

Moral Philosophy
and
The Analysis of Language



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PHILOSOPHERS HAVE sometimes divided human experiences into two major kinds: those predominantly of activity on the part of the agent, and those predominantly of passivity. As passive, man is an observer, contemplator, scientist, chronicler of events, or prophet. As active, man is an agent who directs human affairs, changes nature, formulates policies concerning people, institutions, rules, customs, courses of action, and so on. We need not inquire whether this division is very happy. The important observation is that a person can play either role with intelligence and sophistication, or on the other hand with stupidity and naiveté. Certain branches of philosophy are devoted roughly to the job of determining how a person may conduct his passive role, as contemplator, with intelligence and reason. These are epistemology, logic, and the philosophy of science, doubtless among others. In contrast to them, ethics or moral philosophy has been the philosophical discipline devoted primarily to the job of determining how to conduct the active role with intelligence and reason. At least we can say this as a first approximation.

Let us now address ourselves to a very broad question: What kind of reasoning may show how to conduct our active role with intelligence, and how far may we expect such reasoning to take us? I suppose a person's answer to this question constitutes a good part of his view about the content of moral philosophy.

I shall begin by stating what I believe to be part of the right answer to this broad question. But I shall not attempt to develop or defend this answer in detail. For the primary aim of my remarks is to criticize another answer, a much more familiar answer. According to this second answer, which I wish to criticize, reasoning aimed to conduct our active role intelligently — the substantive part of moral philosophy — must begin with a *description of ordi-*

nary moral questions, of the language of morals (a part of what is often called "metaethics"), and only on the basis of conclusions as to the meaning of ordinary moral questions should one attempt the traditional job of answering these questions. What I wish to show is that this familiar view is mistaken in the role it gives to the examination of ordinary moral language in the activity of guiding decisions intelligently.

I

LET ME BEGIN BY urging that moral philosophy has two main, and closely related, jobs. The first is to determine which policies, preferences, or attitudes are *rational for everybody*. "Rational" in what sense? "Rational" for a person in the sense that he *would* adopt them if he was in a normal frame of mind and was perfectly knowledgeable — that is, had at his disposal and vividly in mind all available relevant knowledge about himself and the world and was making no logical mistake. What might be an example of a policy or preference that is *rational for everybody*, in this sense of "rational"? It is not implausible to suggest that it is rational in this sense to prefer knowledge to ignorance, or pleasure to pain. I shall give attention to one particular example in a moment.

There is a second and related job. This is to give instructions to persons how they may find what is a rational policy for *them* to adopt, a rational preference for *them*, in this same sense of "rational," where it is doubtful whether it can be shown that a given policy or preference is rational for *everybody*. Such instructions hopefully would also be useful in helping a person find the rational decision in specific situations with which philosophy as a discipline can hardly be concerned.

If such jobs are the main jobs of moral philosophy, one may claim that moral philosophy is a perfectly objective discipline. It is not just a matter of proclaiming one's own precious values to the world at large, but rather of determining which attitudes or preferences would be adopted by persons who were normal and perfectly knowledgeable, and of getting clear how to determine what one's own attitude or preference would be if one were perfectly knowledgeable and in a normal frame of mind. These questions are perfectly clear, and presumably can be answered by broadly rational and scientific procedures. We may concede that it may be a difficult matter to get the answers, and that such questions perhaps cannot be answered with certainty or even, in many cases, with a high degree of probability.

Anyone who suggests that such a program is at least a large part of the proper program for moral philosophy must answer various objections. It will be worth while to consider briefly three of these, before turning to a critique of the established theory.

The first objection is that the proposal, as stated, appears not even to attempt an answer to some central questions to which moral philosophy has traditionally addressed itself, and which are urgent questions for practical life. Our proposal that moral philosophy should concern itself with finding rational preferences or attitudes, it will be said, does come close to suggesting a way to answer the traditional question of the good, or the question of a wise or prudent choice; but even if we know what is the "rational" policy for a person, we shall be no closer to knowing what is his *duty* or moral *obligation*, and this is something moral philosophy most certainly is concerned to determine. Nor, again, will we know, by knowing what is "rational" policy, what conduct is morally praiseworthy or blameworthy. It is no answer to questions about such issues, to tell us what a person would prefer, or what policy he would adopt, if he were perfectly knowledgeable and in a normal frame of mind.

This point is an important one, and the objection would be fatal if it cannot be met. But fortunately the objection rests on a misunderstanding, that of too narrow a conception of the types of situation which constitute problems for human beings, and about which they have to make choices and adopt policies. It is true that talk of rational choice or preference suggests a situation of deciding what is for one's own interest or personal advantage in a particular situation. But there are much larger issues with respect to which we must form preferences and make choices. For there are social customs and moral rules and laws; and sometimes we are called upon to decide which of these we shall support, advocate, or join with others in promoting. When this happens the question arises: Which customs, or moral rules, or laws are ones which a given person must rationally prefer — or, more important, which ones are qualified to commend themselves to *every* rational person who is living in a society? And, for persons of good will, a still narrower question will arise: What rules or laws *would* a rational person wish to see written in the consciences of men or the legal institutions of his society if he were also a person of a normal degree of altruism or concern for the welfare of other persons? Now these questions are at least very like the questions people raise when they ask what is obligatory or right or one's duty, in the ordinary senses of these words. Or at least it is arguable that what is *clear and important* in the questions "What is the right thing to do?" and "What is my duty in these circumstances?" and "Which action, if any, is morally obligatory in these circumstances?" could be phrased either as one of the forego-

ing questions about what choice would be rationally preferable, or as a minor modification of one of these. There is another kind of question. This is the question of what attitude or public policy it is rational to adopt toward persons who have disobeyed laws or rational social rules, and so on—or of what attitude or policy it would be rational for persons with a normal degree of altruism to adopt. And this question is at least very like the question people raise when they ask whether the conduct of a person was morally blameworthy in the circumstances; or at least it is arguable that it captures all that is clear and important in such a question.

It is incidentally worth notice that there is a sense in which rational policies for these various types of situation may conflict. For it might be rational, in our sense, for me to prefer one course of action in a certain situation, although this course of action is forbidden by a moral rule it is rational for me to support, or at least which it would be rational for me to support if I had a normal degree of altruism. Again, it might be rational for me to perform a certain action the condemnation or even punishment of which would be decreed by social rules or laws which I must rationally support, or at any rate must rationally support if I have a normal share of altruism. Such conflicts, I think, do exist and are an important problem for moral philosophy; it is not merely, as some philosophers seem to think, that only confused philosophers think there are such problems.

My answer to the first objection, then, in sum is this. The charge is that if we construe the job of moral philosophy as that of determining which attitudes or policies are *rational* in the sense explained, then all the different problems of the moral life are made to collapse into one problem, that of fixing what is to the self-interest of the agent. My reply is that this charge ignores the fact that we are called upon to make many types of choices, and among them the decision whether we shall give our support to certain moral rules, or to their being written into laws and into the consciences of men. And my suggestion is that when we see that there are these various choices, we can see that the proposal after all does preserve an interest in the various problems of the moral life. I have not, of course, touched upon all the various traditional questions of moral philosophy — for instance, that of the fair or just.

There is a second charge which may be levelled against the present suggestion about the tasks of moral philosophy. It will be said that at least the first suggested job, that of determining which

attitudes would be adopted by *everyone* who was knowledgeable about the world and himself, is a vain one. For, it will be said, there are *no* attitudes or preferences about which we can say that they would be adopted by *every* knowledgeable and normal person. For do we not know that any conceivable attitude or policy would be reasonable provided a person's basic values were of an appropriate kind, and do we not know that *any* basic value is possible? Surely there is no such thing as *the* rational attitude toward anything.

We must distinguish, however, between the logically possible and the causally possible. Given that there is no *contradiction* in supposing that a knowledgeable person have a certain attitude, it may still be *causally impossible* for a knowledgeable person to have that attitude, if he is in a normal frame of mind. I do not mean by this merely that we should be unwilling to say that a person was in a "normal" frame of mind if he was both knowledgeable and had a certain attitude, although in some cases this may be true. I rather have in mind, for one thing, the possibility that an analysis of what it is to choose or form a preference is such as to exclude the possibility of certain preferences. I have in mind, for another thing, the possibility that certain attitudes will be inevitable in persons whose cognitive orientations are sound, whose past lives have included normal interactions with a family and other persons, and who are free of distortions produced by fear and anxiety. To suggest this is to make a large and programmatic claim. I do not pretend that we actually have much knowledge of this sort. To make the claim stick would require, for one thing, a systematic philosophical psychology. Let me, however, for the benefit of the sceptical, present one example of what I have in mind. Some philosophers, for example Sidgwick, have argued that it would be irrational for a person to prefer what he regarded as a smaller good to what he regarded as a larger one just because the smaller one could be attained today rather than tomorrow. To be more explicit, suppose that, if the choice between having either *A* or *B* *today* were presented to a person, he would take *A* in preference to *B*. The question then is whether a *rational* person would still prefer *A* to *B*, if the choice were between having *A* at one time and having *B* at a later time. To make the question sensible, of course, we have to lay down some restrictions. A sensible person will recognize that he may be dead tomorrow; there may also be an actual disutility in waiting; and so on. So we must modify our *A* and *B* so as to compensate for these

differences; or better, for purposes of simplicity, we should choose an *A* and *B* for circumstances such that these differences do not arise. Now I suggest that Sidgwick may have been correct if what he was arguing for was this: that *no* perfectly knowledgeable (etc.) human being would alter his preference for *A* over *B* (assuming these adjustments have been made or the need for them does not arise) purely because of the time at which these events would occur. Why not? When we prefer one thing to another, we prefer it as falling under some description, as something of a certain kind. Now, if a person did alter his preference solely because of the time, it must be because the description "an event *A* today" as compared with the description "an event *A* next week" elicits preference, even after the important differences, such as the possibility of death in the meantime, have been adjusted for. Is this possible for a rational person? I think it isn't. The time position of an event is something that can't make a difference to the motivating power of a conception, once it is clear to a person — as of course it is to a person who has the relevant facts vividly before him — that it is one and the same self that enjoys or undergoes the event at either time. The time at which an event occurs *ex hypothesi* does not affect the flavor or quality of the experience. The time of an event is qualityless; it is the fact of position in an order. So, if what elicits interest is the conceived quality of an event, as I incline to think it is, temporal position as such does not affect rational preference. So, if *A* is preferred to *B* now, a rational being, aware of the fact that the experiences will be the same irrespective of the times at which they occur, will still prefer *A* to *B* even if *A* is to come at a later date than *B*. The reason why some people prefer the nearer good to the further one, I suppose, is that they find it harder to imagine what it is like to get the good at a later time, or forget that it is *they* who after all will be enjoying the later experience. In so far they fall short of rationality.

If this suggestion is correct, then there is *one* kind of preference which is necessary for a rational being. I suspect there are many more like it.

To the second charge that there are no distinctively rational attitudes, then, my reply is that the charge seems formidable because attitudes are conceived in a logical vacuum, where everything is possible which is not self-contradictory. But, when we consider what human beings are, what choices and preferences are and what

it is to adopt them, we may see that many logical possibilities are not realized in fact.

Let us look at a third charge. This is simply that it requires to be made out why, of all the jobs the moral philosopher might undertake, the one described has paramount claim on him. Is there any reason to suppose that the most important thing the moral philosopher can do for practice is make clear which choices or preferences or attitudes are rational in the sense described? This is a question which will engage our attention later. But two points are worth our attention now.

The first reply to it is a hypothetical statement. It is that if the job of the moral philosopher is to bring facts and logic to bear in the guidance of choice to a maximal extent, then the task as outlined must be the task of the moral philosopher. For to identify a principle of action or an attitude as "rational" in our sense is to show which choices or attitudes are the ones required by reason and fact in the sense that a person who was perfectly knowledgeable and had the relevant facts vividly before him and made no logical mistakes and was in a normal frame of mind would adopt them. To show what is the rational act or attitude precisely is to bring fact and reason to bear on the practical to a maximal extent. Similarly, if we cannot identify a choice or attitude as rational for everybody, at least to show an individual how to ascertain which attitudes of his are not excluded by considerations of reason, is again to do all that can be done in the way of bringing logic and facts to bear on choice. So, granted that the job of the moral philosopher is to bring fact and logic to bear in the guidance of choices, the philosopher's job would seem to be the one stated.

A second reason why it is important for the moral philosopher to help get clear what is a rational preference in the sense explained is that a distinctive feature of knowing that a choice would be rational in this sense is that there can be no further question whether it is reasonable to make that choice. Knowing that a choice would be rational in our sense is therefore different from knowing, say, that a choice is one it is our *duty* to make; for a person can still ask whether it is reasonable to do one's duty when it conflicts, say, with self-interest. But if a man knows what he would choose if he had vividly in mind all the relevant facts about himself and the world and were in a normal frame of mind, the question whether it is rational for him to do this, at least in my sense of "rational," is devoid of all sense. Here I agree, I think, with what

W. D. Falk has often argued. It is true, of course, that a person may believe some choice is rational in this sense and at the same time wonder whether it is his *duty* to make it or even if it is not his duty *not* to make it. I shall return to the question whether this fact raises a serious problem. It is also true that a man may believe some choice is reasonable in my sense but fail to make it: the alcoholic, for instance, may believe it is not a rational thing for him to take another drink, but may still go on and take it. The alcoholic's problem, however, is about motivation, not about what is reasonable; what he needs is medical advice, or sympathy, or exhortation, not argument about what it is rational for him to do.

II

THE FOREGOING SUGGESTION about the job of moral philosophy has to be appraised in view of another and different account. The remainder of my remarks will comprise a discussion and evaluation of this other view.

This second view is that the natural starting-point of moral philosophy is the existence in ordinary language of certain terms, and the use in ordinary discourse of these terms in certain questions, all of which may be identified as "practical" terminology. There are such questions as: "What is *desirable* in itself?" "When is a . . . a *good* . . .?" "When is a course of action the *best* one to choose [from the point of view of a particular person]?" "When does a person have a *moral obligation* to do something?" "When is a situation or action *just*?" And so on. No one, of course, will deny that these are questions which people continually raise, or that they are important questions, or that they are questions which have occupied the center of the stage in much of the history of moral philosophy.

Many philosophers have thought that the main job of philosophy is the analysis of concepts, or of recurrent types of question — and that the main job of the moral philosopher in particular is the analysis of terms, and questions, like those just mentioned. Just as, they have thought, the business of the philosopher is to analyze concepts like Cause, Number, and Material Thing, so it is his business to analyze notions like Good, Right, and Responsibility.

Philosophers use the word "analyze" in more than one way. The analysis here in question is analysis in the sense of determining and describing or characterizing the *actual* meaning or use or effect of ethical words as they appear in ordinary language, not in the sense of making useful recommendations for change in meaning or use.

The purpose of such a taxonomic inquiry is often simply the satisfaction of curiosity; it is of interest to distinguish and classify all different types of terms from both semantic and pragmatic points of view — as property-ascribing, or "performative," and so on. But the purpose is often also instrumental: the analysts have hoped to pave the way for more effective moral reasoning, and have envisaged the role of the philosopher as that of the clarifying midwife who helps answer questions by helping get the questions clear. For they suppose that, once it is clear what the ordinary man's ethical questions mean, or how they should be characterized, it will already be pretty clear how one should go about answering them, what methodology one may reasonably employ in finding the answers, or how a given alleged answer may be justified. Thus they suppose that the activity of analysis of ordinary ethical language, and the results of such analysis, set the stage for and are a necessary preparation for, the activity of normative reflection, that is, proposals for the answer of these questions, with supporting reasons. Philosophers sometimes do not think it the business of the philosopher to reach or defend any answers to normative questions at all, on the ground that this activity lies outside the domain of analysis of language, which is the proper business of philosophy; but many philosophers think that, *if* one is going to try to reach and defend normative conclusions, one can proceed rationally only on the basis of conclusions about the meaning of ethical questions in ordinary discourse, and the implications for methodology laid down by these conclusions. This view I wish to question.

This view, I say, is held by many philosophers. I suppose many or most contemporary naturalists view their conclusions about the meaning of ethical terms in ordinary language as a solid base for their normative discussions. For the result of any naturalistic analysis of an ethical word like "good" is that at least one proposition connecting ethical and nonethical concepts is construed as true by definition, guaranteed by the very meaning of ethical terms in ordinary discourse. Hence the naturalist's discussion of normative questions can begin with the guarantee, say, that an act is right if it will probably maximize happiness, or would be approved by an impar-

tial, informed, and normal judge. It is not only naturalists, however, who think that reasoning in ethics has a basis of somewhat this kind, and that ethical thinking must acknowledge the epistemological priority of analysis of meanings. Obviously nonnaturalist cognitivist philosophers, like G. E. Moore, may hold that the analysis of ethical language shows that some important ethical statements are analytic, such as "An action is right if and only if it maximizes intrinsic value." But also noncognitivist philosophers, who deny that ethical words are property-ascribing, have supposed that the analysis of ordinary ethical language can give important guidance in the identification of sound ethical reasoning. Take for instance Stephen Toulmin. He denies that ethical words are property-ascribing, but he asserts as a point about English usage that a judgment is called "moral" or "ethical" only if it is used to avoid unnecessary suffering or increase deep satisfaction, in the speaker's community, by altering behavior or attitudes. This point about language forms the logical support for his conclusion that an ethical judgment is discharging its proper function only, roughly, if it can properly be taken as the logical consequence of the application of appropriate utilitarian premises to the situation. The analysis of language, then, is made to identify broadly utilitarian reasoning as sound reasoning in ethics. Much the same is true of R. M. Hare. In his recent book, *Freedom and Reason*, Hare commences with the thesis that ethical statements are to be construed roughly as imperative statements, prescriptions, addressed to everyone whose situation they may fit. "It is wrong to do *A* in circumstances *C*" means "Don't anyone in circumstances *C* ever do *A*!" From this equivalence Hare thinks we can infer how sound ethical reasoning must proceed, and to what extent and by what devices we may hope to meet the contentions of the Nazi or the segregationist. For, by the equivalence, to know whether something is wrong is to know whether one is prepared to proscribe it for everyone including one's self. Since one hardly knows whether he wants to proscribe something until he knows what it would be like for the proscription to be accepted, it is always a point relevant to the acceptance of a moral principle, what it would be like for the principle to be lived by universally. Relevant moral thinking is thus reflection on which proscriptions one wants universally accepted in view of what life would be like if they were so accepted. A moral judgment is as well justified as it can be if, in full view of what universal acceptance would be like, the speaker is

willing to issue the universal imperative which is identical in meaning with the moral judgment.

This way of looking at matters is an attractive one. In any area of discourse, if we wish to assess a given thesis, we had better first find out exactly what the thesis is, and then consider what are the grounds pro and con. Surely, it may seem, this must also be true for all value judgments. And, of course, the analysis of the meaning or use of ethical statements is something about which we ought to be able to get agreement, as much as on any subtle point of empirical science. For, despite the complications, determining the meaning or use of any sentence is essentially a scientific task, and we should expect eventually to be able to reach agreement about the matter. The analysis of ethical language, at least, is "value free," so that we can expect to get solid ground on which to work out what must be the methodology of normative ethics.

I believe, however, that the expectation that the analysis of ordinary language can thus set the stage for normative ethics is unduly optimistic, and a grave oversimplification of the facts. Most of the remainder of my remarks will be aimed at supporting this assessment of the situation.

Let me begin by considering a hypothetical example. Professor John Ladd once suggested that the central moral term of the Navaho Indians is "bahadzid," which roughly is translated as "dangerous" or "imprudent." Now suppose we became convinced that this is the only term in the Navaho language which comes anywhere close to our ethical vocabulary. Would we think that the Navaho moral philosopher could properly confine himself to determining what actions are properly called "bahadzid"? I think we should answer in the negative. We should feel that, before one can think clearly about an action being dangerous or imprudent, we first need the concepts of desirable and undesirable states of affairs, indeed of the intrinsically desirable and undesirable. Again, we would think that there should be terminology available for classifying an action as beneficial or harmful from the point of view of the whole social group, and not merely from the point of view of the agent or his family group; or perhaps there should be terminology available for classifying acts as conforming to or infringing rules the acceptance of which as binding for all members of the group would be socially beneficial. If the Navaho do not have such terms, or raise such questions, we should think: "So much the worse for them!"

This hypothetical example leads to the following question: When should a moral philosopher be satisfied with a given conceptual network for ethics, including definitions or characterizations of the main terms in the system? I suggest that the answer is *not*: when the evidence is cogent that the conceptual network represents accurately the actual moral language of the community. In contrast I suggest the following alternative: A moral philosopher should be satisfied with a conceptual framework if it enables him to raise all the questions concerning conduct and choice and preference he thinks it is important to raise and distinguish, in view of his total understanding of moral discourse, human preferences, moral attitudes, of the function of all these in personal and social living; *and* if the procedure for answering questions about how to choose or act which is implied by his definitions or characterizations as being the proper procedure is all that he thinks can be or need be done to resolve questions about practice. More briefly, I suggest that a philosopher's satisfaction with a given set of conceptual tools for practical thinking should depend on his view of the distinct types of problem which life in society poses, and of ways of reasoning to resolve these problems which he thinks possible and finds satisfying.

In saying this, I am happy to find myself in fairly near agreement with various moral philosophers. R. B. Perry, with all his obscurity about procedure in ethical theory, is a notable example. Perry said that the question is not how ethical words *are* used, for they are used confusedly, but how they are *best* used. W. K. Frankena posed the issue more clearly, in advocating that the problems of metaethics demand for their solution "‘clarity and decision’ about the nature and function of morality, of moral discourse, and of moral theory . . ."

A philosopher who denies that the task of moral philosophy is primarily getting clear about the actual meanings or uses of ethical terms in ordinary discourse need not advocate that philosophy abandon the job of midwife in the practical thinking of ordinary people. For there is more than one way of clarifying ethical discourse. One can do it by formulating explicitly what was implicit in a person's actual question. *Or* one can do it by showing that

*In "Obligation and Motivation," in A. I. Melden (editor), *Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958). On p. 80 he notes comments by other philosophers who have made suggestions along the same line, including C. L. Stevenson, P. H. Nowell-Smith, W. D. Falk, H. D. Aiken, and Philip Rice.

his actual question is better dropped in favor of another but related question, which has more point.

So far I have given no *reason* why moral philosophers should not found their normative reflections on an examination of ordinary ethical language. Why must they leave purely descriptive formulations of linguistic habits for a more reconstructive enterprise? Why must a purely descriptive account of ordinary ethical discourse fail to set the stage for ethical methodology, or normative ethics, in the way many philosophers have envisaged? Let us look at some of the problems we face, if we choose a purely descriptive analysis of ordinary language as the basis of our ethical methodology, in one of the fashions sketched above.

First, the average person uses "good" or "obligatory," in the important contexts, without a definite intended meaning in mind. People do not have a conception of what it is to be good or obligatory in the way they have a conception of what it is to be, say, a bachelor. Hence, whereas "All bachelors are unmarried" can be supported by appeal to inspection of conscious meanings, ethical first principles (except for trivial cases) cannot be.

We may concede to naturalism that there are some exceptions to this. For instance, if several persons are on a beach and looking for stones to skip, and someone calls "Here's a good one!" his utterance perhaps just means "Here's one with the properties requisite for success in the present business." But there are many contexts, and among them the most important for practical decisions, in which the intended meanings are not so clear. Suppose a person asks whether it would be a *good thing* to make certain sacrifices in order to give himself time to develop some original ideas in philosophy. Or suppose a person asks if a system of slavery must be *wrong* because unjust, even in circumstances in which a slave system would benefit the society. In such cases, it seems the ordinary person does not have *any* intended meaning close to the surface, in the way he has it for the example above; hence the intended meaning will not support a claim for the analyticity of a corresponding ethical generalization. Perhaps the usage of some persons is an exception to this judgment. Jeremy Bentham, for instance, as a result of long preaching of his utilitarian system, may have meant exactly what he said he did; for him "is wrong" may have meant just "tends not to maximize utility." But such cases are exceptional; most persons are just puzzled if asked the meaning of their ethical terms, and look to the philosopher for light on the meaning of their own ethical

questions. So when Moore says that "right action" means "action which will maximize intrinsic good" or when Hare says that "A is wrong" means "Don't anyone ever do A!" they are not proposing expressions which most persons could properly classify as synonyms on the basis of inspection of their own consciously intended meanings.

Philosophers who think that analysis of actual meanings of ethical words can set the stage for normative reasoning in one of the ways suggested may not be fazed by the above contention, even if they accept it. They may be happy to reformulate their point in terms of "implicit meanings" instead of "consciously intended meanings." They may say that what the ordinary man is doing with his ethical words is definite enough; the appearance of trouble arises only from the fact that he is unable to explain or characterize his own usage. He means something definite all right, but we must dig deeper to find it — as is true in many other areas of discourse. And we can find what he means by his terms, by noticing the way in which he conducts inquiries, and by noting what he accepts as evidence or arguments pro or con. Such observations can provide a test for hypotheses about what he means by his ethical words. Hence, even when what he means by ethical words is not obvious to him on inspection of conscious meaning, we can properly talk of his "implicit" meaning, and draw inferences about the analyticity of some ethical principles, and so on, as suggested earlier. Implicit meanings are enough.

This proposal leads to my second objection. This is that, even if we do not reject the whole concept of "implicit meanings" as dubious, the implicit meanings of ethical terms cannot function as a source for criticism of a person's ethical reflection or of his ethical principles. The reason is this. The proposal in question suggests that a theory about a person's implicit meanings is to be supported by appeal to the way in which he conducts ethical reflection, and by the ethical principles he takes for granted in his thinking. But then we cannot *correct* his modes of reflection and his ethical principles by appeal to his implicit meanings, for our judgment about his meaning is based on these. If his implicit meanings, according to our conclusion, are inconsistent with his modes of reflection or his ethical principles, what is shown is simply that our views about his meanings are unfounded. For instance, suppose G. E. Moore tried to reform a man's nonutilitarian ethical principles by appeal to his own meaning of "right." Moore would be arguing that the meaning

of "right" is "maximizes intrinsic value"; and it is true that if this is what one means by "right" it is inconsistent not to be a utilitarian. But Moore could hardly justify ascribing this meaning for "right" to the nonutilitarian, on the basis of the man's mode of ethical reflection, since *ex hypothesi* the man's ethical principles are nonutilitarian. It seems, then, that a man cannot be forced into accepting certain ethical principles or modes of reasoning by appeal to his "implicit meanings" and the necessity of being consistent. For this effect, if one cannot appeal to his consciously intended meanings at the outset, it looks as if one must first convince him that certain questions are the important questions, the ones he *wants* to raise; in other words, one must persuade him in effect to *accept* a certain construction of his original question. How might one convince him of this? In parallel cases in the philosophy of science, when we are considering how to use "explanation" or "cause," at least part of the reason for adopting a certain construction of these terms consists in reviewing the advantages of using the terms in a certain way, of showing how such a use would fit in with the total conceptual structure. Similarly in ethics: whether a person accepts a certain interpretation of his question will depend on considerations quite different from a review of his previous linguistic habits; it will depend on considerations like those already mentioned — those I said a philosopher will take into account before he is satisfied with a given conceptual framework for ethics.

Even if the two foregoing objections are unconvincing, however, there is a further difficulty for philosophers who wish to criticize ethical reasoning by appeal to the meanings of ordinary ethical words. For the meaning of these words, in whatever sense they have a meaning, must surely be supposed to differ from one speaker to another. Many philosophers have assumed that there is one single meaning or use of moral terms for important contexts, common to our speech-community. But this supposition ignores the extent to which a person's meanings are entwined with his total conceptual system. In general, as we learn or change our system of beliefs, our concepts change. Why should the same not be true for moral concepts? Take for instance the moral concepts of religious people. Suppose a religious person *says* that what it means for an action to be morally obligatory is for it to be required by God's will for us. He supports this testimony by his deeds: in order to find his duty he prays, or searches Scripture; and when he becomes convinced

that something is God's will, that thing has supreme authority in his conduct, or if it does not he attributes the fact to his moral weakness. Why should we not take him at his word and concede the relation of his moral and theological conceptions? Philosophers have a neat dialectical device, whose use goes back perhaps to Plato, to prove that religious people are mistaken in such an explanation of their moral concepts. Philosophers refute the religious man to their satisfaction merely by raising the question whether it is or isn't true *by definition* that a right action is any action that God wills. The religious man is supposed to, and almost always will, concede that this proposition is not just true by definition, not just an unimportant tautology deriving from the meaning of "right," and hence admits that his explanation of meanings was incorrect. It is not clear, however, why he must give away his case by such an answer. And if he does, the most that is proved is that he is confused, and not that his moral concepts are really identical with those of Bertrand Russell. Or to take another case, suppose an unruly school boy from the East Side tells us that for some action to be wrong is for it to be one which will get one in trouble with the law or one's father or with the school authorities. Can we really go on to prove that he has the same moral concepts as Moore and Sidgwick? It is obvious that learning the English language guarantees certain things about the use of ethical words, specifically many interrelationships of terms like "duty," "ought," and "obligation." But I suggest that on the subtler points — what it is for something to be intrinsically good or right — there may be as much disparity of concepts as there is disparity of total conceptual schemes in which moral language is embedded. By what criterion of "same concept" may we say that such diverse types of mind are expressing the same concepts by their moral words?

If I am right in this, then the moral philosopher who wishes analysis of language to set the stage for a methodology of ethics must be prepared to propose different methodologies for different people, depending on their wider conceptual schemes. It is, or may be, unwarranted to suppose that English usage commits us to one methodology for ethics.

These considerations should be enough to give pause to a philosopher who is tempted to give pride of place to the analysis of actual meanings of ethical words in his general theory of justification in ethics. But there are two other serious questions about his philosophical program.

First, these philosophers aim to use the analysis of ethical language as a device for criticizing ethical reflection, but in fact moral terms as actually used are rather blunt instruments which require to be sharpened for effective use. To be more explicit, when we reflect on the differences between various types of situation, we realize that the things which moral terms can sensibly be used to say about them are rather different. Hence, if one and the same word is to be used to make these different points, it must be capable of use in different senses in different contexts. But in fact there are no such recognized different senses of moral terms; and if one becomes clearly conscious of the different things that can sensibly be meant by them in different contexts, it is not by study of the English uses of the terms, but by the study of moral philosophy. One can master English perfectly well without learning these distinct senses at all. Moral language makes for confusion by failing to distinguish between questions that ought to be distinguished; and, as we shall see in a moment, it also sometimes confusingly labors distinctions that are without a difference. Thus moral thinking cannot be rendered more effective by appeal to the meanings of ordinary moral language; what is needed for this purpose is rather reflection about the differences between situations and noticing what can sensibly be said about the different situations.

Let me illustrate the point. Consider "wrong." Sometimes we say "It would be wrong to do that," meaning to claim that a certain possible action is forbidden by sound moral principles. Sometimes we say, "It was wrong of him to do that," meaning to condemn the agent for a past action that we think he would not have performed but for a defect of character. Now if "is wrong" is to *say* these different things, it must possess corresponding different senses; but there are not recognized distinct senses of this sort in English. There is only one sense of "wrong" recognized by dictionaries, which has to do both jobs. If we see clearly that there are two different issues here, it is not simply because we have learned English. Moral language does not separate the questions for us. Immanuel Kant presumably knew German, but he repeatedly failed to distinguish these very differences. The following argument is sometimes used by ordinary persons: "One is not acting wrongly if he sincerely thinks that what he does is his duty. Therefore if a person does what he thinks is his duty he is always doing the right thing." The existence of this argument has to be charged to the discredit of English as a tool for reflection about ethical problems.

The opposite defect, which the English language also bears, is the laboring of distinctions without a significant difference. A prime example of this is the existence of the terms "duty," "obligation," and "wrong," all capable of being employed in moral contexts, in good English. These words are not exact synonyms: at least, we may say it is wrong to commit adultery or be cruel to an animal, but it sounds queer to say that we have a moral obligation not to commit adultery or be cruel to animals, or to say that this is our moral duty. But while the associations, linguistic ties, suggestions, and flavors of these words are different, it is not clear that there is a difference of substance between what one says with one and what one says with another. Yet the differences of the words are a standing temptation to suppose that there are corresponding differences of substance. C. H. Whiteley and others, for instance, have argued that something is a duty or obligation only if one has made a contract or promise; and H. L. A. Hart has suggested that a person has a duty or obligation only when there is some other person who has a right. Now, even if these writers were correct in their accounts of what English permits us to say, we could still ask if there is some important sense in which we are free to be cruel to animals, it cruelty to animals is merely wrong but there is no obligation to refrain from it? It is hard to see that the difference of terminology makes any important point, or that it does anything but obscure the moral similarity of the cases.

If one turns to such words as "just" and "justice" one hardly knows whether to say that language has added a superfluous term which confuses matters by seeming to point to differences where there are none, or to complain that there is only one set of terms for covering a great many different situations which ought to be sharply distinguished. Either way, it is doubtful whether attention to the actual use of these terms will take us far toward making the conceptual distinctions it is important to make.

Obviously, then, in many contexts the analysis of ordinary moral language can be of little help in criticizing moral principles and reasoning, because the English language itself needs reform before it is an efficient tool for clear moral thinking.

There is a final reason why it is questionable whether a philosopher should begin with an analysis of actual meanings, and then proceed to develop a corresponding methodology for ascertaining whether terms like "good" and "right" apply. This reason is simply the fact that we are not bound to accept the view that the ultimate

aim of normative reasoning, or of moral philosophy, is to identify the situations in which moral terms in their ordinary senses are properly applied — in other words, to answer exactly the questions people raise in ordinary moral language. In other words, it is doubtful whether there is *any point* in knowing whether “good” or “right” in their ordinary senses apply to action or choice, *provided* these terms turn out to refer to something quite different from “rational” choice or preference in the sense described earlier. Why is this?

At an earlier stage I pointed out that a “rational” choice or preference in my sense is one that would occur if one were fully and vividly aware of all the relevant available facts about the world and one’s self, and were in a normal frame of mind. A choice or preference so made, I suggested, has been guided by the facts to the full extent.

It is clear that we have a choice as moral philosophers: whether to recommend that a person make the best choice in the ordinary sense of “best,” or the rational choice in my sense of “rational”; and whether to urge, say, that a person do what is morally obligatory in the ordinary sense of that phrase, or do what conforms, say, with the rules he would want written in the consciences of men if he were rational in my sense.

Consider an example. Suppose I prefer to hear one orchestra program rather than another, in the situation that I know whatever facts might affect my preferences; my preference is then rational in my sense. But suppose someone claims that the opposite preference would be better. Perhaps this could not be shown; but since it is an empirical question how “better” is actually used as applied to such choice, it is logically possible that the opposite preference is the better one in the ordinary sense. The question then arises why one must recommend the preference that is “better.” Is the fact that it is better a reason for adopting it? The fact that it would be better could not be a new empirical fact that would tend to move my preference in a certain way, for our definition of a “rational” preference requires that it already have been formed in full view of *all* the relevant empirical facts, including whatever empirical fact is meant by “the other being better.” One might, of course, say that some nonnatural fact is in question; but since it is not clear what kind of fact such a nonnatural fact might be, I shall ignore this possibility. I concede that perhaps it is tautologously true that it would be better to follow the better preference rather than the ra-

tional one if there is conflict; but this, if true, only re-raises the initial question, why one should take an interest in the better rather than the more rational. It is also true that the expression "is the best thing" may have *de facto* authority over conduct in the sense that when we decide that something is "best" in the ordinary sense, our conditioned responses to the phrasing may be such that we incline to do the thing that we have judged best. It may well be that our conditioned responses are firmer and more favorable to "is the best thing" than to "is the rational thing" especially when explicitly understood in my sense. But it would be absurd for a person to guide his conduct not by the facts but by the *words* which may properly be applied to it. My conclusion is that a more rational choice, in my sense, cannot in good reason take second place to a choice which is better in the ordinary sense, if there should be a conflict between the two.

Much the same may be said for conduct which is properly called "morally obligatory" as contrasted, say, with conduct which would be required by the rules of a society which a rational person, in my sense, might want for his society.

Once such questions are raised, it is clear that there is a difficult question to be answered, before we must assume that the job of the moral philosopher is to begin with the analysis of ordinary ethical words with the aim of determining to what things these words can properly be applied in their ordinary senses.

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The foregoing queries about making the analysis of the actual meaning or use of ethical terms central in the enterprise of clarifying the justification of attitudes and choices, and the methodology for ethics, are not intended to deny importance to the examination of the meanings of ethical words. Indeed, there is a sense in which the actual use of ordinary language is a test for the adequacy of any framework of concepts we might propose for ethics. For if we found, after we had become accustomed to use a set of concepts, that we still wanted to ask and answer questions framed in the terminology of ordinary language in its old sense, there would be reason to think that something was wrong with the proposed structure, and that modifications were in order. We can accept a point once made by Stevenson: if the philosopher has an adequate conceptual scheme there should be no need for relapsing into the use of ethical terms in some other and more familiar sense.

My critical remarks about the limitations of the place of analysis of actual meanings are also, very probably, more applicable to a theory of what philosophers ought to be doing than to their actual practice. Philosophers hardly ever make any inquiries of an empirical sort into ordinary usage. The philosopher who says he is analyzing "ordinary language" in ethics is usually doing something more interesting than he describes it as being. In the first place, he is introspecting to determine his *own* usage — and his own usage has already been fumigated by what he knows about blind alleys in philosophy, and suffused by much general knowledge, as well as by awareness of many problems of which the ordinary man is ignorant. The philosopher's own usage is apt to reflect his own conclusions about what questions can usefully be raised or answered in the realm of practice. Moreover, his definitions are likely to present an orderly conceptual framework in which distinctions are made which he knows to be necessary, and which reflect a salutary preoccupation with philosophical psychology. So, in various ways, the practice of metaethical inquiry is apt to incorporate many of the reforms I have been suggesting. But it seems worth while to recognize what metaethical inquiries should be, and to confess to ourselves that what they should be is something less simple than just a clarifying description of what ordinary questions mean.

The E. H. Lindley Memorial Lectureship Fund was established in 1941 in memory of Ernest H. Lindley, Chancellor of the University of Kansas from 1920 to 1939. In February 1941 Mr. Roy Roberts, the chairman of the committee in charge, wrote in the *Graduate Magazine*:

The Lindley Memorial Lectureship Fund will be administered by the Endowment Association. Each year it is proposed that the Chancellor should invite to the University for a lecture or a series of lectures, some outstanding national or world figure to speak on "Values of Living" — just as the late Chancellor proposed to do in his courses "The Human Situation" and "Plan for Living."

In the following June Mr. Roberts circulated a letter on behalf of the Committee, proposing a somewhat broader plan for the lectureship:

The income from this fund would be spent in a quest for social betterment by bringing to the University each year outstanding world leaders for a lecture or series of lectures, yet with a design so broad in its outline that in the years to come, if it is deemed wise, this living memorial could take some more desirable form.

The fund was allowed to accumulate until 1954, when Professor Richard McKeon lectured on "Human Rights and International Relations." He was followed a few years later by Professor Everett Hughes. The selection of lecturers, has been delegated to the Department of Philosophy, which has chosen to adopt the flexible policy proposed in Mr. Roberts' letter, without forgetting the more explicit commitments suggested in his original article.

The lectures for 1961 and 1962 have been published, and may be obtained from the Department of Philosophy at a price of fifty cents each. The proceeds from the sale have been devoted to the purchase of book prizes for outstanding students in introductory courses offered by the Department.

1961. "The Idea of Man — An Outline of Philosophical Anthropology."
By José Ferrater Mora, Professor of Philosophy, Bryn Mawr College.
1962. "Changes in Events and Changes in Things."
By A. N. Prior, Professor of Philosophy, University of Manchester.