfect specimen, 'imply "can"'. Thus the man who says 'I ought but I can't' is not necessarily saying anything absurd; all that he is doing is to use 'ought' in one of the many off-colour ways that are possible. Some of these we listed.

Now we shall see that typical cases of 'moral weakness' are cases where a man *cannot* do what he thinks he ought; but the 'cannot' here requires very careful examination, since in other senses such a man very well can do what he ought. Nevertheless, in discussing moral weakness we have to deal with a special case of 'ought but can't'; and what was said earlier about 'ought but can't' in general will be relevant.

5.2. The view that there is no problem (that is to say no *philosophical* problem) about moral weakness rests in the main on an analogy between the moral words and other common predicates of our language. Since in the case of 'ought' the analogy is not so plausible, let us for a moment take one of the moral *adjectives*, namely 'best'. On the view that we are considering, there is nothing odder about thinking something the best thing to do in the circumstances, but not doing it, than

there is about thinking a stone the roundest stone in the vicinity and not picking it up, but picking up some other stone instead. If I am not looking for a round stone, but just for a stone, there will be nothing which requires explanation if I leave the round stone and pick up, say, a jagged one; and if I am not seeking to do the best thing in the circumstances, but just wondering what to do, there will be nothing that requires explanation if I choose to do what I think to be, say, the worst possible thing to do and leave undone what I think the best thing to do.

One will be likely, that is to say, to think that there is no problem (given that one has considered the matter at all), if one assimilates moral predicates to ordinary descriptive predicates, and ignores their differences. To think that there is no problem is, as we have seen, the mark of a descriptivist. This is a matter of degree. Only the most out-and-out descriptivist will be completely unworried by the possibility of there being a problem; most descriptivists are prepared to admit that if someone does what he says is the worst possible thing to do, an explanation is called for. But nevertheless the attitude of a moral philosopher to this question puts him, as I have already implied, on one side or the other of one of the deepest cleavages in ethics—that between descriptivists and prescriptivists.

For a certain kind of descriptivist, indeed, the existence of 'moral weakness' will still present a problem—namely any descriptivist who approaches these questions in a way which goes back to Aristotle and beyond, but has been associated especially (how justly, I do not know) with the name of Aquinas. This is to say that there is a 'law of nature' (a true but synthetic universal proposition) that all things do, as a matter of fact, seek the good and eschew the evil. The logical properties of this proposition would be like those of the proposition that silkmoths lay their eggs in mulberry-trees—except that the latter is more restricted in scope. Only silkmoths seek mulberry-trees to lay their eggs in, but *everything*

seeks the good. Naturally it will not do to say that everything just *happens* to seek the good; this must therefore be some sort of synthetic necessary truth—but perhaps the same would be said about the proposition that silkmths lay their eggs in mulberry-trees—they do not just happen to lay their eggs there; they do it because that is their *nature*. The concept of 'natural necessity' that is here said to be involved is exceedingly obscure and elusive. I find it much more credible to say that the only kind of necessity here is a logical necessity; in so far as, and in the sense that, it is true at all that everything seeks the good, it is true in virtue of the meanings of 'good' and 'seek'. And this should teach us something about the meaning of the word 'good', and of other such words—namely that they are not purely descriptive. In any case, since this kind of descriptivist will have the same problem on his hands as the prescriptivist, no separate treatment is perhaps necessary.

5.3. Nevertheless it is incumbent on the prescriptivist to say why there is a problem, and to do something about elucidating it. The problem is posed by the fact that moral judgements, in their central use, have it as their function to guide conduct. If this is their function, how can we think, for example, that we ought not to be doing a certain thing (i.e. accept the view that we ought not to be doing it as a guide to our conduct) and then not be guided by it? No one can say that there is no problem here, unless he denies that it is the function of moral judgements to guide conduct.

There are analogies here between expressions like 'think good' and 'think that I ought', on the one hand, and the word 'want' on the other. These analogies are what give force to the old maxim referred to in the previous section, that everything seeks the good. For the Greek and Latin words for 'to seek' (*epiēsthai*, *appetere*) mean also 'to want'. It has rightly been said that 'the primitive sign of wanting is trying to get';¹ and this should warn us that to want something, and espe-

¹ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 67.

cially to want something more than anything else (where this is the genuine active kind of want and not mere 'idle wishing') is to have a very different kind of thing going on in our minds from what we have when we think that some descriptive proposition is true (for example that a certain cloud is shaped like a duck). To speak very crudely, the kind of thought that we have when we want something belongs with the kinds of thought that are expressed in prescriptive language, such as choices, resolves, requests, prayers, and, lastly, moral and other evaluative judgements. To draw attention to the close logical relations, on the one hand between wanting and thinking good, and on the other between wanting and doing something about getting what one wants, is to play into the hands of the prescriptivist; for it is to provide yet another link between thinking good and action.

5.4. We must not, however, become so obsessed by the analogies between wanting and making value-judgements that we ignore their differences. Doing just this, perhaps, led Socrates into his famous troubles over the question of moral weakness.¹ It is in their universalizability that value-judgements differ from desires (9.1); and nearly all the difficulties of Socrates stem from failing to notice this. In this respect wanting is like assenting to a singular imperative, not to a moral or other value-judgement. If I am trying to make up my mind what to do, I may simply ask myself what I most want to do; or I may ask myself what I ought to do. If I want to do A in these circumstances, I am not committed to wanting anyone else placed in exactly or relevantly similar circumstances to do likewise. But if I think that I ought to do A in these circumstances, I am committed to thinking that anyone else similarly placed ought to do the same. This means that making up my mind what I ought to do is a much more difficult and complex matter than making up my mind what I want to do; and it is these complexities that lead to the

¹ See, e.g., Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1145^b25.

problem of moral weakness, and their unravelling to its solution. In making up my mind what I most want to do I have to consult only my own desires. But in making up my mind what I ought to do I have to consider more than this; I have to ask myself 'What maxim (to use Kant's term) can I accept as of *universal* application in cases like this, whether or not I play the part in the situation which I am playing now?'

Are we not all, frequently, in circumstances in which we should most like to do *A*, but should very much dislike it if someone did *A* in similar circumstances when we were the victims of his act? I mention this case as an example only, not meaning to imply that all cases of moral weakness are cases where it leads us to harm other people's interests. Indeed, moral weakness is most typically exhibited in falling short of our *ideals*, which need not, as I shall later show, have anything to do with other people's interests (8.4 f.). But in all cases moral weakness is the tendency not to do ourselves something which *in general* we commend, or to do something which *in general* we condemn. This is perhaps the central difficulty of the moral life; and it is no accident that this moral difficulty is reflected in a similarly central difficulty in theoretical ethics. Some moral philosophers speak as if it were easy to make up one's mind what one ought to do. It would indeed be easy, if either of two one-sided ethical theories were a full account of the matter. If deciding what we ought to do were a mere matter of our own desires—like deciding what we most want to do—then it would be a relatively easy task. We should decide what we most wanted to do, and, if it were in our power, do it. To put the same point in a more technical way: if moral judgements were *singular* prescriptives of some sort, then there would be less difficulty in deciding which of them to accept, and acceptance of them would lead to action; there could be no question of weakness of will. That was why Socrates, who paid insufficient attention to the universaliza-

bility of moral judgements, found himself saying that there was no such thing as weakness of will.

5.5. That is one spurious way of easing our moral difficulties. The other way consists in accepting the universalizability of moral judgements, and the descriptive meaning that goes with it, and forgetting the universal *prescriptiveness* of moral principles. Then it again becomes easier to make up one's mind what one ought to do, because one is no longer, in saying that one ought to do *A*, prescribing to oneself. If this view were correct, I could decide that I, and that anyone in like circumstances, ought to do *A*, and then, without any hint of going back on what I had decided, not do *A*. There are a great many things which we should be perfectly prepared to say that we ought to do if we did not think that, in saying this, we were committing ourselves to any prescription, and thus action. The real difficulty of making a moral decision is, as I have said before, that of finding some action to which one is prepared to commit oneself, and which at the same time one is prepared to accept as exemplifying a principle of action binding on anyone in like circumstances. This is what makes the moral life, for one who takes it seriously, so appallingly difficult.

So difficult is it, in fact—so great is the strain between prescriptivity and universalizability in certain situations—that something has to give; and this is the explanation of the phenomenon of moral weakness. Not only do *we* give, because we are morally weak; we have found for ourselves a language which shares our weakness, and gives just where we do. For moral language is a human institution. It is the business of the moral philosopher to say, not what the logical behaviour of moral terms *would* be like, if they were devised by and for the use of angels, but what it actually is like.¹ To use another of Kant's expressions, a 'holy' moral language would be a very simple one; it would consist of universalizable prescriptive

¹ Cf. Ewing, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

judgements without any way of escaping from either their prescriptivity or their universality. It would, in fact, be like the evaluative language described in the last chapter of *The Language of Morals* (which was, it will be remembered, a simplified artificial model) without any of the escape-routes for backsliders which are so amply provided in our actual moral language, and which were, some of them, described in the body of the book (e.g. *LM* 7.5, 9.4, 11.2). No shift of ground from the viewpoint of that book is implied in saying that human moral language, unlike a holy or angelic moral language, has, built into its logic, all manner of ways of evading the rigour of pure prescriptive universality. These we shall have to chart in more detail. But nevertheless it would be a slander upon human moral language and on its users to claim that they do not even *aspire* to have universal prescriptive principles; not all who speak morally have already given up the struggle in one of the two ways just referred to, by reconciling themselves to a moral language that is either not prescriptive or not fully universal.

An angel, in making up his mind about a moral question concerning his own conduct, might proceed as follows. He might ask himself to what action he was prepared to commit himself, and at the same time prepared to accept as exemplifying a principle of action binding on anyone in like circumstances. As we have seen, this question is an appallingly difficult one in many situations—the source of the difficulty, we might say, is that in setting out to live morally we are aspiring to be like angels, which is a formidable undertaking. But angels, unlike human beings, do not find any difficulty in answering such questions, because, having holy wills and no selfish inclinations, they do not ever want to do actions whose maxims they cannot universalize. But we are not angels; and therefore, although the *simplest* logic for a moral language would be that of the universalizable prescriptive, we shy at this rigorous and austere simplicity, and, in our vain struggles

to find a more comfortable way of speaking, have introduced complexities into the logic of our moral language—vain struggles, because the ideal of pure universal prescriptive moral principles obstinately remains with us, and we are not in the end satisfied with anything which falls short of it.

The complexities are very great, and it will be impossible to mention all of them.' The inquiry into them will be, as are most philosophical inquiries, at one and the same time about language and about what happens; for to ask about different senses of 'ought' and of 'think that one ought', in the way that the philosopher asks this, is at the same time to ask about different possible states of mind; the two inquiries are inseparable. One cannot study language, in a philosophical way, without studying the world that we are talking about.²

5.6. Here, however, it is necessary to qualify somewhat the expression 'different senses of "ought"'. The impression may have been given by certain passages in *The Language of Morals* that moral words are somehow ambiguous, in that they have a series of distinct senses, so that one could ask a man in which sense he was using them—for example the 'inverted commas', the 'ironic', the 'conventional', and so on (*LM* 7.5). It is wrong to say this. Fortunately Professor Nowell-Smith has now provided us with a terminology for saying much better what I was trying to say. He has invented the expression 'Janus-word' to describe words of the sort we are considering, which have two or more aspects to their meaning, one of which may on occasion be emphasized to the neglect of the others.³ We cannot say that such a word is ambiguous; it is indeed an inseparable element in its meaning that it can shift in this way. The human word 'ought', unlike its counterpart in an angelic moral language, not only faces both ways in the

¹ For a somewhat more detailed account, with which I largely agree, see Mr. P. L. Gardiner's very helpful article 'On assenting to a moral principle', *Aristotelian Society*, lv (1954/5), 23.

² See Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 130 (also in *Aristotelian Society*, lvii (1956/7), 8).

³ See P. H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics*, Index s.v.

sense of having both descriptive and prescriptive meaning—for the angelic word does that—but can sometimes look in the direction that suits its user's interests, and bury its other face in the sand. Even if we are at our most moral when we say that we ought to be doing such and such a thing (getting up, for example), and fully intend to set about doing it there and then, we know only too well that if our moral strength were to fail us at the last moment, and we did not get up, we could still go on saying that we thought that we ought to be getting up—and saying it, though in a way in an attenuated sense, without in another way departing from the meaning of the word as we were using it all along; for all along the meaning of the word was such that we *could* backslide in this way.

There are many different methods of backsliding without appearing to. The commonest, perhaps, of these subterfuges is that known as special pleading. We start off as if we were prepared to accept a certain moral principle as binding on everybody; and we start off by accepting it as prescriptive, and therefore as committing *us* in particular to acting in accordance with the principle. But when we consider how contrary to our own interests it is for us to act in accordance with the principle, we weaken. While continuing to prescribe that everyone *else* (or at any rate everyone whose interests do not especially concern us) should act in accordance with the principle, we do not so prescribe to ourselves (for to do this fully and in earnest would commit us to acting). The word 'ought' can remain universal in that it retains all the descriptive meaning that it ever had; but it ceases to express a universal prescription—the prescription is not universal and the universality is only descriptive. To restore the appearance of prescriptive universality, we substitute, in our own case, for genuine prescriptiveness, a mere *feeling*, varying in strength, that we are not playing our part in the scheme which we claim to be accepting (that we are, as it were, leading our regiment from behind). This feeling is called a guilty con-

science. It is essential to the success of this manœuvre that the feeling should not, at the time, be too strong. The man who wishes to act against his conscience must make sure that his conscience is less powerful than the desires which oppose it; for if conscience pricks us too hard it will prick us into doing the action, and genuine prescriptive universality will be restored.

Suppose, however, that this does not happen, and that we fail to do the required action, and merely feel uncomfortable about it. Has the expression 'think that I ought' changed its meaning for us? We have, indeed, accepted, as exemplifying the state of mind called 'thinking that I ought', something less robust than formerly; but then from the start the expression 'think that I ought' had the potentiality of such a decline—it is an expression of human language, and humans are always doing this sort of thing. There are, indeed, many ways in which it can lose its robustness without, in a sense, departing from its original meaning; we shall notice some others later.

5.7. I have been speaking as if we were extremely self-conscious and purposive about adopting such a device as I have described. Now there are indeed people who know what they are going about when they do this; such are the real hypocrites. But this is not the state of most of us. Far from it being a matter of freely chosen policy to think in this way, most of us find it impossibly hard, not being angels, to think in any other. Our morality is formed of principles and ideals which we do not succeed in persuading ourselves to fulfil. And this *inability* to realize our ideals is well reflected in the highly significant names given in both Greek and English to this condition: Greek calls it *akrasia*—literally 'not being strong enough (sc. to control oneself)'; and English calls it 'moral weakness' or 'weakness of will'. Nor is this the only evidence that the state of mind that most people are thinking of when they speak of weakness of will involves an inability, in some sense, to do what we think we ought. There are two

extremely well-worn passages in literature which are constantly quoted in this controversy, usually against the prescriptivist position. Since those who quote them frequently show themselves unaware of the contexts in which they occur, I shall quote them at length, in order to show how many references there are to the powerlessness of the speakers. The first describes Medea, trying to resist the onset of love for Jason:

Meanwhile, Aetes' daughter's heart took fire;
Her struggling Reason could not quell Desire.
'This madness how can I resist?', she cried;
'No use to fight; some God is on its side . . .
Dash from your maiden breast these flames it feels!
Ah, if I could, the less would be my ills.
Alas I cannot quench them; an unknown
Compulsion bears me, all reluctant, down.
Urged this way—that—on Love's or Reason's course,
I see and praise the better: do the worse.'¹

Ovid here again and again stresses the helplessness of Medea; and so does St. Paul stress his own helplessness in the famous passage from Romans vii:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am not: I am unspiritual, the purchased slave of sin. I do not even acknowledge my own actions as mine, for what I do is not what I want to do, but what I detest. But if what I do is against my will, it means that I agree with the law and hold it to be admirable. But as things are, it is no longer I who perform the action, but sin that lodges in me. For I know that nothing good lodges in me—in my unspiritual nature, I mean—for though the will to do good is there, the deed is not. The good which I want to do, I fail to do; but what I do is the wrong which is against my will; and if what I do is against my will, clearly it is no longer I who am the agent, but sin that has its lodging in me. I discover this principle, then: that when I want to do the right, only the wrong is within my reach. In my inmost self I delight in the law of God, but I perceive that there is in my

¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, vii. 20.

bodily members a different law, fighting against the law that my reason approves and making me a prisoner under the law that is in my members, the law of sin. Miserable creature that I am, who is there to rescue me out of this body doomed to death? God alone, through Jesus Christ our Lord! Thanks be to God! In a word then, I myself, subject to God's law as a rational being, am yet, in my unspiritual nature, a slave to the law of sin.¹

The impression given by these two passages is very different from that conveyed by descriptivist philosophers who quote scraps from them out of context. Taken as a whole, these passages do not even run counter to the summary view which I put forward in *The Language of Morals*. For I said there that I proposed to use the word 'value-judgement' in such a way that 'the test, whether someone is using the judgement "I ought to do X" as a value-judgement or not, is "Does he or does he not recognize that if he assents to the judgement, he must also assent to the command "Let me do X"?" And earlier I said 'It is a tautology to say that we cannot sincerely assent to a command addressed to ourselves, and *at the same time* not perform it, if now is the occasion for performing it, and it is in our (physical and psychological) power to do so'.² The purpose of putting in the words 'physical and psychological power' was precisely to meet the possible objection which we are considering. Nobody in his senses would maintain that a person who assents to an imperative must (analytically) act on it even when he is unable to do so. But this is what I should have to have been maintaining, if these quotations from Ovid and St. Paul were to serve as counter-examples to my view. It is not in Medea's or St. Paul's psychological power to act on the imperatives that are entailed by the moral judgements which they are making.

¹ Tr. from the *New English Bible*. The new translators, by writing 'The good which I want to do, I fail to do' (the Greek has merely 'I do not do'), show that they agree with my interpretation of the passage.

² *LM* 11.2 (p. 168) and 2.2 (p. 20). For the use of 'command' see *LM* 1.2.

5.8. We see, therefore, that the typical case of moral weakness, as opposed to that of hypocrisy, is a case of 'ought but can't'. We have therefore to put it in its place within the general account of 'ought but can't' given above (4.1). What is it that distinguishes 'psychological' impossibility from 'physical', and this kind of 'psychological' impossibility from others? And what happens to 'ought' in all these cases? We saw that 'physical' impossibility (and also such allied cases as impossibility due to lack of knowledge or skill) causes an imperative to be withdrawn altogether, as inconsistent with the admission of impossibility; but that in a similar case an 'ought' does not have to be withdrawn but only down-graded. It no longer carries prescriptive force in the particular case, though it may continue to do so with regard to actions in similar circumstances (similar, except that the action is possible). I referred to this phenomenon as 'a lifting of a corner of the net'. We are now, perhaps, in a better position to understand it. We also saw that, although the prescription for the particular case has to be withdrawn, this does not prevent agony of mind, or even, in some cases, social reprobation. Jocasta was the victim of destiny, and knew it; but she hanged herself, and people no doubt called her incestuous, which is a term of disapproval.

In cases of moral weakness, where the impossibility is psychological, remorse and disapproval are even more in place; for, though unable to overcome this temptation, they keep alive the will-power which may overcome lesser ones. It is therefore not a consequence of our account of the matter, which stresses the impossibility of resisting the temptation, that the morally weak man is exempt from adverse moral judgements. In terms of the preceding chapter, the question 'What shall I do?' arises for him (as it does not in cases of physical impossibility); and even if we can be sure that he will answer it in a certain way, it may nevertheless be of value to say that he ought not to act so, in order to reassert the general prescriptive principle. St. Paul gives plenty of evidence

of remorse, and Medea was no doubt subject to parental disapproval. St. Paul, we may be sure, did not want himself to sin likewise on future occasions; and Aetes did not want his other daughters to go falling for foreign adventurers. To this extent their remarks were prescriptive. But it was clearly of no immediate use for either St. Paul or Medea or Aetes to prescribe for the particular cases. Sometimes, by uttering a prescription, another person may help a morally weak agent to overcome his moral weakness—the actual utterance, by reinforcing the will of the agent, alters the situation, so that what was impossible becomes possible. But the cases we have been considering may be supposed to lie beyond the reach of such help on the part of fellow humans—though the divine help which St. Paul invokes is partly of this kind.

The form of prescription is preserved, however (and this shows how reluctant we are to suppress it) in the curious metaphor of divided personality which, ever since this subject was first discussed, has seemed so natural. One part of the personality is made to issue commands to the other, and to be angry or grieved when they are disobeyed; but the other part is said either to be unable to obey, or to be so depraved as not to want to, and to be stronger than the part which commands. Medea actually uses the imperative; and St. Paul speaks of a 'law' which he 'agrees with' or 'consents unto' (*Rev. Version*). And so two interpretations of this phenomenon become possible, both of them metaphorical, and both consistent with prescriptivism. The first is that the person who accepts some moral judgement but does not act on it is actually giving commands to himself, but unable to obey them because of a recalcitrant lower nature or 'flesh'; the other is that he is, in his whole personality or real self, ceasing to prescribe to himself (though there may be a part of him that goes on prescribing, and though he may be quite ready to prescribe to others). These two metaphors are so natural and so deeply imprinted in our common speech that the philosopher who wishes to

abandon them in pursuit of literalness will have to invent his own language. Cases differ, and possibly one metaphor is sometimes more appropriate and sometimes another.

5.9. We may conclude, at any rate, that typical cases of moral weakness do not constitute a counter-example to prescriptivism, as I have been maintaining it. But, since it may be objected that there are other cases which do provide counter-examples, it will be helpful to approach the problem from the other end, and ask what sort of case would provide a counter-example to prescriptivism, and whether it exists.

As we have seen, it will not do to quote cases in which people cannot bring themselves to do what they think they ought to do. The fact that in such cases it is often true that a man is *physically* in a position, and strong, knowledgeable, and skilful enough, &c., to do what he thinks he ought, is irrelevant. For, whether or not the psychological inability down-grades the 'ought', as I have suggested, it certainly makes it impossible to act on any prescription that may survive, and so explains how prescriptivity, if it survives, is still compatible with disobedience. We may remark that the fact that 'physical' possibility may be unimpaired is the cause of a common initial reluctance to accept the account of the matter which I have given. It cannot be said, it is objected, that the morally weak person *cannot* do what he thinks he ought, because he is obviously as able as the rest of us. But 'able' here refers only to 'physical' ability. In a deeper sense the man cannot do the act. This is clearest in cases of compulsive neuroses in which 'psychological' impossibility comes close to 'physical'; but it holds also in more normal cases of weakness of will, as the very word 'weakness' indicates.

Nor will it do to quote cases in which a man goes on saying that he ought, but fails to act, even though he can act, in every sense of 'can'. For this is the case of what I called purposive backsliding, or hypocrisy; and these are allowed for. If a man does what he says he ought not to, though perfectly able to

resist the temptation to do it, then there is something wrong with what he says, as well as with what he does. In the simplest case it is insincerity; he is not saying what he really thinks. In other cases it is self-deception; he thinks that he thinks he ought, but he has escaped his own notice using 'ought' in an off-colour way. The residual feelings of guilt have supplied the place of real prescriptiveness. There are endless possible variations upon this theme; but until one is produced which really does run counter to prescriptivism, the prescriptivist need not be concerned.

Equally irrelevant is the case of the man who *thought* that he ought to do something, but, now that the time has come to do it, has let pass from his mind either the thought that he ought, or the thought that now is the time. And so is that of the man who thinks that in general *one ought*, but has not got as far as realizing that *his* present case falls under this principle. These cases can be ruled out by confining our attention to cases in which a man does not do what he thinks (now) that *he ought to be doing*.¹

Then there are the cases of people who *think* that they ought, but lack complete moral conviction. They may be using the word 'ought' in the most full-blooded possible way; but they are not so *sure* that they ought, as to commit themselves to action. These cases, likewise, present no difficulty.

Then there is the case, mentioned already above and in *LM* 11.2, in which a man, in saying that he ought, means no more than that the action in question is required by the accepted morality of his society, or that it is the sort of action, the thought of whose omission induces in him certain feelings. Since such a man is not using the word 'ought' prescriptively, and since I have allowed for such uses, this case needs no further discussion.

In all this, we find no case that provides a true counter-example. And since I myself am unable even to describe such

¹ I owe this useful way of putting the matter to Gardiner, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

PART II

MORAL REASONING

And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.
ST. LUKE, VI, 31

6 · A MORAL ARGUMENT

6.1. HISTORICALLY, one of the chief incentives to the study of ethics has been the hope that its findings might be of help to those faced with difficult moral problems. That this is still a principal incentive for many people is shown by the fact that modern philosophers are often reproached for failing to make ethics relevant to morals.¹ This is because one of the main tenets of many recent moral philosophers has been that the most popular method by which it was sought to bring ethics to bear on moral problems was not feasible—namely the method followed by the group of theories loosely known as ‘naturalist’.

The method of naturalism is so to characterize the *meanings* of the key moral terms that, given certain factual premisses, not themselves moral judgements, moral conclusions can be deduced from them. If this could be done, it was thought that it would be of great assistance to us in making moral decisions; we should only have to find out the non-moral facts, and the moral conclusion as to what we ought to do would follow. Those who say that it cannot be done leave themselves the task of giving an alternative account of moral reasoning.

Naturalism seeks to make the findings of ethics *relevant* to

¹ I have tried to fill in some of the historical background of these reproaches, and to assess the justification for them, in my article in *The Philosophy of C. D. Broad*, ed. P. Schilpp.

moral decisions by making the former not morally *neutral*. It is a very natural assumption that if a statement of ethics is relevant to morals, then it cannot be neutral as between different moral judgements; and naturalism is a tempting view for those who make this assumption. Naturalistic definitions are not morally neutral, because with their aid we could show that statements of non-moral facts *entailed* moral conclusions. And some have thought that unless such an entailment can be shown to hold, the moral philosopher has not made moral reasoning possible.

One way of escaping this conclusion is to say that the relation between the non-moral premisses and the non-moral conclusion is not one of entailment, but that some other logical relation, peculiar to morals, justifies the inference. This is the view put forward, for example, by Mr. Toulmin.¹ Since I have argued elsewhere against this approach, I shall not discuss it here. Its advocates have, however, hit upon an important insight: that moral reasoning does not necessarily proceed by way of *deduction* of moral conclusions from non-moral premisses. Their further suggestion, that therefore it makes this transition by means of some other, peculiar, non-deductive kind of inference, is not the only possibility. It may be that moral reasoning is not, typically, any kind of ‘straight-line’ or ‘linear’ reasoning from premisses to conclusion.

6.2. A parallel from the philosophy of science will perhaps make this point clear. It is natural to suppose that what the scientist does is to reason from premisses, which are the data of observation, to conclusions, which are his ‘scientific laws’, by means of a special sort of inference called ‘inductive’. Against this view, Professor Popper has forcibly argued that in science there are no inferences other than deductive; the typical procedure of scientists is to propound hypotheses, and then look for ways of testing them—i.e. experiments which,

¹ S. E. Toulmin, *The Place of Reason in Ethics*, esp. pp. 38–60. See my review in *Philosophical Quarterly*, i (1950/1), 372, and *LM* 3.4.

if they are false, will show them to be so. A hypothesis which, try as we may, we fail to falsify, we accept provisionally, though ready to abandon it if, after all, further experiment refutes it; and of those that are so accepted we rate highest the ones which say most, and which would, therefore, be most likely to have been falsified if they were false. The only inferences which occur in this process are deductive ones, from the truth of certain observations to the falsity of a hypothesis. There is no reasoning which proceeds from the data of observation to the truth of a hypothesis. Scientific inquiry is rather a kind of *exploration*, or looking for hypotheses which will stand up to the test of experiment.¹

induction

We must ask whether moral reasoning exhibits any similar features. I want to suggest that it too is a kind of exploration, and not a kind of linear inference, and that the only inferences which take place in it are deductive. What we are doing in moral reasoning is to look for moral judgements and moral principles which, when we have considered their logical consequences and the facts of the case, we can still accept. As we shall see, this approach to the problem enables us to reject the assumption, which seemed so natural, that ethics cannot be relevant to moral decisions without ceasing to be neutral. This is because we are not going to demand any inferences in our reasoning other than deductive ones, and because none of these deductive inferences rely for their validity upon naturalistic definitions of moral terms.

Two further parallels may help to make clear the sense in which ethics is morally neutral. In the kind of scientific reasoning just described, mathematics plays a major part, for many of the deductive inferences that occur are mathematical in character. So we are bound to admit that mathematics is relevant to scientific inquiry. Nevertheless, it is also neutral,

¹ K. R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (esp. pp. 32 f.). See also his article in C. A. Mace (ed.), *British Philosophy in the Mid-Century*, p. 155.

in the sense that no discoveries about matters of physical fact can be made with the aid of mathematics alone, and that no mathematical inference can have a conclusion which says more, in the way of prediction of observations, than its premisses implicitly do.

An even simpler parallel is provided by the rules of games. The rules of a game are neutral as between the players, in the sense that they do not, by themselves, determine which player is going to win. In order to decide who wins, the players have to play the game in accordance with the rules, which involves their making, themselves, a great many individual decisions. On the other hand, the 'neutrality' of the rules of a game does not turn it into a game of chance, in which the bad player is as likely to win as the good.

Ethical theory, which determines the meanings and functions of the moral words, and thus the 'rules' of the moral 'game', provides only a clarification of the conceptual framework within which moral reasoning takes place; it is therefore, in the required sense, neutral as between different moral opinions. But it is highly relevant to moral reasoning because, as with the rules of a game, there could be no such thing as moral reasoning without this framework, and the framework dictates the form of the reasoning. It follows that naturalism is not the only way of providing for the possibility of moral reasoning; and this may, perhaps, induce those who have espoused naturalism as a way of making moral thought a rational activity to consider other possibilities.

The rules of moral reasoning are, basically, two, corresponding to the two features of moral judgements which I argued for in the first half of this book, prescriptivity and universalizability. When we are trying, in a concrete case, ~~to decide~~ what we ought to do, what we are looking for (as I have already said) is an action to which we can commit ourselves (prescriptivity) but which we are at the same time prepared to accept as exemplifying a principle of action to be prescribed

for others in like circumstances (universalizability). If, when we consider some proposed action, we find that, when universalized, it yields prescriptions which we cannot accept, we reject this action as a solution to our moral problem—if we cannot universalize the prescription, it cannot become an 'ought'.

It is to be noticed that, troublesome as was the problem of moral weakness when we were dealing theoretically with the logical character of the moral concepts, it cannot trouble us here. For if a person is going to reason seriously at all about a moral question, he has to presuppose that the moral concepts are going, in his reasoning, to be used prescriptively. One cannot start a moral argument about a certain proposal on the basis that, whatever the conclusion of it, it makes no difference to what anybody is to do. When one has arrived at a conclusion, one may then be too weak to put it into practice. But *in arguing* one has to discount this possibility; for, as we shall see, to abandon the prescriptivity of one's moral judgements is to unscrew an essential part of the logical mechanism on which such arguments rely. This is why, if a person were to say 'Let's have an argument about this grave moral question which faces us, but let's not think of any conclusion we may come to as requiring anybody to *do* one thing rather than another', we should be likely to accuse him of flippancy, or worse.

6.3. I will now try to exhibit the bare bones of the theory of moral reasoning that I wish to advocate by considering a very simple (indeed over-simplified) example. As we shall see, even this very simple case generates the most baffling complexities; and so we may be pardoned for not attempting anything more difficult to start with.

The example is adapted from a well-known parable.¹ *A* owes money to *B*, and *B* owes money to *C*, and it is the law that creditors may exact their debts by putting their debtors

¹ Matthew xviii. 23.

into prison. *B* asks himself, 'Can I say that I ought to take this measure against *A* in order to make him pay?' He is no doubt *inclined* to do this, or *wants* to do it. Therefore, if there were no question of universalizing his prescriptions, he would assent readily to the *singular* prescription 'Let me put *A* into prison' (4.3). But when he seeks to turn this prescription into a moral judgement, and say, 'I *ought* to put *A* into prison because he will not pay me what he owes', he reflects that this would involve accepting the principle 'Anyone who is in my position ought to put his debtor into prison if he does not pay'. But then he reflects that *C* is in the same position of unpaid creditor with regard to himself (*B*), and that the cases are otherwise identical; and that if anyone in this position ought to put his debtors into prison, then so ought *C* to put him (*B*) into prison. And to accept the moral prescription 'C ought to put me into prison' would commit him (since, as we have seen, he must be using the word 'ought' prescriptively) to accepting the singular prescription 'Let *C* put me into prison'; and this he is not ready to accept. But if he is not, then neither can he accept the original judgement that he (*B*) ought to put *A* into prison for debt. Notice that the whole of this argument would break down if 'ought' were not being used both universalizably *and prescriptively*; for if it were not being used prescriptively, the step from 'C ought to put me into prison' to 'Let *C* put me into prison' would not be valid.

The structure and ingredients of this argument must now be examined. We must first notice an analogy between it and the Popperian theory of scientific method. What has happened is that a provisional or suggested moral principle has been rejected because one of its particular consequences proved unacceptable. But an important difference between the two kinds of reasoning must also be noted; it is what we should expect, given that the data of scientific observation are recorded in descriptive statements, whereas we are here dealing with prescriptions. What knocks out a suggested hypothesis,

on Popper's theory, is a singular statement of fact: the hypothesis has the consequence that p ; but not- p . Here the logic is just the same, except that in place of the observation-statements ' p ' and 'not- p ' we have the singular *prescriptions* 'Let C put B into prison for debt' and its contradictory. Nevertheless, given that B is disposed to reject the first of these prescriptions, the argument against him is just as cogent as in the scientific case.

We may carry the parallel further. Just as science, seriously pursued, is the search for hypotheses and the testing of them by the attempt to falsify their particular consequences, so morals, as a serious endeavour, consists in the search for principles and the testing of them against particular cases. Any rational activity has its discipline, and this is the discipline of moral thought: to test the moral principles that suggest themselves to us by following out their consequences and seeing whether we can accept *them*.

No argument, however, starts from nothing. We must therefore ask what we have to have before moral arguments of the sort of which I have given a simple example can proceed. The first requisite is that the facts of the case should be given; for all moral discussion is about some particular set of facts, whether actual or supposed. Secondly we have the logical framework provided by the meaning of the word 'ought' (i.e. prescriptivity and universalizability, both of which we saw to be necessary). Because moral judgements have to be universalizable, B cannot say that he ought to put A into prison for debt without committing himself to the view that C , who is *ex hypothesi* in the same position *vis-à-vis* himself, ought to put *him* into prison; and because moral judgements are prescriptive, this would be, in effect, prescribing to C to put *him* into prison; and this he is unwilling to do, since he has a strong inclination not to go to prison. This inclination gives us the third necessary ingredient in the argument: if B were a completely apathetic person, who literally did not mind

Universalizable

what happened to himself or to anybody else, the argument would not touch him. The three necessary ingredients which we have noticed, then, are (1) facts; (2) logic; (3) inclinations. These ingredients enable us, not indeed to arrive at an evaluative conclusion, but to *reject* an evaluative proposition. We shall see later that these are not, in all cases, the only necessary ingredients.

6.4. In the example which we have been using, the position was deliberately made simpler by supposing that B actually stood to some other person in exactly the same relation as A does to him. Such cases are unlikely to arise in practice. But it is not necessary for the force of the argument that B should *in fact* stand in this relation to anyone; it is sufficient that he should consider hypothetically such a case, and see what would be the consequences in it of those moral principles between whose acceptance and rejection he has to decide. Here we have an important point of difference from the parallel scientific argument, in that the crucial case which leads to rejection of the principle can itself be a supposed, not an observed, one. That hypothetical cases will do as well as actual ones is important, since it enables us to guard against a possible misinterpretation of the argument which I have outlined. It might be thought that what moves B is the *fear* that C will actually do to him as he does to A —as happens in the gospel parable. But this fear is not only irrelevant to the moral argument; it does not even provide a particularly strong non-moral motive unless the circumstances are somewhat exceptional. C may, after all, not find out what B has done to A ; or C 's moral principles may be different from B 's, and independent of them, so that what moral principle B accepts makes no difference to the moral principles on which C acts.

Even, therefore, if C did not exist, it would be no answer to the argument for B to say 'But in my case there is no fear that anybody will ever be in a position to do to me what I am proposing to do to A '. For the argument does not rest on any

such fear. All that is essential to it is that *B* should disregard the fact that he plays the particular role in the situation which he does, without disregarding the inclinations which people have in situations of this sort. In other words, he must be prepared to give weight to *A*'s inclinations and interests as if they were his own. This is what turns selfish prudential reasoning into moral reasoning. It is much easier, psychologically, for *B* to do this if he is actually placed in a situation like *A*'s *vis-à-vis* somebody else; but this is not necessary, provided that he has sufficient imagination to envisage what it is like to be *A*. For our first example, a case was deliberately chosen in which little imagination was necessary; but in most normal cases a certain power of imagination and readiness to use it is a fourth necessary ingredient in moral arguments, alongside those already mentioned, viz. logic (in the shape of universalizability and prescriptivity), the facts, and the inclinations or interests of the people concerned.

It must be pointed out that the absence of even one of these ingredients may render the rest ineffective. For example, impartiality by itself is not enough. If, in becoming impartial, *B* became also completely dispassionate and apathetic, and moved as little by other people's interests as by his own, then, as we have seen, there would be nothing to make him accept or reject one moral principle rather than another. That is why those who, like Adam Smith and Professor Kneale, advocate what have been called 'Ideal Observer Theories' of ethics, sometimes postulate as their imaginary ideal observer not merely an impartial spectator, but an impartially *sympathetic* spectator.¹ To take another example, if the person who faces

¹ It will be plain that there are affinities, though there are also differences, between this type of theory and my own. For such theories see W. C. Kneale, *Philosophy*, xxv (1950), 162; R. Firth and R. B. Brandt, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, xii (1951/2), 317, and xv (1954/5), 407, 414, 422; and J. Harrison, *Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. xxviii (1954), 132. Firth, unlike Kneale, says that the observer must be 'dispassionate', but see Brandt, op. cit., p. 411 n. For a shorter discussion see

the moral decision has no imagination, then even the fact that someone can do the very same thing to him may pass him by. If, again, he lacks the readiness to universalize, then the vivid imagination of the sufferings which he is inflicting on others may only spur him on to intensify them, to increase his own vindictive enjoyment. And if he is ignorant of the material facts (for example about what is likely to happen to a person if one takes out a writ against him), then there is nothing to tie the moral argument to particular choices.

6.5. The best way of testing the argument which we have outlined will be to consider various ways in which somebody in *B*'s position might seek to escape from it. There are indeed a number of such ways; and all of them may be successful, at a price. It is important to understand what the price is in each case. We may classify these manoeuvres which are open to *B* into two kinds. There are first of all the moves which depend on his using the moral words in a different way from that on which the argument relied. We saw that for the success of the argument it was necessary that 'ought' should be used universalizably and prescriptively. If *B* uses it in a way that is either not prescriptive or not universalizable, then he can escape the force of the argument, at the cost of resigning from the kind of discussion that we thought we were having with him. We shall discuss these two possibilities separately. Secondly, there are moves which can still be made by *B*, even though he is using the moral words in the same way as we are. We shall examine three different sub-classes of these.

Before dealing with what I shall call the *verbal* manoeuvres in detail, it may be helpful to make a general remark. Suppose that we are having a simple mathematical argument with somebody, and he admits, for example, that there are five

Brandt, *Ethical Theory*, p. 173. Since for many Christians God occupies the role of 'ideal observer', the moral judgements which they make may be expected to coincide with those arrived at by the method of reasoning which I am advocating.

eggs in this basket, and six in the other, but maintains that there are a dozen eggs in the two baskets taken together; and suppose that this is because he is using the expression 'a dozen' to mean 'eleven'. It is obvious that we cannot compel him logically to admit that there are not a dozen eggs, in *his* sense of 'dozen'. But it is equally obvious that this should not disturb us. For such a man only appears to be dissenting from us. His dissent is only apparent, because the proposition which his words express is actually consistent with the conclusion which we wish to draw; he *says* 'There are a dozen eggs'; but he *means* what we should express by saying 'There are eleven eggs'; and this we are not disputing. It is important to remember that in the moral case also the dissent may be only apparent, if the words are being used in different ways, and that it is no defect in a method of argument if it does not make it possible to prove a conclusion to a person when he is using words in such a way that the conclusion does not follow.

It must be pointed out, further (since this is a common source of confusion), that in this argument nothing whatever hangs upon our *actual* use of words in common speech, any more than it does in the arithmetical case. That we use the sound 'dozen' to express the meaning that we customarily do use it to express is of no consequence for the argument about the eggs; and the same may be said of the sound 'ought'. There is, however, something which I, at any rate, customarily express by the sound 'ought', whose character is correctly described by saying that it is a universal or universalizable prescription. I hope that what I customarily express by the sound 'ought' is the same as what most people customarily express by it; but if I am mistaken in this assumption, I shall still have given a correct account, so far as I am able, of that which I express by this sound.¹ Nevertheless, this account will interest other people mainly in so far as my

¹ Cf. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, p. 6.

hope that they understand the same thing as I do by 'ought' is fulfilled; and since I am moderately sure that this is indeed the case with many people, I hope that I may be of use to them in elucidating the logical properties of the concept which they thus express.

At this point, however, it is of the utmost importance to stress that the fact that two people express the same thing by 'ought' does not entail that they share the same moral opinions. For the formal, logical properties of the word 'ought' (those which are determined by its *meaning*) are only one of the four factors (listed earlier) whose combination governs a man's moral opinion on a given matter. Thus ethics, the study of the logical properties of the moral words, remains morally neutral (its conclusions neither are substantial moral judgements, nor entail them, even in conjunction with factual premisses); its bearing upon moral questions lies in this, that it makes logically impossible certain combinations of moral and other prescriptions. Two people who are using the word 'ought' in the same way may yet disagree about what ought to be done in a certain situation, either because they differ about the facts, or because one or other of them lacks imagination, or because their different inclinations make one reject some singular prescription which the other can accept. For all that, ethics (i.e. the logic of moral language) is an immensely powerful engine for producing moral agreement; for if two people are willing to use the moral word 'ought', and to use it in the same way (*viz.* the way that I have been describing), the other possible sources of moral disagreement are all eliminable. People's inclinations about most of the important matters in life tend to be the same (very few people, for example, like being starved or run over by motor-cars); and, even when they are not, there is a way of generalizing the argument, to be described in the next chapter, which enables us to make allowance for differences in inclinations. The facts are often, given sufficient patience, ascertainable. Imagination

can be cultivated. If these three factors are looked after, as they can be, agreement on the use of 'ought' is the only other necessary condition for producing moral agreement, at any rate in typical cases. And, if I am not mistaken, this agreement in use is already there in the discourse of anybody with whom we are at all likely to find ourselves arguing; all that is needed is to think clearly, and so make it evident.

After this methodological digression, let us consider what is to be done with the man who professes to be using 'ought' in some different way from that which I have described—because he is not using it prescriptively, or not universalizably. For the reasons that I have given, if he takes either of these courses, he is no longer in substantial moral disagreement with us. Our apparent moral disagreement is really only verbal; for although, as we shall see shortly, there may be a residuum of substantial disagreement, this cannot be moral. It cannot even be an evaluative disagreement, in the sense of 'evaluative' above defined (2.8).

Let us take first the man who is using the word 'ought' prescriptively, but not universalizably. He can say that he ought to put his debtor into prison, although he is not prepared to agree that his creditor ought to put *him* into prison. We, on the other hand, since we are not prepared to admit that our creditors in these circumstances ought to put us into prison, cannot say that we ought to put our debtors into prison. So there is an appearance of substantial moral disagreement, which is intensified by the fact that, since we are both using the word 'ought' prescriptively, our respective views will lead to different particular actions. Different *singular* prescriptions about what to do are (since both our judgements are prescriptive) derivable from what we are respectively saying. But this is not enough to constitute a moral disagreement. For there to be a moral disagreement, or even an evaluative one of any kind, we must differ, not only about what is to be done in some particular case, but about some universal

principle concerning what *ought* to be done in cases of a certain sort; and since *B* is (on the hypothesis considered) advocating no such universal principle, he is saying nothing with which we can be in moral or evaluative disagreement. Considered purely as prescriptions, indeed, our two views are in substantial disagreement; but the moral, evaluative (i.e. the *universal* prescriptive) disagreement is only verbal, because, when the expression of *B*'s view is understood as he means it, the view turns out not to be a view about the morality of the action at all. So *B*, by this manoeuvre, can go on prescribing to himself to put *A* into prison, but has to abandon the claim that he is justifying the action morally, as we understand the word 'morally'. One may, of course, use any word as one pleases, at a price. But he can no longer claim to be giving that sort of justification of his action for which, as I think, the common expression is 'moral justification' (10.7).

I need not deal at length with the second way in which *B* might be differing from us in his use of 'ought', viz. by not using it prescriptively. If he were not using it prescriptively, it will be remembered, he could assent to the singular prescription 'Let not *C* put me into prison for debt', and yet assent also to the non-prescriptive moral judgement '*C* ought to put me into prison for debt'. And so his disinclination to be put into prison for debt by *C* would furnish no obstacle to his saying that he (*B*) ought to put *A* into prison for debt. And thus he could carry out his own inclination to put *A* into prison with apparent moral justification. The justification would be, however, only apparent. For if *B* is using the word 'ought' non-prescriptively, then 'I ought to put *A* into prison for debt' does not entail the singular prescription 'Let me put *A* into prison for debt'; the 'moral' judgement becomes quite irrelevant to the choice of what to do. There would also be the same lack of substantial moral disagreement as we noticed in the preceding case. *B* would not be disagreeing with us other than verbally, so far as the moral question is concerned

(though there might be points of *factual* disagreement between us, arising from the *descriptive* meaning of our judgements). The 'moral' disagreement could be only verbal, because whereas we should be dissenting from the universalizable prescription 'B ought to put A into prison for debt', *this* would not be what B was expressing, though the words he would be using would be the same. For B would not, by these words, be expressing a prescription at all.

6.6. So much for the ways (of which my list may well be incomplete) in which B can escape from our argument by using the word 'ought' in a different way from us. The remaining ways of escape are open to him even if he is using 'ought' in the same way as we are, viz. to express a universalizable prescription.

We must first consider that class of escape-routes whose distinguishing feature is that B, while using the moral words in the same way as we are, refuses to make positive moral judgements at all in certain cases. There are two main variations of this manoeuvre. B may either say that it is indifferent, morally, whether he imprisons A or not; or he may refuse to make any moral judgement at all, even one of indifference, about the case. It will be obvious that if he adopts either of these moves, he can evade the argument as so far set out. For that argument only forced him to *reject* the moral judgement 'I ought to imprison A for debt'. It did not force him to assent to any moral judgement; in particular, he remained free to assent, either to the judgement that he ought not to imprison A for debt (which is the one that we want him to accept) or to the judgement that it is neither the case that he ought, nor the case that he ought not (that it is, in short, indifferent); and he remained free, also, to say 'I am just not making any moral judgements at all about this case'.

We have not yet, however, exhausted the arguments generated by the demand for universalizability, provided that the moral words are being used in a way which allows this

demand. For it is evident that these manoeuvres could, in principle, be practised in any case whatever in which the morality of an act is in question. And this enables us to place B in a dilemma. Either he practises this manoeuvre in *every* situation in which he is faced with a moral decision; or else he practises it only *sometimes*. The first alternative, however, has to be sub-divided; for 'every situation' might mean 'every situation in which he himself has to face a moral decision regarding one of his own actions', or it might mean 'every situation in which a moral question arises for him, whether about his own actions or about somebody else's'. So there are three courses that he can adopt: (1) He either refrains altogether from making moral judgements, or makes none except judgements of indifference (that is to say, he either observes a complete moral silence, or says 'Nothing matters morally'; either of these two positions might be called a sort of amoralism); (2) He makes moral judgements in the normal way about other people's actions, but adopts one or other of the kinds of amoralism, just mentioned, with regard to his own; (3) He expresses moral indifference, or will make no moral judgement at all, with regard to *some* of his own actions and those of other people, but makes moral judgements in the normal way about others.

Now it will be obvious that in the first case there is nothing that we can do, and that this should not disturb us. Just as one cannot win a game of chess against an opponent who will not make any moves—and just as one cannot argue mathematically with a person who will not commit himself to any mathematical statements—so moral argument is impossible with a man who will make no moral judgements at all, or—which for practical purposes comes to the same thing—makes only judgements of indifference. Such a person is not entering the arena of moral dispute, and therefore it is impossible to contest with him. He is compelled also—and this is important—to abjure the protection of morality for his own interests.



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In the other two cases, however, we have an argument left. If a man is prepared to make positive moral judgements about other people's actions, but not about his own, or if he is prepared to make them about some of his own decisions, but not about others, then we can ask him on what principle he makes the distinction between these various cases. This is a particular application of the demand for universalizability. He will still have left to him the ways of escape from this demand which are available in all its applications, and which we shall consider later. But there is no way of escape which is available in this application, but not in others. He must either produce (or at least admit the existence of) some principle which makes him hold different moral opinions about apparently similar cases, or else admit that the judgements he is making are not moral ones. But in the latter case, he is in the same position, in the present dispute, as the man who will not make any moral judgements at all; he has resigned from the contest.

In the particular example which we have been considering, we supposed that the cases of *B* and of *C*, his own creditor, were identical. The demand for universalization therefore compels *B* to make the same moral judgement, whatever it is, about both cases. He has therefore, unless he is going to give up the claim to be arguing morally, either to say that neither he nor *C* ought to exercise their legal rights to imprison their debtors; or that both ought (a possibility to which we shall recur in the next section); or that it is indifferent whether they do. But the last alternative leaves it open to *B* and *C* to do what they like in the matter; and we may suppose that, though *B* himself would like to have this freedom, he will be unwilling to allow it to *C*. It is as unlikely that he will *permit* *C* to put him (*B*) into prison as that he will *prescribe* it (10.5). We may say, therefore, that while move (1), described above, constitutes an abandonment of the dispute, moves (2) and (3) really add nothing new to it.

6.7. We must next consider a way of escape which may seem much more respectable than those which I have so far mentioned. Let us suppose that *B* is a firm believer in the rights of property and the sanctity of contracts. In this case he may say roundly that debtors ought to be imprisoned by their creditors whoever they are, and that, specifically, *C* ought to imprison him (*B*), and he (*B*) ought to imprison *A*. And he may, unlike the superficially similar person described earlier, be meaning by 'ought' just what we usually mean by it—i.e. he may be using the word prescriptively, realizing that in saying that *C* ought to put him into prison, he is prescribing that *C* put him in prison. *B*, in this case, is perfectly ready to go to prison for his principles, in order that the sanctity of contracts may be enforced. In real life, *B* would be much more likely to take this line if the situation in which he himself played the role of debtor were not actual but only hypothetical; but this, as we saw earlier, ought not to make any difference to the argument.

We are not yet, however, in a position to deal with this escape-route. All we can do is to say why we cannot now deal with it, and leave this loose end to be picked up later. *B*, if he is sincere in holding the principle about the sanctity of contracts (or any other universal moral principle which has the same effect in this particular case), may have two sorts of grounds for it. He may hold it on utilitarian grounds, thinking that, unless contracts are rigorously enforced, the results will be so disastrous as to outweigh any benefits that *A*, or *B* himself, may get from being let off. This could, in certain circumstances, be a good argument. But we cannot tell whether it is, until we have generalized the type of moral argument which has been set out in this chapter, to cover cases in which the interests of more than two parties are involved. As we saw, it is only the interests of *A* and *B* that come into the argument as so far considered (the interests of the third party, *C*, do not need separate consideration, since *C* was introduced only in

order to show *B*, if necessary fictionally, a situation in which the roles were reversed; therefore *C*'s interests, being a mere replica of *B*'s, will vanish, as a separate factor, once the *A/B* situation, and the moral judgements made on it, are universalized). But if utilitarian grounds of the sort suggested are to be adduced, they will bring with them a reference to all the other people whose interests would be harmed by laxity in the enforcement of contracts. This escape-route, therefore, if this is its basis, introduces considerations which cannot be assessed until we have generalized our form of argument to cover 'multilateral' moral situations (7.2 ff.). At present, it can only be said that if *B* can show that leniency in the enforcement of contracts would really have the results he claims for the community at large, he might be justified in taking the severer course. This will be apparent after we have considered in some detail an example (that of the judge and the criminal) which brings out these considerations even more clearly.

On the other hand, *B* might have a quite different, non-utilitarian kind of reason for adhering to his principle. He might be moved, not by any weight which he might attach to the interests of other people, but by the thought that to enforce contracts of this sort is necessary in order to conform to some moral or other *ideal* that he has espoused. Such ideals might be of various sorts. He might be moved, for example, by an ideal of abstract justice, of the *fiat justitia, ruat caelum* variety. We have to distinguish such an ideal of justice, which pays no regard to people's interests, from that which is concerned merely to do justice *between* people's interests. It is very important, if considerations of justice are introduced into a moral argument, to know of which sort they are. Justice of the second kind can perhaps be accommodated within a moral view which it is not misleading to call utilitarian (7.4). But this is not true of an ideal of the first kind. It is characteristic of this sort of non-utilitarian ideals that, when they are introduced into moral arguments, they render ineffective the appeal

to universalized self-interest which is the foundation of the argument that we have been considering. This is because the person who has whole-heartedly espoused such an ideal (we shall call him the 'fanatic') does not mind if people's interests—even his own—are harmed in the pursuit of it. (8.6, 9.1).

It need not be justice which provides the basis of such an escape-route as we are considering. Any moral ideal would do, provided that it were pursued regardless of other people's interests. For example, *B* might be a believer in the survival of the fittest, and think that, in order to promote this, he (and everyone else) ought to pursue their own interests by all means in their power and regardless of everyone else's interests. This ideal might lead him, in this particular case, to put *A* in prison, and he might agree that *C* ought to do the same to him, if he were not clever enough to avoid this fate. He might think that universal obedience to such a principle would maximize the production of supermen and so make the world a better place. If these were his grounds, it is possible that we might argue with him factually, showing that the universal observance of the principle would not have the results he claimed. But we might be defeated in this factual argument if he had an ideal which made him call the world 'a better place' when the jungle law prevailed; he could then agree to our factual statements, but still maintain that the condition of the world described by us as resulting from the observance of his principle would be better than its present condition. In this case, the argument might take two courses. If we could get him to imagine himself in the position of the weak, who went to the wall in such a state of the world, we might bring him to realize that to hold his principle involved prescribing that things should be done to him, in hypothetical situations, which he could not sincerely prescribe. If so, then the argument would be on the rails again, and could proceed on lines which we have already sketched. But he might stick to his principle and say 'If I were weak, then I ought to go to

the wall'. If he did this, he would be putting himself beyond the reach of what we shall call 'golden-rule' or 'utilitarian' arguments by becoming what we shall call a 'fanatic'. Since a great part of the rest of this book will be concerned with people who take this sort of line, it is unnecessary to pursue their case further at this point.

6.8. The remaining manœuvre that *B* might seek to practise is probably the commonest. It is certainly the one which is most frequently brought up in philosophical controversies on this topic. This consists in a fresh appeal to the facts—i.e. in asserting that there are in fact morally relevant differences between his case and that of others. In the example which we have been considering, we have artificially ruled out this way of escape by assuming that the case of *B* and *C* is exactly similar to that of *A* and *B*; from this it follows *a fortiori* that there are no morally relevant differences. Since the *B/C* case may be a hypothetical one, this condition of exact similarity can always be fulfilled, and therefore this manœuvre is based on a misconception of the type of argument against which it is directed. Nevertheless it may be useful, since this objection is so commonly raised, to deal with it at this point, although nothing further will be added thereby to what has been said already.

✓ It may be claimed that no two actual cases would ever be exactly similar; there would always be some differences, and *B* might allege that some of these were morally relevant. He might allege, for example, that, whereas his family would starve if *C* put him into prison, this would not be the case if he put *A* into prison, because *A*'s family would be looked after by *A*'s relatives. If such a difference existed, there might be nothing logically disreputable in calling it morally relevant, and such arguments are in fact often put forward and accepted.

The difficulty, however, lies in drawing the line between those arguments of this sort which are legitimate, and those which are not. Suppose that *B* alleges that the fact that *A* has a hooked nose or a black skin entitles him, *B*, to put him in

prison, but that *C* ought not to do the same thing to him, *B*, because his nose is straight and his skin white. Is this an argument of equal logical respectability? Can I say that the fact that I have a mole in a particular place on my chin entitles me to further my own interests at others' expense, but that they are forbidden to do this by the fact that they lack this mark of natural pre-eminence?

The answer to this manœuvre is implicit in what has been said already about the relevance, in moral arguments, of hypothetical as well as of actual cases. The fact that no two actual cases are ever identical has no bearing on the problem. For all we have to do is to imagine an identical case in which the roles are reversed. Suppose that my mole disappears, and that my neighbour grows one in the very same spot on his chin. Or, to use our other example, what does *B* say about a hypothetical case in which he has a black skin or a hooked nose, and *A* and *C* are both straight-nosed and white-skinned (9.4; 11.7)? Since this is the same argument, in essentials, as we used at the very beginning, it need not be repeated here. *B* is in fact faced with a dilemma. Either the property of his own case, which he claims to be morally relevant, is a properly universal property (i.e. one describable without reference to individuals), or it is not. If it is a universal property, then, because of the meaning of the word 'universal', it is a property which might be possessed by another case in which he played a different role (though in fact it may not be); and we can therefore ask him to ignore the fact that it is he himself who plays the role which he does in this case. This will force him to count as morally relevant only those properties which he is prepared to allow to be relevant even when other people have them. And this rules out all the attractive kinds of special pleading. On the other hand, if the property in question is not a properly universal one, then he has not met the demand for universalizability, and cannot claim to be putting forward a moral argument at all.

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6.9. It is necessary, in order to avoid misunderstanding, to add two notes to the foregoing discussion. The misunderstanding arises through a too literal interpretation of the common forms of expression—which constantly recur in arguments of this type—‘How would you like it if . . .?’ and ‘Do as you would be done by’. Though I shall later, for convenience, refer to the type of arguments here discussed as ‘golden-rule’ arguments, we must not be misled by these forms of expression.

First of all, we shall make the nature of the argument clearer if, when we are asking *B* to imagine himself in the position of his victim, we phrase our question, never in the form ‘What *would* you say, or feel, or think, or how *would* you like it, if you were he?’, but always in the form ‘What *do* you say (*in propria persona*) about a hypothetical case in which you are in your victim’s position?’ The importance of this way of phrasing the question is that, if the question were put in the first way, *B* might reply ‘Well, of course, if anybody did this to me I should resent it very much and make all sorts of adverse moral judgements about the act; but this has absolutely no bearing on the validity of the moral opinion which I am *now* expressing’. To involve him in contradiction, we have to show that he *now* holds an opinion about the hypothetical case which is inconsistent with his opinion about the actual case.

The second thing which has to be noticed is that the argument, as set out, does not involve any sort of deduction of a moral judgement, or even of the negation of a moral judgement, from a factual statement about people’s inclinations, interests, &c. We are not saying to *B* ‘You are as a matter of fact averse to this being done to you in a hypothetical case; and from this it follows logically that you ought not to do it to another’. Such a deduction would be a breach of Hume’s Law (‘No “ought” from an “is”’), to which I have repeatedly declared my adherence (*LM* 2.5). The point is, rather, that because of his aversion to its being done to him in the hypo-

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thetical case, he cannot accept the singular *prescription* that in the hypothetical case it should be done to him; and this, because of the logic of ‘ought’, precludes him from accepting the moral judgement that he ought to do likewise to another in the actual case. It is not a question of a factual statement about a person’s inclinations being inconsistent with a moral judgement; rather, his inclinations being what they are, he cannot assent sincerely to a certain singular prescription, and if he cannot do this, he cannot assent to a certain universal prescription which entails it, when conjoined with factual statements about the circumstances whose truth he admits. Because of this entailment, if he assented to the factual statements and to the universal prescription, but refused (as he must, his inclinations being what they are) to assent to the singular prescription, he would be guilty of a logical inconsistency.

If it be asked what the relation is between his aversion to being put in prison in the hypothetical case, and his inability to accept the hypothetical singular prescription that if he were in such a situation he should be put into prison, it would seem that the relation is not unlike that between a belief that the cat is on the mat, and an inability to accept the proposition that the cat is not on the mat. Further attention to this parallel will perhaps make the position clearer. Suppose that somebody advances the hypothesis that cats never sit on mats, and that we refute him by pointing to a cat on a mat. The logic of our refutation proceeds in two stages. Of these, the second is: ‘Here is a cat sitting on a mat, so it is not the case that cats never sit on mats’. This is a piece of logical deduction; and to it, in the moral case, corresponds the step from ‘Let this not be done to me’ to ‘It is not the case that I ought to do it to another in similar circumstances’. But in both cases there is a first stage whose nature is more obscure, and different in the two cases, though there is an analogy between them.

In the ‘cat’ case, it is logically possible for a man to look straight at the cat on the mat, and yet believe that there is no

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cat on the mat. But if a person with normal eyesight and no psychological aberrations does this, we say that he does not understand the meaning of the words, 'The cat is on the mat'. And even if he does not have normal eyesight, or suffers from some psychological aberration (such a phobia of cats, say, that he just *cannot* admit to himself that he is face to face with one), yet, if we can convince him that everyone else can see a cat there, he will have to admit that there *is* a cat there, or be accused of misusing the language.

If, on the other hand, a man says 'But I *want* to be put in prison, if ever I am in that situation', we can, indeed, get as far as accusing him of having eccentric desires; but we cannot, when we have proved to him that nobody else has such a desire, face him with the choice of either saying, with the rest, 'Let this not be done to me', or else being open to the accusation of not understanding what he is saying. For it is not an incorrect use of words to want eccentric things. Logic does not prevent me wanting to be put in a gas chamber if a Jew. It is perhaps true that I logically cannot want for its own sake an experience which I think of as *unpleasant*; for to say that I think of it as unpleasant may be logically inconsistent with saying that I want it for its own sake. If this is so, it is because 'unpleasant' is a prescriptive expression. But 'to be put in prison' and 'to be put in a gas chamber if a Jew', are not prescriptive expressions; and therefore these things can be wanted without offence to logic. It is, indeed, in the logical possibility of wanting *anything* (neutrally described) that the 'freedom' which is alluded to in my title essentially consists. And it is this, as we shall see, that lets by the person whom I shall call the 'fanatic' (9.1 ff.).

There is not, then, a complete analogy between the man who says 'There is no cat on the mat' when there is, and the man who wants things which others do not. But there is a partial analogy, which, having noticed this difference, we may be able to isolate. The analogy is between two relations: the

relations between, in both cases, the 'mental state' of these men and what they say. If I believe that there is a cat on the mat I cannot sincerely say that there is not; and, if I want not to be put into prison more than I want anything else, I cannot sincerely say 'Let me be put into prison'. When, therefore, I said above 'His inclinations being what they are, he cannot assent sincerely to a certain singular prescription', I was making an analytic statement (although the 'cannot' is not a logical 'cannot'); for if he were to assent sincerely to the prescription, that would entail *ex vi terminorum* that his inclinations had changed—in the very same way that it is analytically true that, if the other man were to say sincerely that there was a cat on the mat, when before he had sincerely denied this, he must have changed his belief.

If, however, instead of writing 'His inclinations being what they are, he cannot . . .', we leave out the first clause and write simply 'He cannot . . .', the statement is no longer analytic; we are making a statement about his psychology which might be false. For it is logically possible for inclinations to change; hence it is possible for a man to come sincerely to hold an ideal which requires that he himself should be sent to a gas chamber if a Jew. That is the price we have to pay for our freedom. But, as we shall see, in order for reason to have a place in morals it is not necessary for us to close this way of escape by means of a logical barrier; it is sufficient that, men and the world being what they are, we can be very sure that hardly anybody is going to take it with his eyes open. And when we are arguing with one of the vast majority who are not going to take it, the reply that somebody else *might* take it does not help his case against us. In this respect, all moral arguments are *ad hominem*.¹

¹ The above discussion may help to atone for what is confused or even wrong in *LM* 3.3 (p. 42). The remarks there about the possibility or impossibility of accepting certain moral principles gave the impression of creating an impasse; I can, however, plead that in *LM* 4.4 (p. 69) there appeared a hint of the way out which is developed in this book.

All morals are hypothetical !!

apportioned between trumpeting and silence. And exactly the same difficulty will arise in multilateral cases: we have to consider the interests of all parties affected; but how does this consideration lead to a determinate moral conclusion?

7.3. An answer to this question is suggested by a further application of the requirement of universalizability; and it is an answer which brings us to a standpoint which has some affinities with traditional utilitarianism. The principle often accepted by utilitarians, 'Everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one'¹ can both be justified by the appeal to the demand for universalizability, and be used to provide an answer to our present question. For what this principle means is that everyone is entitled to equal consideration, and that if it is said that two people ought to be treated differently, some difference must be cited as the ground for these different moral judgements. And this is a corollary of the requirement of universalizability. It must be emphasized that it, like the principle of universalizability itself, is a purely formal principle, following from the logical character of the moral words; no substantial moral judgements follow from it unless the substance is put in by arguments such as we have suggested—and these require other ingredients besides logic, as we have seen (6.3,4). The substance of the moral judgements of a utilitarian comes from a consideration of the substantial inclinations and interests that people actually have, together with the formal requirement that the prescriptions which they prompt have to be universalizable before moral judgements can be made out of them.

Before we revert to the very complicated nexus of interests with which a judge is confronted, and between which he has to do justice, let us consider a much simpler, trilateral case. Suppose that three people are dividing a bar of chocolate between them, and suppose that they all have an equal liking for chocolate. And let us suppose that no other considerations

¹ Cf. J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ch. 5 (quoting Bentham).

such as age, sex, ownership of the chocolate, &c., are thought to be relevant. It seems to us obvious that the just way to divide the chocolate is equally. And the principle of universalizability gives us the logic of this conclusion. For if it be maintained that one of the three ought to have more than an equal share, there must be something about his case to make this difference—for otherwise we are making different moral judgements about similar cases. But there is *ex hypothesi* no relevant difference, and so the conclusion follows. As before, it is possible to escape from the conclusion by refraining from making a moral judgement at all; for example, one of the parties may say 'I am jolly well going to take the whole bar, and you aren't strong enough to stop me'. But, so long as the three are going to make a moral judgement about the way the chocolate ought to be divided, they will have to say, in the circumstances described, that it ought to be divided equally.

Suppose, on the other hand, that one of the three does not like chocolate. Then they can all happily prescribe universally that those who do not like chocolate should not be given any (leaving out of consideration the possibility that they might be given it to trade with, or given other things in lieu). And so they can all agree that the chocolate ought to be divided in the ratio 1:1:0. It is not my purpose in this book to develop in detail a utilitarian moral system. As we shall see in the next chapter, utilitarianism can, in principle, cover only a part of morality, albeit a very important part. I shall not therefore examine the various possibilities that there are of extending this kind of reasoning to cover more complex cases, but shall content myself with a short survey of some of the main problems that have to be surmounted by such a system.

7.4. First, there is the problem of the commensurability of desires, inclinations, &c. In the main this is a question for empirical investigation, to see whether systems of measurement can be devised, based on people's behaviour in carefully determined situations, which yield results that are

consistent, both among themselves, and with our ordinary notions of what we mean by 'desire', &c.¹ To ask for empirical research of this sort is not to deny that much conceptual clarification is also required; it is merely to affirm that it is in the context of accurate empirical research that our concepts are likely to become clear and precise, if at all. We have to attack in this way the problem of the comparison of the intensities not merely of different desires of the same person, but of desires of different people—which is much more difficult. But the fact remains that we all do, in a rough and ready way, make use of such comparisons in arriving at our moral judgements.

It cannot be denied, however, that many and notoriously difficult problems arise, even given that we can compare the intensity of different people's desires. To take one well-known example: suppose that it is a question of giving the last half-pint of water to *A* or *B*, and *A* wants the water though with less intensity, whereas *B* wants the water very much indeed; but *A* is dying, whereas *B* has, in all likelihood, a long life before him. We imagine ourselves in the places of *A* and *B*, treating each as one, and neither as more than one; but what conclusion emerges from this exercise?

Are we, in any case, to treat each *person* as one, or each *desire* of a person as of equal weight to the same desire, of the same intensity, had by some other person? The two methods might lead to different results; for there might be two people, one of whom, *A*, had altogether very moderate desires, whereas the other, *B*, had many and very intense desires. As a result, it might be the case that, where there was a choice of giving something to *A* or giving it to *B*, the desire for this thing came right at the top of *A*'s desires, as ranged in order of intensity, but only in the middle of *B*'s order, and yet that, all the same, *B* wanted it more than *A* did. If a sense can be

¹ For a promising example of such investigation, see D. Davidson and P. Suppes, *Decision Making*.

given to this description, we should, if we were treating each *person* as one, presumably give the thing to *A*; but if we were comparing *desires* one with another, simply on the basis of their intensity without regard to who has them, we should have to give the thing to *B*.

Another difficulty is that which arises when we have a choice between the equal but very incomplete satisfaction of a number of people's desires, and the more complete satisfaction of the desires of most of them, purchased at the cost of the complete frustration of the desires of a few. Suppose, for example, that we can make everybody except Jones happy by excluding him from the choir, but that it will make him suicidally unhappy. This will be recognized as analogous to the problem, which has vexed utilitarians, of whether we ought to maximize happiness or to distribute it equally, if we cannot do both. From the standpoint of the present theory it looks as if equal distribution has strong claims of its own.

Then there is the vexed problem about *higher* and *lower* desires, which is analogous to the problem, familiar to students of utilitarianism, of higher and lower pleasures. Are we to give equal weight to all desires of the same intensity; or are we to give greater weight to desires which are, in some sense, morally better? The discussion of this problem has been to a certain extent confused by an attempt to bring within the scope of a utilitarian theory considerations which do not really belong there. If, as I shall maintain, utilitarianism cannot in any case cover the whole of morality, it may be better, when we are dealing with arguments of a strictly utilitarian sort, to follow Bentham in giving equal weight to all desires of the same intensity, irrespective of their object; and to compensate Mill, who objected to this, by the provision which we make, in the non-utilitarian part of our account, for ideals. Mill's mistake was perhaps to try to incorporate ideals into a utilitarian theory, which cannot really absorb them.

A further problem concerns the relation between *desires*,

All this is insufficiently 'subjectivist'
in the Austrian sense.

moral philosophy. If, on the other hand, our present attacker tries to say the same thing to us, we can reply that we agree with him that there are disputes which are properly expressed in terms of his non-prescriptive or non-universalizable concepts—only our own moral philosophy is sufficiently general to allow for them.

The word 'general' is the key to the whole problem. We can get the better of the naturalist because there are crucial moral problems with which his account of the matter is not sufficiently general to deal; we can get the better of our present attacker because our language is general enough to express any dispute which he may say he is having with us. If *A* has a language in which he can express everything that *B* wants to say, and more, then *A* is bound to be the winner in this philosophical game. A mathematician who knows about fractions and integers is in a strong position *vis-à-vis* one who knows only about integers. And I claim that we are in the same position with regard both to the naturalists and to our present attacker. For our language admits of descriptive terms (as required by the naturalist); but it includes also evaluative terms, in our sense (i.e. universally prescriptive terms), which he cannot admit, but which are required in order to express things that we say.¹ And our language contains means of expressing all that our present attacker could wish to say, but also means of expressing universal prescriptions, such as his language forbids him to utter. And so, when both these factions have had their say, we shall be left saying something else which they cannot express, but which we all know perfectly well how to express—namely moral and other evaluative judgements.

¹ The naturalist might say that in his language what we call evaluative judgements could be expressed by means of universal imperatives. But they cannot, because the imperatives of ordinary language cannot be properly universal (*LM* 12.4). The old non-naturalists were, in this sense, right to claim that moral concepts are *sui generis*.

11 · A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

11.1 WHAT is needed, in order to consolidate the theoretical suggestions which I have put forward, is to apply them to an important moral problem such as confronts us in real life. This will serve both to illustrate and to recapitulate the chief theses that I have been defending. The best problem, for this purpose, that I can think of is that which arises when there is conflict between races—especially between races of different colours. Allusion has already been made to this problem; but it deserves a more extended treatment. By 'more extended', I do not mean a comprehensive treatment; for that would take us out of philosophy altogether into history, sociology, psychology, and politics. Any treatment which does not include contributions from these other fields is bound to be truncated and superficial; for we need to know why (historically and psychologically) people give way to racial bitterness, and what changes in social conditions would remove it. In discussions of this problem, we very soon discover that there are many people who are quite unable to adopt the philosophical approach to it which looks for rational arguments and is prepared to test their cogency. It is no use hoping by philosophy alone to convince such people or to make them change their behaviour. Here a deep understanding of psychology is required before any progress can be hoped for. Moreover, it would be necessary in any adequate treatment of the problem to consider the scientific basis, if there is one, of the classification of people into races, and of the grading of these races in respect of intelligence and other qualities (if such grading is possible, which seems doubtful). But nevertheless there is a philosophical problem involved, whose neglect will also make any account of the matter superficial.

We need not only to know the causes of behaviour, and how it might be altered, but to determine what is right and wrong about the way people behave; and to this end we must examine, as I have tried to do in this book, how it is possible to reason cogently about moral questions. Therefore I make no apology for devoting this chapter to the philosophical aspects of the problem alone.

I will start with a brief and general classification, with examples, of arguments that might be used by people when faced with conflicts between races. I do not hope to make this classification very profound or complete; for I am aiming only to produce instances of the chief sorts of argument that are of logical interest. I shall start with arguments concerned with matters of fact; and I shall subdivide these into those concerned with genuine matters of fact, and those concerned with questions which look like questions of fact but turn out not to be. I shall then consider various moral arguments which could still go on even when the facts are agreed. I hope that this classification will be of some philosophical interest, as shedding light on the relation between facts and moral judgements.

11.2. First, then, genuine questions of fact. In this class, we may mention first questions about the actual characteristics of different races. And these can be subdivided into (1) questions about their capabilities; (2) questions about their moral and other propensities; and (3) questions about what it is like to *be* a member of such and such a race in such and such a situation.

(1) *The capabilities of different races*

It is sometimes said that black people are incapable of self-government, or of leadership (political or otherwise), or of acquiring an advanced education, or even certain practical skills. Now, if these allegations were true, it would have an effect on some moral arguments; for obviously it is no use maintaining that black people *ought* to be allowed to exercise

self-government, if they *cannot* do so; and it is no use saying that they ought to be made foremen, if they cannot do the job of foremen. The 'argument from incapability' is not always put in this extreme form. Sometimes it is said merely that black people, though they *can* acquire these capabilities, cannot acquire them to the same degree and are therefore bound to remain inferior to white people in these respects. It is not at all clear that the weaker form of the thesis has the consequences for moral arguments which follow from the stronger form. For example, black people might not be able to govern themselves according to the standards which are said to be observed in Westminster; but this would not be an argument against the view that they ought to be allowed to govern themselves in whatever way they can. Alternatively, it may be said that black people, though they may become capable of governing themselves, &c., at some date in the distant future, are not capable of doing so now. This, if admitted, would have an important bearing on some moral questions, but not the same bearing as either of the other two theses mentioned.

(2) *The moral and other propensities of races*

It is sometimes said that members of a certain race inherit, either genetically or culturally, defects of character which might make it right to treat them differently from other races. The Jews have often been a target for such accusations; and it has also been alleged from time to time that Orientals of certain races are less truthful or less trustworthy than Englishmen claim to be. If these arrogant-sounding accusations were established, they would have some bearing on moral arguments; but how powerful it would depend on the particular defect that existed. One would also, if the defect was inherited culturally and not genetically, have to consider to what extent the cultural and social factors causing the perpetuation of the defect were the fault of the members of the race itself, and to what extent they were the result of the actions of other races—e.g., the persecution of the Jews.

These two kinds of factual arguments are not such as can be established or refuted by philosophical reasoning. They have to be shown to be true or false by the means appropriate to the examination of alleged facts of these kinds—i.e. by the objective study of history and, in appropriate cases, by social or psychological surveys and experiments. The sincerity of people who make these kinds of allegation can, indeed, be put to the proof by seeing whether they are willing to submit to these objective tests.

(3) *What it is like to be a member of a certain race*

Another type of factual argument which may be adduced in moral disputes about race relations is concerned with the effect of certain sorts of treatment upon the happiness, &c., of the members of a certain race. Thus, it has sometimes been maintained that to use black people as slaves, or in conditions resembling slavery, is not cruel in the same way as it would be to use white people as slaves, because black people do not have the same sensibilities as white. An extreme form of this argument is the doctrine that blacks are like animals, or (it has sometimes even been said) actually *are* animals—though this is really a spurious factual argument and belongs in the next section. It is certainly true that if working on a farm in conditions similar to those of an ox on the same farm were no more a cause of unhappiness to a Bantu than to an ox, certain moral arguments against treating the Bantu in this way would not be available.

Now there are difficulties in assessing this kind of factual argument which there are not in the cases of the first two kinds mentioned. For there are notorious philosophical obstacles to verifying propositions about the feelings of other people. We can, however, sidestep these difficulties by saying that the difficulty of knowing what it feels like to be a Bantu is, at any rate, nothing like so great as that of knowing what it feels like to be an ox; and that the difficulty is one of the same kind as, and greater only in degree than, that of knowing what

it is like to be James, my twin brother. The practical, as opposed to the philosophical, difficulty of knowing what it feels like to be a Bantu on a farm is to be got over by a closer and more sympathetic acquaintance with individual Bantus on farms. I shall not resume until later the question of why it is relevant to moral arguments to know what it feels like to be a Bantu (II.9, 6.4 ff.).

One other more particular type of factual argument needs to be mentioned; it is not co-ordinate with the first three, but is a way of applying one or more of them to actual situations. It is sometimes said that if certain racial policies are pursued, the results will be so and so—with the implication that these results ought to be avoided at all costs, and that therefore the policy ought to be rejected. For example, it may be argued that if the pass laws are repealed, there will be no check on subversive activities by members of the subject race, and that all sorts of violence will then break out, leading eventually to a breakdown of ordered government. Or it may be argued that if the colour bar is at all relaxed, miscegenation will result (it being taken for granted that this would be an unspeakable evil). These arguments are simply examples of a type of argument which is exceedingly common in morals, and might, indeed, be said to be a constituent in any moral argument. It is of the form 'If you do *this* in *these* circumstances, what you will be doing is to bring about *these* consequences'. The effect of such an argument is to show what, *in concreto*, the person will be doing if he does what he is proposing (*LM* 4.1). In racial contexts such arguments often depend on arguments of the types already considered: e.g., it has sometimes been said that if Jews are allowed to do business without restriction, they will, because of their moral and other propensities, soon get a stranglehold on the economy of some country and use it against the interests of non-Jews; and it was sometimes said that if Indians were allowed a greater share in the government of India, there would be,

because of their incompetence and corruptibility, a breakdown of the high standards of administration maintained by the (British-staffed) Indian Civil Service. If such hypothetical predictions had been correct, then the further question would have arisen of whether the states of affairs predicted were worse than the states of affairs which would come into being if alternative policies were pursued. But, subject to this proviso, this is a perfectly legitimate argument in morals, if the premisses are true. That is to say, it is quite in order to try to show that the facts are such that if a certain policy is pursued then a certain moral principle will be observed or infringed; and the argument then shifts to questions of moral principle.

11.3. Let us now turn from genuine factual arguments to spurious ones. These are forthcoming from both parties to most racial questions; they are not the monopoly of those of whose policies liberals disapprove. However, I shall start with arguments which are put forward by people of whose policies the majority of my readers will disapprove; I shall thus, perhaps, the more easily display the fallaciousness of the arguments; and then I shall turn to some similar arguments, just as lacking in cogency, which are used by those who are on the angels' side.

Suppose that a Nazi argues that he has a right to persecute members of non-Germanic races because there is something in the hereditary make-up (in the 'blood', he might say) of the Germanic races which gives them a natural superiority over other races and a right to make them their subjects. This looks at first sight very like some perfectly good factual arguments that we mentioned earlier; we have the statement that the facts are such that a certain moral principle applies. But the argument suffers from two fatal weaknesses. In the first place, no determinate criterion is given for discovering whether this factor is present in the heredity or blood of any particular person. No empirical tests are offered for determining the truth of the assertion that members of Germanic

racess actually have this mark of natural superiority to members of other races. So the argument rests on statements of 'fact' whose truth is in principle not ascertainable; and therefore we can never know whether the premisses of the argument, or its conclusion, are true. We do not need to be logical positivists to reject this sort of argument; but if anyone does accept some kind of verification theory of meaning, he will go further, and say that the premisses of such arguments are not merely untestable but meaningless. Into this question I shall not go, merely remarking that here is an instance where a seemingly quite abstract philosophical controversy has a direct application to practical questions.

In the second place, even if the premisses of these arguments were all right, the users of them have not told us *why* the moral conclusions follow from the premisses. In order that the presence of this blood-factor in Germans should justify their domination of other races, it has to be the case that the factor confers a right to dominate; and it is hard to see why this should be so. Even if it could be proved by experiment that whenever the blood of a German has a certain chemical added to it it turns purple, and that this is so with the blood of no other race, it is not thereby established that any moral consequences follow from this. We shall have to postpone further consideration of this question until we have come back to the general question of the place of factual premisses in moral arguments.

As further examples of this type of spurious factual argument, we may mention the argument that Christians may persecute Jews, because certain Jews said on a famous occasion 'His blood be upon us and upon our children';¹ and the argument that white people may make black people their subjects, because black people are the descendants of Ham, and it says in the Bible that Noah cursed the descendants of Ham because Ham had looked at Noah's naked body when

¹ Matthew xxvii. 25.

Noah was in a drunken stupor.¹ In both cases there is no conceivable way of discovering whether an individual Jew or Bantu who is being maltreated is really the descendant of Ham, or of a member of the crowd outside Pilate's palace; and, even if they were, it is not in the least clear why this should justify their maltreatment.

11.4. Let us now consider some examples of arguments suffering from these same two defects which are often used by more respectable people. It is often said that white people ought to treat black people better because they are their brothers; or because they are, like whites, children of God. As before, no criterion is stated for determining whether an individual member of some other race is or is not my 'brother', in the extended sense, or whether he is or is not a child of God; if two people were arguing about whether the natives of a certain territory were or were not children of God, it is entirely unclear by what tests they could ever settle their argument. We cannot, indeed, deny the value of these forms of expression as metaphors; but what we need to do is to find out what they are metaphors for, and whether propositions expressed in terms of them are, when put unmetaphorically, true.

Secondly, even if it could be established beyond doubt that a certain man was my 'brother', or that he was a 'child of God', it is not clear why it follows that I ought to treat him in a certain way. What moral principles are the basis of my duties even to my real brothers, or to the children of my human father? Admittedly, if we agree, as most of us do, that we have certain duties to our real brothers, then these duties must have as their ground *something* about the relation 'being a brother of'. It would need to be elucidated what this something is—for until this is done we shall not know what is the principle involved. Has it, for example, something to do with common nurture, and does it therefore extend to foster-

¹ Genesis ix. 25.

brothers? Or has it something to do with common parenthood, and if so do both parents have to be the same or only one? If we could answer these questions, we should then know the precise features of brothers which we think to be the grounds of our duties towards them. It would then become a question whether black people, who are our brothers only in an extended sense, possess, in common with our real brothers, those features which are the grounds of our duties to our real brothers. And it is, to say the least, rather unlikely that this would prove to be the case.

The relevance to this argument of the theses of this book is the following. I have maintained (2.2 ff.) that all moral judgements are made on the basis of *something about* the thing judged (which is another way of stating the thesis of universalizability). Now it is possible that this 'something', in the present case, might be the mere biological relation, *being a brother of*. But this seems unlikely. We are therefore led to inquire what, in particular, it is about this relation that makes us accept the moral prescription that we ought to behave in certain ways to our brothers.

There are the same sort of difficulties with the expression 'child of God'. It is not obvious *a priori* that we ought to treat fellow children of God in certain ways. We require, presumably, the general premiss that God's will ought to be done, and the particular premiss that God wills his children to treat one another in certain ways. Well-known philosophical problems arise concerning both these premisses; but there is no room to discuss them here.¹

11.5. We may notice, lastly in this class of arguments, one which can be shown to possess the same defects as these ones, but which nevertheless enjoys a certain philosophical respectability, and which is therefore worth examining in more detail. This is the argument that we ought to treat blacks in

¹ For a brief discussion, see my article in *The Listener*, 13 October 1955, p. 593.

certain ways because they are *people*. Now it must be said at the start that this argument is in fact an attempted short cut; it is perfectly possible, given that blacks are people, and given also certain other assumptions, to reason cogently that they ought to be treated in the same way as other people. This I shall later attempt to show (11.9). But the argument is nevertheless worthless as it stands, since it suffers from the same defects as I have already exposed. In order to turn it into a cogent piece of reasoning, we have to bring out into the open certain concealed steps in the argument and certain suppressed assumptions; and the complaint to be made against those who use this kind of argument is not that they arrive at wrong conclusions, but that they bury the really important and interesting factors in the arguments, and thus conceal from us some very fundamental features of moral arguments and of moral discourse in general. It is only by understanding these fundamental features that the arguments can be seen to be cogent. The short cut proposed has thus to be condemned for two reasons: it gets to a desirable conclusion by a fallacious mode of reasoning which could also be used to justify the most damnable conclusions; and, by seeming to offer an easy way to this desirable conclusion, it encourages us to leave off our study of moral philosophy when it has reached only a very superficial level. As it stands, the inference from 'X is a person' to 'I ought to be kind to X' is logically no better than that from 'X is a non-Aryan' to 'I ought to put X in the gas-chamber'.

In order to understand this, let us first notice that the 'people' argument suffers from the same defects as the 'brothers' and 'children of God' arguments. No criterion is offered for determining whether something is a person or not. Is it sufficient to be a live member of the human species? It does not seem to follow from the fact that a black person is a live member of the human species that I ought to treat him in any particular way. So if we have *this* determinate criterion

for being called a person, no moral conclusion seems to follow from the fact that someone is a person. The same will be the case whatever determinate criterion we are given. For example, it may be said that someone is a person if he has the power of rational choice. But it will still not be obvious why a human being who has this power ought to be allowed to exercise this choice as much as possible; for no grounds have been given for this contention.

Suppose, in general, that there is a determinate criterion for deciding whether a given being is a person or not. It will then require establishing that we ought to treat such a being in one way rather than in another. Faced with this challenge, a defender of this type of argument might make his principle indubitable by making it analytic. He might say that by establishing that X is a person one has established that X ought to be treated as a person; and that this is analytic, because 'as a person' means merely 'as a person ought to be treated'. But though it is, certainly, analytic that people ought to be treated as people ought to be treated, the question is, How ought people to be treated?

One way that might be suggested for getting out of this difficulty is to write into the notion of a person some moral content. By calling a being a person we should then imply, as part of what we are saying, that he ought to be treated in a certain way. This will validate the step from 'X is a person' to 'X ought to be treated in a certain way'. But now we are left without a determinate and morally neutral criterion for finding out whether he *is* a person. In order to be sure that he is a person, we shall first have to satisfy ourselves that he ought to be treated in a certain way, and no basis has yet been established for making this moral judgement.

11.6. Having dealt with a number of arguments which are unsatisfactory, and with others which are incomplete, in that they appeal to antecedent moral principles, we come now to the constructive part of this chapter. It is based on the account

of moral language and moral reasoning given in the preceding chapters and in my earlier book.

Let us ask, first, why it is that we think what I have called factual arguments to be relevant to moral questions. Why did I say that certain factual arguments (for example about the predictable results of certain policies) were perfectly admissible; and why, on the other hand, do we have this strange phenomenon of Nazis and others inventing obviously spurious factual arguments in order to justify their actions morally? Why not just get on with the job of exterminating the Jews? What need is supplied by the bogus claim that Germans have some special element in their heredity which distinguishes them from other men? Or why does it make a difference to the moral argument that a certain policy would have a certain result? It looks as if facts (or some sorts of facts) are held to be relevant to moral arguments; so much so that if one has not got any genuine facts one invents some make-believe ones. But why is this? In short, what is the bearing of facts on moral arguments? This is one of the central problems of moral philosophy, and I have tried in this and my earlier book to sketch an answer to it. Without further references back, let us set out the answer as clearly and briefly as possible.

An obvious, and so far as it goes true, but incomplete answer to the question 'Why are facts relevant to moral arguments?' is this: moral judgements have to be about something; and it is the facts of the case which determine what we are judging. Thus, when we are asking moral questions about a proposed action, it is relevant to know what the person would be doing who did the action; for, if we do not know this, we literally shall not know what we are talking about.

I say that this answer is incomplete for two reasons. The first is that it does not explain why we think some facts, and not others, relevant to moral arguments. The second is that it does not explain why it makes a difference if it is a *moral* argument. If I were deciding just what *to do*, without any

thought of what I *ought* to do, it would still be important to me to know *what* I should be doing if I did so and so. We shall see that these two incompletenesses are related to each other.

There are some philosophers, to whom I have referred often enough before, who can see only one possible way in which facts might have relevance in moral arguments. This is by there being some logical link, holding in virtue of the meanings of words, between factual premisses and moral conclusions. Now I do not think that there is any such link. And because these philosophers have eyes only for this sort of relevance, they think that if I deny the possibility of such a link, I am committed to holding that facts are not relevant to moral arguments; and this would be an absurd position. But what I have been maintaining is that facts are relevant to moral arguments, but not in the way that these people think.

Facts are relevant to moral arguments because they make a difference between cases which would otherwise be similar.

Let us illustrate this by considering again why the Nazis set so much store by the claim that there is something in the blood of Germans which differentiates them from other races. The explanation is that they were proposing to treat other races in a markedly different way from Germans, and wanted a reason why they *ought* to do this. A Nazi might say, as he contemplated the Jews that he was just driving into the gas-chamber, 'These men look just as I would look if I were starved and naked like them; they have the same feelings and aspirations, and there is, apparently, no other relevant difference between them and myself or my German friends. And I would not think it right to treat a German in this way. But there is something that makes a difference; although Germans and Jews are often indistinguishable to the naked eye, there is this all-important thing about them, that they lack that factor in their heredity which true Germans have, and which entitles Germans to send them to the gas-chamber.' Put thus

crudely, the argument sounds grotesque; yet something of the sort undoubtedly lies behind many claims of racial superiority. And this parody of moral thinking, just because it is a parody of moral thinking, illustrates extremely well the role which even bogus facts can play in moral arguments—even bad ones. This argument of the Nazis is pretending to be like a perfectly good moral argument, and thus shows us something about what a good moral argument would be like.

The point is this: it is part of the meanings of the moral words that we are logically prohibited from making different moral judgements about two cases, when we cannot adduce any difference between the cases which is the ground for the difference in moral judgements. This is one way of stating the requirement of (universalizability) which, as we have seen, is fundamental to all moral reasoning. Since the Nazi cannot justify his different treatment of Germans and Jews without adducing some difference between their cases, he invents a difference.

Other participants in race conflicts are more fortunate: they do not have to invent anything; the difference is there, for all to see, in the colour of their victims' skins. This is why it seems so much easier to justify racial discrimination when there is a colour difference than when there is not. But even less obvious differences than those of colour will serve if they have to. What is important to the would-be discriminator is that there should be *some* qualitative difference (i.e. not merely a numerical difference) between the class of people whom he wishes to oppress, exploit, or persecute and those whom he does not. Some of us remember how, at school, the wearing of shoes of a different pattern was enough to mark out some poor boy for maltreatment.

These caricatures of moral reasoning teach us something about the real thing. It is indeed required that, to justify different treatment of people, qualitative differences have to be produced between them or between their actions or

circumstances. We try to justify our singular moral judgements by producing principles involved in them: one may or ought to do such and such a *kind* of thing in such and such a *kind* of situation to people of a certain *kind*.

11.7. Now these examples of spurious moral reasoning are parodies. The question which next arises, therefore, is, How do we distinguish the parody from its original? If we do not think that it is an adequate justification for discriminating against a person that his skin is black, how would we distinguish those features of the man or his situation which do justify different treatment from those which do not? There seems at first sight to be no formal difference between saying 'It is right to kill him because his skin is black' and saying 'It is right to kill him because he has killed another man'. Some people regard both of these as good reasons; some, neither; and some, one but not the other. We have therefore to ask, can moral philosophy point out any means of distinguishing between good and bad reasons of this sort; or, in other words, between relevant differences, such as really do justify discrimination, and those which are not relevant? Have we any reason for saying that black skin is not relevant, but being a murderer is?

There are those who try to answer this question in the following way. They take a look at the kind of differences that people *do* call morally relevant; and they make a list of them, reduce them if they can to some sort of system, and then say that we *mean* by 'morally relevant difference' just these differences and no others, and *mean* by 'morality' just that system of evaluations which takes these, and no other, differences into account. There are many objections to this procedure; I will here mention just two. First, how do we know that we could not get a different list if we did the investigation in South Africa or Soviet Russia or ancient Sparta? Secondly, to make such a list does not explain anything; we want to know what leads to things getting put on the list or left off it. The

proponents of this view do not seem to have gone far enough in their search for an explanation.

Now, if the argument of this book is correct, we can in fact go a good deal further, by a step which is really no different in principle from one which we took a moment ago. We saw that it follows from the meanings of the moral terms that if different moral judgements are made, relevant differences must be adduced; and we saw that this was a version of the requirement of universalizability. But we have not yet exhausted the potency of this principle; we still have the use of it left which was explained in 6.8 and 9.4.

In order to illustrate this use again, let us suppose that we are having an argument with a man who maintains that a black skin, by itself, is a sufficient ground for discriminating against its possessor. We tell him, and he, being a credulous person, believes, the following story. The Soviet Institute of Race Relations (which is a much more enterprising and scientific body than its Western counterparts) has just succeeded in breeding a new kind of bacillus, which Soviet agents are at this very moment broadcasting in areas of racial conflict throughout the world. This bacillus is very catching, and the symptom of the disease which it induces is that, if the patient's skin was white, it turns permanently black, and vice versa. Now when the person with whom we are arguing has absorbed the implications of this story, we ask him whether he still thinks that skin-colour by itself is a sufficient ground for moral discrimination. It is unlikely that he will go on saying that it is; for then he will have to say that if he catches the disease the former blacks who have also had it will have acquired the right to oppress *him*, and all his formerly white friends.

What do we learn from this simple piece of science fiction? What we have got our opponent to do by this innocent deception is to perform an intellectual operation which, if he had really been wanting to reason morally, he would have performed

without the deception. This operation is to consider the hypothetical case in which he himself has lost the quality which he said was a sufficient ground for discrimination, and his present victims have gained it—and to consider this hypothetical case as if it were actual. There are two stages in the process of universalization. The first is passed when we have found a universal principle, not containing proper names or other singular terms, from which the moral judgement which we want to make follows, given the facts of our particular situation. This stage is comparatively easy to pass, even for the proponent of the most scandalous moral views. It is passed, for example, by adducing the principle that it is all right for black people to be oppressed by white people. But the next stage is more difficult. It is necessary, not merely that this principle should be produced, but that the person who produces it should actually hold it. It is necessary not merely to *quote* a maxim, but (in Kantian language) to *will* it to be a universal law. It is here that prescriptivity, the second main logical feature of moral judgements, makes its most decisive appearance. For willing it to be a universal law involves willing it to apply even when the roles played by the parties are reversed. And this test will be failed by all maxims or principles which look attractive to oppressors and persecutors on the first test. It will indeed be found that, if we apply these two tests, both founded on the logical, formal features of moral terms, we shall be able to sort out, in the field of race relations at least, the grounds of discrimination which we are really prepared to count as morally relevant from those which we are not. — Still — why? what counts?

11.8. From this satisfactory conclusion, however, there is, as we have seen, a way of escape for the sufficiently determined racist. It remains to illustrate, in terms of the present example, what price he has to pay for his escape. Let us suppose that there is a racist the mainspring of whose racialism is a horror of miscegenation; and let us suppose that

the source of this horror is not any belief about the consequences, social or biological, of miscegenation. That is to say, he is not moved by alleged facts about the weakening of the human stock by mating between people of different colours, or about the unsatisfactory life lived by people of mixed descent, or by anything of that kind. If these were his grounds, we could argue with him in a scientific way, trying to show that the offspring of mixed marriages are just as likely to be vigorous and intelligent as those of other marriages; or that any bad social effects of miscegenation would be removed if *he* and people like him abandoned their attempts to enforce a colour bar. Let us suppose, however, that his grounds are not these, but simply a horror of the very idea of a black man mating with a white woman. This cannot be touched by any scientific or factual argument of the sort described. And it may well be true that, if miscegenation is to be prevented, it is necessary to have a rigid colour bar; and that if this is enforced, and leads to resentment, other repressive measures will be necessary for the maintenance of public order, and thus we shall have the whole apparatus of racial repression. If this is true, then it will be hard for us to argue with this man. He detests miscegenation so much that he is prepared to live in a police state in order to avoid it.))

And he must be prepared for more than this. He must, if he is going to universalize his moral judgements, be prepared that he himself should not merely live in a police state, but live in it in the same conditions as he is now prepared to make the blacks live in—conditions which are getting steadily worse. He must be prepared that *he* should be subject to arbitrary arrest and maltreatment just on grounds of skin colour, and to butchery if he tries, in collaboration with his fellows, to protest.

Now it may be that there are people so fanatical as to be prepared for all these things in order to avoid miscegenation. But they are surely very few. The repression happens because

these few people have on their side a multitude of other people who are not prepared at all to suffer thus, but who have not really thought through the argument. They think, perhaps, that all will be well without too much repression; or that blacks do not mind being treated like this as much as whites would; or that there is a scientific basis for belief in racial superiority—or some of the many other things that racialists tend to believe. All these beliefs can perhaps be refuted severally by scientists and others without any help from the philosopher; but they are apt, collectively, to form an amalgam in the minds of racialists which makes into allies of the fanatic many people who are not, in themselves, in the least fanatical. The contribution of the philosopher is to take this amalgam apart, deposit such beliefs as are open to scientific refutation in the in-trays of the scientists, and, when the scientists have dealt with them, exhibit the prescriptive remainder of racialism for what it is—something that fanatics may hold but which the bulk of a people—even a people as hard-pressed as the white South Africans—never will.

11.9. We are now in a position to explain why, in spite of the inadequacy of an argument which we mentioned earlier, it *is* morally relevant that blacks are people. Saying that they are people is saying that they are like us in certain respects. It is not clear yet in *what* respects; this will be found to vary from case to case, as we shall see. But the principle of this argument from the fact that blacks are people can now be exposed as follows. If a black man whom I am contemplating maltreating has, as I have every reason to suppose that he has, certain characteristics in common with myself—if, to use an example from an earlier century, it causes him great suffering if he and his wife are separated and sent as slaves to different countries—then I can reason as follows. I am not prepared in general to accept the maxim that it is all right for people to separate husbands from wives for commercial gain; for this would be committing myself to the judgement that it would

be all right for somebody to do this to me if he were in a position to do so. But can I say that it is all right to do this to blacks? The answer must be 'No'; for if I envisage myself becoming a black, but retaining my other characteristics, and in particular the characteristic of being attached to my wife, I am not (since I am not a fanatic for the liberty of commerce) prepared to accept a maxim which permits people to do this to me.

On the other hand, if we take the example of the murderer mentioned above, the position is altered. I may very well be prepared to prescribe that, if I commit a murder, I should be hanged. In actual fact I am not; for I am not a supporter of capital punishment—for reasons which are irrelevant to the present argument. But let us, in order to avoid this difficulty, substitute 'put in prison' for 'hanged' or 'killed'. I am prepared to prescribe that if I commit a murder I should be put in prison: and my reasons are utilitarian ones comparable to those given by the judge in 7.2 ff. But reasons of this sort are not available to racialists. Thus we see why it is thought not to be relevant that the man is black, but is thought to be relevant that a man is a murderer. More important, we see why it is thought to be relevant that a slave loves his wife. The duties which we acknowledge towards people are not derived from the 'essence of man' or from any philosophical mystifications of that sort; they are acknowledged because we say 'There, but for my good fortune, go I. That man is like me in important respects; in particular, the same things as cause me to suffer cause him to suffer; therefore, unless I am prepared to accept a maxim which would permit me to be treated like him were I to acquire a black skin (which I am not), I cannot say that it is all right for me to treat him thus.'

This line of reasoning also helps to explain why we recognize certain duties towards both men and animals, but certain others towards men only. For example, nobody would be thought to be oppressing animals because he did not allow

them self-government; but, on the other hand, it is generally thought to be wrong to torture animals for fun. Now why is it that we do not acknowledge a duty to accord animals self-government? It is simply because we think that there is a real and relevant difference between men and animals in this respect. We can say 'If I were turned into an animal, I should stop having any desire for political liberty, and therefore the lack of it would be no hardship to me'. It is possible to say this even of men in certain stages of development. Nobody thinks that children ought to have complete political liberty; and most people recognize that it would be foolish to introduce the more advanced kinds of political liberty all at once in backward countries, where people have not got to the stage of wanting it, and would not know what to do with it if they got it. So this mode of reasoning allows us to make the many distinctions that are necessary in assessing our obligations towards different *kinds* of people, and indeed of sentient beings. In all cases the principle is the same—am I prepared to accept a maxim which would allow this to be done to me, were I in the position of this man or animal, and capable of having only the experiences, desires, &c., of him or it?

It may be objected that not all people will follow this mode of reasoning which I have been suggesting. Those who indulged in bear-baiting did not reason: 'If we were bears we should suffer horribly if treated thus; therefore we cannot accept any maxim which permits bears to be treated thus; therefore we cannot say that it is all right to treat bears thus.' And no doubt there are some white South Africans (a few) who will be quite unmoved by being told that they are causing the Bantu to suffer. It seems that I am required to say what has gone wrong in such cases.

A number of different things may have gone wrong. The commonest is what we call insensitivity or lack of imagination. The bear-baiter does not really imagine what it is like to be a bear. If he did, he would think and act differently. Another

way of putting this is to say that these people are not paying attention to the relevant similarities between themselves and their victims. If we like to revert to the metaphor, having understood what it stands for, the bear-baiter is not thinking of the bear as his brother—or even cousin.

It is also possible that, though fully aware of what they are doing to their victims, they are not reasoning morally about it. That is to say, they are not asking themselves whether they can universalize their prescriptions; though they may make play with the moral *words* which they have heard other people use, they are not, in their own thinking, using these words according to the logical rules which are implicit in their meaning. And there are other possibilities, too numerous to mention here, which have been examined in the body of this book.

It may be asked: What is to be done about this? Can the philosopher, in particular, do anything about it? When South African believers in white supremacy read this book, will they at once hasten to repeal the pass laws and make the blacks their political equals? This is highly unlikely; and in any case they will not read the book. To get people to think morally it is not sufficient to tell them how to do it; it is necessary also to induce in them the wish to do it. And this is not the province of the philosopher. It is more likely that enlightened politicians, journalists, radio commentators, preachers, novelists, and all those who have an influence on public opinion will gradually effect a change for the better—given that events do not overtake them. Perhaps people in areas of racial conflict can be, in the end, brought to think of the resemblances between themselves and members of other races as morally relevant, and of the differences as morally irrelevant. Perhaps, even, they may learn to cultivate their imaginations. But this much can be claimed for philosophy, that it is sometimes easier to bring something about if we understand clearly what it is we are trying to do.

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