



Ethics and the Limits
of Philosophy

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CHAPTER 1



Socrates' Question

IT IS NOT a trivial question, Socrates said: what we are talking about is how one should live. Or so Plato reports him, in one of the first books written about this subject.¹ Plato thought that philosophy could answer the question. Like Socrates, he hoped that one could direct one's life, if necessary redirect it, through an understanding that was distinctively philosophical—that is to say, general and abstract, rationally reflective, and concerned with what can be known through different kinds of inquiry.

The aims of moral philosophy, and any hopes it may have of being worth serious attention, are bound up with the fate of Socrates' question, even if it is not true that philosophy, itself, can reasonably hope to answer it. With regard to that hope, there are two things to be mentioned here at the outset. One is particularly to be remembered by the writer—how large a claim he is making if he says that a particular kind of abstract, argumentative writing should be worth serious attention when these large questions are at issue. There are other books that bear on the question—almost all books, come to that, which are any good and which are concerned with human life at all. That is a point for the philosophical writer even if he does not think his relation to Socrates' question lies in trying to answer it.

The other initial point is one for the reader. It would be a serious thing if philosophy could answer the question. How could it be that a *subject*, something studied in universities (but not only

there), something for which there is a large technical literature, could deliver what one might recognize as an answer to the basic questions of life? It is hard to see how this could be so, unless, as Socrates believed, the answer were one that the reader would recognize as one he might have given himself. But how could this be? And how would this be related to the existence of the subject? For Socrates, there was no such subject; he just talked with his friends in a plain way, and the writers he referred to (at least with any respect) were the poets. But within one generation Plato had linked the study of moral philosophy to difficult mathematical disciplines, and after two generations there were treatises on the subject—in particular, Aristotle's *Ethics*, still one of the most illuminating.²

Some philosophers would like to be able to go back now to Socrates' position and to start again, reflectively questioning common sense and our moral or ethical concerns, without the weight of texts and a tradition of philosophical study. There is something to be said for this, and in this book I shall try to follow it to the extent of pursuing an inquiry and hoping to involve the reader in it. At another level, however, it is baseless to suppose that one can or should try to get away from the practices of the subject. What makes an inquiry a philosophical one is reflective generality and a style of argument that claims to be rationally persuasive. It would be silly to forget that many acute and reflective people have already labored at formulating and discussing these questions. Moral philosophy has the problems it has because of its history and its present practices. Moreover, it is important that there is a tradition of activity, some of it technical, in other parts of philosophy, such as logic, the theory of meaning, and the philosophy of mind. While few of them outside mathematical logic provide "results," there is certainly a lot to be known about the state of the subject, and some of it bears significantly on moral philosophy.

There is another reason for not forgetting that we exist now and not in Socrates' condition. For him and for Plato it was a special feature of philosophy that it was reflective and stood back from ordinary practice and argument to define and criticize the attitudes involved in them. But modern life is so pervasively reflective, and a high degree of self-consciousness is so basic to its institutions, that

these qualities cannot be what mainly distinguishes philosophy from other activities—from law, for instance, which is increasingly conscious of itself as a social creation; or medicine, forced to understand itself as at once care, business, and applied science; to say nothing of fiction, which even in its more popular forms needs to be conscious of its fictionality. Philosophy in the modern world cannot make any special claim to reflectiveness, though it may be able to make a special use of it.

This book will try to give some idea of the most important developments in moral philosophy, but it will proceed by way of an inquiry into its problems, in those directions that seem to me most interesting. I hope that the accounts of other people's work will be accurate, but they will assuredly be selective. It is not merely that my account of the subject will be different from one given by someone else (that must presumably be so if the book is worth reading at all), nor is it a question of how representative it will be, but rather that I shall not be concerned all the time to say how representative it is. There is one respect, at least, in which this book is not representative of ways in which the subject is for the most part now conducted, at least in the English-speaking world. It is more skeptical than much of that philosophy about what the powers of philosophy are, and it is also more skeptical about morality.

What the aims of moral philosophy should be depends on its own results. Because its inquiries are indeed reflective and general, and concerned with what can be known, they must try to give an account of what would have to go into answering Socrates' question: what part might be played by knowledge of the sciences; how far purely rational inquiry can take us; how far the answer to the question might be expected to be different if it is asked in one society rather than another; how much, at the end of all that, must be left to personal decision. Philosophical reflection thus has to consider what is involved in answering this, or any other less general, practical question, and to ask what powers of the mind and what forms of knowledge might be called upon by it. One thing that has to be considered in this process is the place of philosophy itself.

There might seem to be a circle in this: philosophy, in asking

how Socrates' question might be answered, determines its own place in answering it. It is not a circle but a progression. Philosophy starts from questions that, on any view of it, it can and should ask, about the chances we have of finding out how best to live; in the course of that, it comes to see how much it itself may help, with discursive methods of analysis and argument, critical discontent, and an imaginative comparison of possibilities, which are what it most characteristically tries to add to our ordinary resources of historical and personal knowledge.

Socrates' question is the best place for moral philosophy to start. It is better than "what is our duty?" or "how may we be good?" or even "how can we be happy?" Each of these questions takes too much for granted, although not everyone will agree about what that is. In the case of the last question, some people, such as those who want to start with the first question, will think that it starts in the wrong place, by ignoring the distinctive issues of morality; others may simply find it rather optimistic. Socrates' question is neutral on those issues, and on many others. It would be wrong, however, to think that it takes nothing for granted. The first thing we should do is to ask what is involved in Socrates' question, and how much we are presupposing if we assume that it can be usefully asked at all.

"How should one live?" — the generality of *one* already stakes a claim. The Greek language does not even give us *one*: the formula is impersonal. The implication is that something relevant or useful can be said to anyone, in general, and this implies that something general can be said, something that embraces or shapes the individual ambitions each person may bring to the question "how should I live?" (A larger implication can easily be found in this generality: that the question naturally leads us out of the concerns of the ego altogether. We shall come back to this later.) This is one way in which Socrates' question goes beyond the everyday "what shall I do?" Another is that it is not immediate; it is not about what I should do now, or next. It is about a manner of life. The Greeks themselves were much impressed by the idea that such a question must, consequently, be about a whole life and that a good way of

living had to issue in what, at its end, would be seen to have been a good life. Impressed by the power of fortune to wreck what looked like the best-shaped life, some of them, Socrates one of the first, sought a rational design of life which would reduce the power of fortune and would be to the greatest possible extent luck-free.³ This has been, in different forms, an aim of later thought as well. The idea that one must think, at this very general level, about a *whole life* may seem less compelling to some of us than it did to Socrates. But his question still does press a demand for reflection on one's life as a *whole*, from every aspect and all the way down, even if we do not place as much weight as the Greeks did on how it may end.

The impersonal Greek phrase translated as *one should* is not only silent about the person whose life is in question. It is also entirely noncommittal, and very fruitfully so, about the kinds of consideration to be applied to the question. "How should I live?" does not mean "what life morally ought I to live?"; this is why Socrates' question is a starting point different from those other questions I mentioned, about duty or about a life in which one would be good. It may be the same as a question about the good life, a life worth living, but that notion in itself does not bring in any distinctively moral claims. It may turn out, as Socrates believed and most of us still hope, that a good life is also the life of a good person (*must be* is what Socrates believed; *can be* is what most of us hope). But, if so, that will come out later. *Should* is simply *should* and, in itself, is no different in this very general question from what it is in any casual question, "what should I do now?"

Some philosophers have supposed that we cannot start from this general or indeterminate kind of practical question, because questions such as "what should I do?", "what is the best way for me to live?", and so on, are *ambiguous* and sustain both a moral and a nonmoral sense. On this view, the first thing one would have to do with the question is to decide which of these two different kinds of thing it meant, and until then one could not even start to answer it. That is a mistake. The analysis of meanings does not require "moral" and "nonmoral" as categories of meaning. Of course, if someone says of another "he is a good man," we can ask whether the speaker means that he is morally good, as contrasted, for in-

stance, with meaning that he is a good man to take on a military sortie — but the fact that one can give these various interpretations no more yields a moral sense of “good” or of “good man” than it does a military sense (or a football sense, etc.).

One can of course ask, on a given occasion, “what should I do from an ethical point of view?” or “what should I do from a self-interested point of view?” These ask for the results of subdeliberations, and invite one to review a particular type of consideration among those that bear on the question and to think what the considerations of that type, taken by themselves, support. In the same way, I can ask what I should do taking only economic or political or family considerations into account. At the end of all that, there is the question “what should I do, all things considered?” There is only one kind of question to be asked about what to do, of which Socrates’ is a very general example, and moral considerations are one kind of consideration that bear on answering it.⁴

Here and earlier I have mentioned “moral” considerations, using that word in a general way, which corresponds to what is, irremovably, one name for the subject: moral philosophy. But there is another name for the subject, “ethics,” and corresponding to that is the notion of an ethical consideration. By origin, the difference between the two terms is that between Latin and Greek, each relating to a word meaning *disposition* or *custom*. One difference is that the Latin term from which “moral” comes emphasizes rather more the sense of social expectation, while the Greek favors that of individual character. But the word “morality” has by now taken on a more distinctive content, and I am going to suggest that morality should be understood as a particular development of the ethical, one that has a special significance in modern Western culture. It peculiarly emphasizes certain ethical notions rather than others, developing in particular a special notion of obligation, and it has some peculiar presuppositions. In view of these features it is also, I believe, something we should treat with a special skepticism. From now on, therefore, I shall for the most part use “ethical” as the broad term to stand for what this subject is certainly about, and “moral” and “morality” for the narrower system, the peculiarities of which will concern us later on.

I shall not try to define what exactly counts as an ethical consideration, but I shall say something about what goes into the notion of the ethical. It does no harm that the notion is vague. It is in fact *morality*, the special system, that demands a sharp boundary for itself (in demanding “moral” and “nonmoral” senses for words, for instance). This is a function of its special presuppositions. Without them, we can admit that there is a range of considerations that falls under the notion of the ethical, and we can also see why the range is not clearly delimited.

One thing that falls within its range is the notion of an obligation. A rather varied set of considerations is ordinarily counted as obligations, and I shall take up later (in Chapter 10) the question of why this should be so. One familiar kind is the obligation that one can put oneself under, in particular by making a promise. There is also the idea of a duty. The most familiar use of that word nowadays may be in narrow institutional connections, as when there is a list or roster of duties. Going beyond that, duties have characteristically been connected with a role, position, or relationship, such as those that follow from one’s “station,” as Bradley called it in the title of a famous essay.⁵ In a case such as the duties of a job, the job may have been acquired voluntarily, but in general duties, and most obligations other than those of promises, are not acquired voluntarily.

In the thought of Kant and of others influenced by him, all genuinely moral considerations rest, ultimately and at a deep level, in the agent’s will. I cannot simply be *required* by my position in a social structure — by the fact that I am a particular person’s child, for instance — to act in a certain way, if that *required* is to be of the moral kind, and does not simply reflect a psychological compulsion or social and legal sanctions. To act morally is to act autonomously, not as the result of social pressure. This mirrors some of the characteristic concerns of the subsystem morality. As against that, it has been in every society a recognizable ethical thought, and remains so in ours, that one can be under a requirement of this kind simply because of who one is and of one’s social situation. It may be a kind of consideration that some people in Western societies now would not want to accept, but it has been accepted by almost everyone in the past, and there is no necessity in the demand that

every requirement of this kind must, under rational scrutiny, be either abandoned or converted into a voluntary commitment. Such a demand is, like other distinctive features of morality, closely related to processes of modernization: it represents an understanding in ethical terms of the process that in the world of legal relations Maine called the change from status to contract. It corresponds also to a changing conception of the self that enters into ethical relations.⁶

Obligation and duty look backwards, or at least sideways. The acts they require, supposing that one is deliberating about what to do, lie in the future, but the reasons for those acts lie in the fact that I have already promised, the job I have undertaken, the position I am already in. Another kind of ethical consideration looks forward, to the outcomes of the acts open to me. "It will be for the best" may be taken as the general form of this kind of consideration. In one way of taking this, specially important in philosophical theory, *the best* is measured by the degree to which people get what they want, are made happy, or some similar consideration. This is the area of welfarism or utilitarianism (I shall discuss such theories in Chapters 5 and 6). But that is only one version. G. E. Moore also thought that the forward-looking type of consideration was fundamental, but he allowed things other than satisfaction—such as friendship and the awareness of beauty—to count among the good consequences. It was because of this that his theory was so attractive to the Bloomsbury group: it managed to reject at once the stuffiness of duty and the vulgarity of utilitarianism.

There is another kind of ethical consideration, which presents an action as being of some ethically relevant kind. There is a wide range of ethical characteristics of actions under which they may be chosen or, again, refused. A particular action may be refused because it would be theft or murder, for instance, or deceitful or dishonorable, or, less dramatically, because it would let someone down. These descriptions—and there are many of them—operate at different levels; thus an action can be dishonorable because it is deceitful.

Closely connected with these descriptions, under which actions may be chosen or rejected, are various virtues, a virtue being a

disposition of character to choose or reject actions because they are of a certain ethically relevant kind. The word "virtue" has for the most part acquired comic or otherwise undesirable associations, and few now use it except philosophers, but there is no other word that serves as well, and it has to be used in moral philosophy. One might hope that, with its proper meaning reestablished, it will come back into respectable use. In that proper use, meaning an ethically admirable disposition of character, it covers a broad class of characteristics, and, as so often in these subjects, the boundary of that class is not sharp and does not need to be made sharp. Some desirable personal characteristics certainly do not count as virtues, such as being sexually attractive. That can be a matter of character (some people have a sexually attractive character), but it does not have to be and it does not rate as a virtue, any more than having perfect pitch does. Again, virtues are always more than mere skills, since they involve characteristic patterns of desire and motivation. One can be a good pianist and have no desire to play, but if one is generous or fair-minded, those qualities themselves help to determine, in the right contexts, what one will want to do.

This is not to say that virtues can never be misused. One kind of virtue that can evidently be misused is the so-called executive virtues, which do not so much involve objectives of their own as assist in realizing other objectives—courage, for instance, or self-control. These are nevertheless virtues, being traits of character, and they are not related to pursuing other objectives as the mere possession of a skill is. According to Socrates, the virtues cannot be misused, and indeed he held something even stronger, that it is impossible for people, because they have a certain virtue, to act worse than if they did not have it. This led him, consistently, to believe that there is basically only one virtue, the power of right judgment. We need not follow him in that. More important, we should not follow him in what motivates those ideas, which is the search for something in an individual's life that can be *uniquely* good, good under all possible circumstances. That search has its modern expressions as well, and we shall encounter one of them in the special preoccupations of morality.

The notion of a virtue is a traditional one in moral philosophy,

but it fell out of discussion for some time. In recent work, several writers have rightly emphasised its importance.⁷ If one has a certain virtue, then that affects how one deliberates. We need to be clear, however, about the ways in which it can affect the deliberation. An important point is that the virtue-term itself usually does not occur in the content of the deliberation. Someone who has a particular virtue does actions because they fall under certain descriptions and avoids others because they fall under other descriptions. That person is described in terms of the virtue, and so are his or her actions: thus he or she is a just or courageous person who does just or courageous things. But—and this is the point—it is rarely the case that the description that applies to the agent and to the action is the same as that in terms of which the agent chooses the action. “Just” is indeed such a case, one of the few, and a just or fair person is one who chooses actions because they are just and rejects others because they are unjust or unfair. But a courageous person does not typically choose acts as being courageous, and it is a notorious truth that a modest person does not act under the title of modesty. The benevolent or kindhearted person does benevolent things, but does them under other descriptions, such as “she needs it,” “it will cheer him up,” “it will stop the pain.” The description of the virtue is not itself the description that appears in the consideration. Moreover, there is typically no one ethical concept that characterizes the deliberations of a person who has a particular virtue. Rather, if an agent has a particular virtue, then certain ranges of fact become ethical considerations for that agent because he or she has that virtue. The road from the ethical considerations that weigh with a virtuous person to the description of the virtue itself is a tortuous one, and it is both defined and pitied by the impact of self-consciousness.

That same impact, in fact, may have contributed to making the virtues unpopular as an ethical conception. Their discussion used to make much of the *cultivation* of the virtues. In third-personal form, that exercise, if not under that title, is very familiar: it forms a good part of socialization or moral education or, come to that, education. As a first-personal exercise, however, the cultivation of the virtues has something suspect about it, of priggishness or self-deception. It is not simply that to think in this way is to think about

oneself rather than about the world and other people. Some ethical thought, particularly if it is self-critical, will of course do that. More than one writer has recently stressed the importance of our capacity to have second-order desires—desires to have certain desires⁸—and its significance for ethical reflection and the practical consciousness. Deliberation toward satisfying those second-order desires must be in a special degree directed toward the self. The trouble with cultivating the virtues, if it is seen as a first-personal and deliberative exercise, is rather that your thought is not self-directed enough. Thinking about your possible states in terms of the virtues is not so much to think about your actions, and it is not distinctively to think about the terms in which you could or should think about your actions: it is rather to think about the way in which others might describe or comment on the way in which you think about your actions, and if that represents the essential content of your deliberations, it really does seem a misdirection of the ethical attention. The lesson of all this, however, is not that the virtues are not an important ethical concept. It is rather that the importance of an ethical concept need not lie in its being itself an element of first-personal deliberation. The deliberations of people who are generous or brave, and also the deliberations of people who are trying to be more generous or braver, are different from the deliberations of those who are not like that, but the difference does not mainly lie in their thinking about themselves in terms of generosity or courage.

These, then, are some kinds of ethical concepts and considerations. What sorts of considerations bear on action but are *not* ethical considerations? There is one very obvious candidate, the considerations of egoism, those that relate merely to the comfort, excitement, self-esteem, power, or other advantage of the agent. The contrast between these considerations and the ethical is a platitude, and is grounded in obviously reasonable ideas about what ethical practices are for, the role they play in human societies. Yet even here distinctions need to be made. One is only a verbal point. We are concerned with Socrates' question “how should one live?” and egoism, in the unvarnished and baldly self-interested sense, is at any rate an intelligible answer to that, even though most of us may be

disposed to reject it. It is possible to use the word "ethical" of any scheme for living that would provide an intelligible answer to Socrates' question. In that sense, even the baldest egoism would be an ethical option. I do not think we should follow that use. However vague it may initially be, we have a conception of the ethical that understandably relates to us and our actions the demands, needs, claims, desires, and, generally, the lives of other people, and it is helpful to preserve this conception in what we are prepared to call an ethical consideration.

Egoism can, however, take a step farther than it takes in its baldest form. There is a theory of how we should act which has been called, confusingly enough, *ethical egoism*. This claims that each person ought to pursue his or her own self-interest. This differs from bald egoism because it is a reflective position and takes a general view about people's interests. Whether we call it an ethical system, as it calls itself, does not really matter very much. The important question is how it contributes to the idea of an ethical *consideration*. At first sight it seems to make no contribution to that, since it says that each of us ought to act on nonethical considerations. If it simply says that, it merely seems dogmatic: if people in fact act on considerations other than self-interest, what shows that they are irrational to do so? What this view is more likely to do, in fact, is to *leave open* the role of ethical considerations, and to ask how a life that involves acting on those considerations is related to self-interest.

There is another view, which looks much the same as the last but is different. It also claims something general, saying that *what ought to happen* is that everyone pursue his or her own interest. This view is likely to have an unstable effect on the considerations that one takes into account in acting. It may introduce a consideration that is ethical in the ordinary sense. If I believe that what ought to happen is that people pursue their own interest, then one thing I may have reason to do is to promote that state of affairs, and this may involve my giving a helping hand to others in adopting that policy. Such a line of action may well conflict with my simply pursuing my own self-interest.

In fact, it is quite difficult to sustain the bare belief that what

ought to happen is that people pursue their own interest. It is more natural to support this with another consideration, that it is *for the best* if everyone does that. This may take the form of saying such things as that attempts to be kind to others merely confuse the issue. Someone who argues like this (and believes it) actually accepts some other ethical considerations as well, for instance that it is a good thing if people get what they want, and believes in addition that the best way for as many people as possible to get as much as possible of what they want is that each person should pursue what he or she wants. This is, of course, what advocates of *laissez-faire* capitalism used to claim in the early nineteenth century. Some even claim it in the late twentieth century, in the face of the obvious fact that all economic systems depend on people in society having dispositions that extend beyond self-interest. Perhaps this contradiction helps to explain why some advocates of *laissez-faire* tend to give moralizing lectures, not only to people who are failing to pursue their own interest but to people who are.

We are contrasting ethical and egoistic considerations. But might not somebody want someone else's happiness? Of course. Then would not egoism, my pursuit of what I want, coincide with what is supposed to be an ethical type of consideration, the concern for someone else's happiness? Again yes, but it is not very interesting unless in some more general and systematic way egoistic and ethical considerations come together. That is a question we shall come to when we consider foundations in Chapter 3.

From all this it will be seen that the idea of the ethical, even though it is vague, has some content to it; it is not a purely formal notion. One illustration of this lies in a different kind of nonethical consideration, which might be called the *counterethical*. Counterethical motivations, a significant human phenomenon, come in various forms, shaped by their positive counterparts in the ethical. Malevolence, the most familiar motive of this kind, is often associated with the agent's pleasure, and that is usually believed to be its natural state; but there exists a pure and selfless malevolence as well, a malice transcending even the agent's need to be around to enjoy the harm that it wills. It differs from counterjustice, a whimsical delight in unfairness. That is heavily parasitic on its ethical

counterpart, in the sense that a careful determination of the just is needed first, to give it direction. With malevolence it is not quite like that. It is not that benevolence has to do its work before malevolence has anything to go on, but rather that each uses the same perceptions and moves from them in different directions. (This is why, as Nietzsche remarked, cruelty needs to share the sensibility of the sympathetic, while brutality needs not to.) Other counterethical motivations, again, are parasitic on the reputation or emotional self-image of the ethical rather than on its conclusions. This, as one would expect, can particularly involve the virtues. That an action would be cowardly is not often found by an agent to be a consideration in its favor, but it could be, and in a counterethical way, ministering to a masochism of shame.

I have touched on considerations of egoism and on considerations that go outside the self—of benevolence, for instance, or fairness. But there is a question that has proved very important to ethics of how far outside the self such considerations should range. Will it count as an ethical consideration if you consider the interests and needs only of your family or of your community or of the nation? Certainly such local loyalties have provided the fabric of people's lives and the forum, it seems right to say, of ethical life. However, there are some ethical demands that seem to be satisfied only by a universal concern, one that extends to all human beings and perhaps beyond the human race. This concern is particularly cultivated by the subsystem morality, to the extent that it is often thought that no concern is truly moral unless it is marked by this universality.

For morality, the ethical constituency is always the same: the universal constituency. An allegiance to a smaller group, the loyalties to family or country, would have to be justified from the outside inward, by an argument that explained how it was a good thing that people should have allegiances that were less than universal. (I shall consider in Chapters 5 and 6 the motives and perils of this kind of approach; and also different accounts that have been given of what the universal constituency is.) At a more everyday level (a less reflective one, the moral critic would say), the location of the ethical can move from one side to another of a given contrast.

Relative to my personal interest, the interests of the town or the nation can represent an ethical demand, but the interests of the town can count as self-interested if the demand comes from some larger identification. This is simply because the requirements of benevolence or fairness may always stake a claim against self-interest; *we* can represent a self-interest as much as *I*, and who *we* are depends on the extent of identification in a particular case, and on the boundaries of contrast.

I have mentioned several sorts of ethical consideration, and more than one kind of nonethical. Philosophy has traditionally shown a desire to reduce this diversity, on both sides of the divide. It has tended, first of all, to see all nonethical considerations as reducible to egoism, the narrowest form of self-interest. Indeed some philosophers have wanted to reduce that to one special kind of egoistic concern, the pursuit of pleasure. Kant, in particular, believed that every action not done from moral principle was done for the agent's pleasure. This needs to be distinguished from another idea, that all actions, including those done for ethical reasons, are equally motivated by the pursuit of pleasure. This theory, psychological hedonism, finds it hard to avoid being either obviously false or else trivially vacuous, as it becomes if it simply identifies with the agent's expected pleasure anything that the agent intentionally does. But in any case this theory makes no special contribution to a distinction between the ethical and the nonethical. If there were any true and interesting version of psychological hedonism, those actions that had nonethical motivations would not necessarily form any special class of pleasure-seeking activity. Kant's view, on the other hand, does contribute to the question, by holding that moral action is uniquely exempted from psychological hedonism; that view is certainly wrong.⁹ If we are not influenced by such a theory, we can accept the obvious truth that there are different sorts of nonethical motivation—and, moreover, that there is more than one kind of motivation acting against ethical considerations.¹⁰

The desire to reduce all nonethical considerations to one type is less strong in philosophy now than it was when moral philosophy chiefly concentrated not so much on questions of what is the right

thing to do and what is the good life (the answers to such questions were thought to be obvious), but rather on how one was to be motivated to pursue those things, against the motivations of selfishness and pleasure. The desire to reduce all *ethical* considerations to one pattern is, on the other hand, as strong as ever, and various theories try to show that one or another type of ethical consideration is basic, with other types to be explained in terms of it. Some take as basic a notion of obligation or duty, and the fact that we count it as an ethical consideration, for instance, that a certain act will probably lead to the best consequences is explained in terms of our having one duty, among others, to bring about the best consequences. Theories of this kind are called “deontological.” (This term is sometimes said to come from the ancient Greek word for duty. There is no ancient Greek word for duty: it comes from the Greek for what one *must* do.)

Contrasted with these are theories that take as primary the idea of producing the best possible state of affairs. Theories of this kind are often called “teleological.” The most important example is that which identifies the goodness of outcomes in terms of people’s happiness or their getting what they want or prefer. This, as I have already said, is called utilitarianism, though that term has also been used, for instance by Moore, for the more general notion of a teleological system.¹¹ Some of these reductive theories merely tell us what is rational, or again most true to our ethical experience, to treat as the fundamental notion. Others are bolder and claim that these relations are to be discovered in the meanings of what we say. Thus Moore claimed that “right” simply meant “productive of the greatest good.”¹² Moore’s philosophy is marked by an affectation of modest caution, which clogged his prose with qualifications but rarely restrained him from wild error, and this, as a claim about what the words mean, is simply untrue. More generally, if theories of this kind are offered descriptively, as accounts of what we actually take to be equivalent, they are all equally misguided. We use a variety of different ethical considerations, which are genuinely different from one another, and this is what one would expect to find, if only because we are heirs to a long and complex ethical tradition, with many different religious and other social strands.

As an enterprise that intends to be descriptive, like anthropol-

ogy, the reductive undertaking is merely wrongheaded. It may have other aims, however. It may, at some deeper level, seek to give us a theory of the subject matter of ethics. But it is not clear why that aim, either, must encourage us to reduce our basic ethical conceptions. If there is such a thing as the truth about the subject matter of ethics — the truth, we might say, about the ethical — why is there any expectation that it should be simple? In particular, why should it be conceptually simple, using only one or two ethical concepts, such as *duty* or *good state of affairs*, rather than many? Perhaps we need as many concepts to describe it as we find we need, and no fewer.

The point of trying to reduce our ethical concepts must be found in a different aim of ethical theory, which is not just to describe how we think about the ethical but to tell us how we should think about it. Later I shall argue that philosophy should not try to produce ethical theory, though this does not mean that philosophy cannot offer any critique of ethical beliefs and ideas. I shall claim that in ethics the reductive enterprise has no justification and should disappear. My point here, however, is merely to stress that the enterprise needs justifying. A good deal of moral philosophy engages unblinkingly in this activity, for no obvious reason except that it has been going on for a long time.

There is one motive for reductivism that does not operate simply on the ethical, or on the nonethical, but tends to reduce every consideration to one basic kind. This rests on an assumption about rationality, to the effect that two considerations cannot be rationally weighed against each other unless there is a common consideration in terms of which they can be compared. This assumption is at once very powerful and utterly baseless. Quite apart from the ethical, aesthetic considerations can be weighed against economic ones (for instance) without being an application of them, and without their both being an example of a third kind of consideration. Politicians know that political considerations are not all made out of the same material as considerations against which they are weighed; even different political considerations can be made out of different material. If one compares one job, holiday, or companion with another, judgment does not need a particular set of weights.

This is not merely a matter of intellectual error. If it were that, it

could not survive the fact that people's experience contradicts it, that they regularly arrive at conclusions they regard as rational, or at least as reasonable, without using one currency of comparison. The drive toward a *rationalistic conception of rationality* comes instead from social features of the modern world, which impose on personal deliberation and on the idea of practical reason itself a model drawn from a particular understanding of public rationality. This understanding requires in principle every decision to be based on grounds that can be discursively explained. The requirement is not in fact met, and it probably does little for the aim that authority should be genuinely answerable. But it is an influential ideal and, by a reversal of the order of causes, it can look as if it were the result of applying to the public world an independent ideal of rationality. As an ideal, we shall see more of it later.¹³

Let us go back to Socrates' question. It is a particularly ambitious example of a personal practical question. The most immediate and uncomplicated question of that sort, by contrast, is "what am I to do?" or "what shall I do?" The various ethical and nonethical considerations we have been discussing contribute to answering such a question. Its answer, the conclusion of the deliberation, is of the form "I shall do . . ." or "what I am going to do is . . ." — and that is an expression of intention, an intention I have formed as a result of my deliberation. When it comes to the moment of action, it may be that I shall fail to carry it out, but then that will have to be because I have forgotten it, or been prevented, or have changed my mind, or because (as I may come to see) I never really meant it — it was not the real conclusion of my deliberation, or it was not a real deliberation. When the time for action is immediate, there is less room for these alternatives, so it is paradoxical if I come out with an answer of this kind and immediately fail to do what I said I was immediately going to do.

The question "what should I do?" allows rather more space between thought and action. Here the appropriate conclusion is "I should do . . ." and there are several intelligible ways of adding here ". . . but I am not going to." *Should* draws attention to the reasons I have for acting in one way rather than another. The usual

function of "I should . . ." but I am not going to" is to draw attention to some special class of reasons, such as ethical or prudential reasons, which are particularly good as reasons to declare to others — because they serve to justify my conduct, for instance by fitting it into someone's plan of action — but which are not, as it turns out, the strongest reasons for me, now; the strongest reason is that I desire very much to do something else. Desiring to do something is of course a reason for doing it.¹⁴ (It can even be a reason that justifies my conduct to others, though there are some tasks of justification, those particularly connected with justice, which by itself it cannot do.) So, in this sort of case, what I think I have most reason to do, taking all things together, is the thing I very much desire to do, and if *I should* is taken to refer to what I have most reason to do, this is what I should do. There is a further and deeper question, whether I can intentionally and without compulsion fail to do even what I think I have most reason to do; this, from Aristotle's name for the phenomenon, is known as the problem of *akrasia*.¹⁵

Socrates' question, then, means "how has one most reason to live?" In saying earlier that the force of *should* in the question was just *should*, I meant that no prior advantage is built into the question for one kind of reason over another. In particular, there is no special consideration for respectable justifying reasons. If ethical reasons, for instance, emerge importantly in the answer, that will not be because they have simply been selected for by the question. Nevertheless, there is a peculiar emphasis given to Socrates' question in that it stands at a distance from any actual and particular occasion of considering what to do. It is a general question about what to do, because it asks how to live, and it is also in a sense a timeless question, since it invites me to think about my life from no particular point in it. These two facts make it a reflective question. That does not determine the answer, but it does affect it. Answering a practical question at a particular time, in a particular situation, I shall be particularly concerned with what I want *then*. Socrates' question I ask at no particular time — or, rather, the time when I no doubt ask it has no particular relation to the question. So I am bound by the question itself to take a more general, indeed a

longer-term, perspective on life. This does not determine that I give the answers of long-term prudence. The answer to the question might be: the best way for me to live is to do at any given time what I most want to do at that time. But if I have a weakness for prudence, the nature of Socrates' question is likely to bring it out.

It is, moreover, *anybody's* question. This does not mean, of course, that when asked by some particular person, it is a question about anybody: it is a question about that particular person. But when the question is put before me in the Socratic way, to invite reflection, it is going to be part of the reflection, because it is part of the knowledge constituting it, that the question can be put to anybody. Once constituted in that way, it very naturally moves from the question, asked by anybody, "how should I live?" to the question "how should anybody live?" That seems to ask for the reasons we all share for living in one way rather than another. It seems to ask for the conditions of *the good life* — the right life, perhaps, for human beings as such.

How far must the very business of Socratic reflection carry the question in that direction, and with what effects on the answer? The timelessness of the reflection does not determine that the answer should favor prudence. Similarly, the fact that the reflective question can be asked by anyone should allow its answer to be egoistic. But if it is egoistic, it will be egoism of one kind rather than another — the general egoism, distinguished earlier, which says that all people should favor their own interests. This naturally invites the thought that, if so, then it must be a better human life that is lived in such a way. But if so (it is tempting to go on), then it must be better, in some impersonal or interpersonal sense, that people should live in such a way. Having been led to this impersonal standpoint, perhaps we can be required to look back from it, make our journey in the reverse direction, and even revise our starting point. For if it is not better from an impersonal standpoint that each person should live in an egoistic way, perhaps we have a reason for saying that each of us should not live in such a way, and we must, after all, give a nonegoistic answer to Socrates' question. If all that does indeed follow, then the mere asking of Socrates' reflective question will take us a very long way into the ethical world. But does it follow?

Practical thought is radically first-personal. It must ask and answer the question "what shall I do?"¹⁶ Yet under Socratic reflection we seem to be driven to generalize the *I* and even to adopt, from the force of reflection alone, an ethical perspective. In Chapter 4, we shall see whether reflection can take us that far. But even if it cannot, Socratic reflection certainly takes us somewhere. Reflection involves some commitment, it seems, and certainly philosophy is committed to reflection. So the very existence of this book must raise the double question of how far reflection commits us and why we should be committed to reflection. Socrates thought that his reflection was inescapable. What he meant was not that everyone would engage in it, for he knew that not everyone would; nor that anyone who started reflecting on his life would, even against his will, be forced by inner compulsion to continue. His thought was rather that the good life must have reflection as part of its goodness: *the unexamined life, as he put it, is not worth living.*

This requires a very special answer to his question, which, for him, gives the final justification for raising it in the first place. If my book is committed to raising the question, is it committed to answering it in such a way? Must any philosophical inquiry into the ethical and into the good life require the value of philosophy itself and of a reflective intellectual stance to be part of the answer?

CHAPTER 10



Morality, the Peculiar Institution

EARLIER I referred to morality as a special system, a particular variety of ethical thought. I must now explain what I take it to be, and why we would be better off without it.

The important thing about morality is its spirit, its underlying aims, and the general picture of ethical life it implies. In order to see them, we shall need to look carefully at a particular concept, *moral obligation*. The mere fact that it uses a notion of obligation is not what makes morality special. There is an everyday notion of obligation, as one consideration among others, and it is ethically useful. Morality is distinguished by the special notion of obligation it uses, and by the significance it gives to it. It is this special notion that I shall call “moral obligation.” Morality is not one determinate set of ethical thoughts. It embraces a range of ethical outlooks; and morality is so much with us that moral philosophy spends much of its time discussing the differences between those outlooks, rather than the difference between all of them and everything else. They are not all equally typical or instructive examples of the morality system, though they do have in common the idea of moral obligation. The philosopher who has given the purest, deepest, and most thorough representation of morality is Kant. But morality is not an invention of philosophers. It is the outlook, or, incoherently, part of the outlook, of almost all of us.

In the morality system, moral obligation is expressed in one especially important kind of deliberative conclusion—a conclu-

sion that is directed toward what to do, governed by moral reasons, and concerned with a particular situation. (There are also general obligations, and we shall come back to them later.) Not every conclusion of a particular moral deliberation, even within the morality system, expresses an obligation. To go no further, some moral conclusions merely announce that you *may* do something. Those do not express an obligation, but they are in a sense still governed by the idea of obligation: you ask whether you are under an obligation, and decide that you are not.

This description is in terms of the output or conclusion of moral deliberation. The moral considerations that go into a deliberation may themselves take the form of obligations, but one would naturally say that they did not need to do so. I might, for instance, conclude that I was under an obligation to act in a certain way, because it was for the best that a certain outcome should come about and I could bring it about in that way. However, there is a pressure within the morality system to represent every consideration that goes into a deliberation and yields a particular obligation as being itself a general obligation; so if I am now under an obligation to do something that would be for the best, this will be because I have some general obligation, perhaps among others, to do what is for the best. We shall see later how this happens.

The fact that moral obligation is a kind of practical conclusion explains several of its features. An obligation applies to someone with respect to an action—it is an obligation to do something—and the action must be in the agent’s power. “*Ought* implies *can*” is a formula famous in this connection. As a general statement about *ought* it is untrue, but it must be correct if it is taken as a condition on what can be a particular obligation, where that is practically concluded. If my deliberation issues in something I cannot do, then I must deliberate again. The question of what counts as in the agent’s power is notoriously problematical, not only because of large and unnerving theories claiming that everything (or everything psychological) is determined, but also because it is simply unclear what it means to say that someone can act, or could have acted, in a certain way. To say anything useful about these problems needs a wide-ranging discussion that I shall not attempt in this

book.¹ What I shall have to say here, however, will suggest that morality, in this as in other respects, encounters the common problems in a peculiarly acute form.

Another feature of moral obligations in this sense is that they cannot conflict, ultimately, really, or at the end of the line. This will follow directly from the last point, that what I am obliged to do must be in my power, if one grants a further principle (it has been called the "agglomeration principle"), that if I am obliged to do X and obliged to do Y, then I am obliged to do X and Y. This requirement, too, reflects the practical shape of this notion of obligation. In an ordinary sense of "obligation," not controlled by these special requirements, obligations obviously can conflict. One of the most common occasions of mentioning them at all is when they do.²

The philosopher David Ross invented a terminology, still sometimes used, for discussing the conflict of obligations, which distinguished between *prima facie* and actual obligations. A *prima facie* obligation is a conclusion, supported by moral considerations, which is a candidate for being one's actual obligation. It will be the proper conclusion of one's moral deliberation if it is not outweighed by another obligation. Ross tried to explain (without much success) why a merely *prima facie* obligation—one that is eventually outweighed—is more than an apparent obligation. It is to be seen as exerting some force on the place of decision, but not enough, granted the competition, to get into that place. The effect, in more concrete terms, is that the considerations that supported the defeated *prima facie* obligation can come to support some other, actual, obligation. If I have for good and compelling reasons broken a promise, I may acquire an actual obligation to do something else because of that, such as compensate the person who has been let down.

It is not at all clear why I should be under this further obligation, since it is one's own business, on this view of things, to observe one's obligations, and I shall have done that. No actual obligation has been broken. This has a comforting consequence, that I should not blame myself. I may blame myself for something else, such as getting into the situation, but it is mistaken to blame or reproach myself for not doing the rejected action: self-reproach

belongs with broken obligations, and, it has turned out, there was no obligation. It is conceded that I may reasonably feel bad about it, but this feeling is distinguished by the morality system from remorse or self-reproach, for instance under the title "regret," which is not a moral feeling. This reclassification is important, and very characteristic of what happens when the ethical is contracted to the moral. To say that your feelings about something done involuntarily, or as the lesser of two evils, are to be understood as regret, a nonmoral feeling, implies that you should feel toward those actions as you feel toward things that merely happen, or toward the actions of others. The thought *I did it* has no special significance; what is significant is whether I voluntarily did what I ought to have done. This turns our attention away from an important dimension of ethical experience, which lies in the distinction simply between what one has done and what one has not done. That can be as important as the distinction between the voluntary and the non-voluntary.³

Moral obligation is inescapable. I may acquire an obligation voluntarily, as when I make a promise: in that case, indeed, it is usually said that it has to be voluntarily made to be a promise at all, though there is a gray area here, as with promises made under constraint. In other cases, I may be under an obligation through no choice of mine. But, either way, once I am under the obligation, there is no escaping it, and the fact that a given agent would prefer not to be in this system or bound by its rules will not excuse him; nor will blaming him be based on a misunderstanding. Blame is the characteristic reaction of the morality system. The remorse or self-reproach or guilt I have already mentioned is the characteristic first-personal reaction within the system, and if an agent never felt such sentiments, he would not belong to the morality system or be a full moral agent in its terms. The system also involves blame between persons, and unless there were such a thing, these first-personal reactions would doubtless not be found, since they are formed by internalization. But it is possible for particular agents who belong to the system never to blame anyone, in the sense of expressing blame and perhaps even of feeling the relevant sentiments. They might, for instance, be scrupulously skeptical about

what was in other people's power. The point that self-blame or remorse requires one's action to have been voluntary is only a special application of a general rule, that blame of anyone is directed to the voluntary. The moral law is more exigent than the law of an actual liberal republic, because it allows no emigration, but it is unequivocally just in its ideas of responsibility.

In this respect, utilitarianism is a marginal member of the morality system. It has a strong tradition of thinking that blame and other social reactions should be allocated in a way that will be socially useful, and while this might lead to their being directed to the voluntary, equally it might not. This follows consistently from applying the utilitarian criterion to all actions, including the social actions of expressing blame and so forth. The same principle can be extended to unexpressed blame and critical thoughts; indeed, at another level, a utilitarian might well ask whether the most useful policy might not be to forget that the point of blame, on utilitarian grounds, was usefulness. These maneuvers do seem to receive a check when it comes to self-reproach and the sense of moral obligation. Utilitarians are often immensely conscientious people, who work for humanity and give up meat for the sake of the animals. They think this is what they morally ought to do and feel guilty if they do not live up to their own standards. They do not, and perhaps could not, ask: How useful is it that I think and feel like this? It is because of such motivations, and not only because of logical features, that utilitarianism in most versions is a kind of morality, if a marginal one.

The sense that moral obligation is inescapable, that what I am obliged to do is what I *must* do, is the first-personal end of the conception already mentioned, that moral obligation applies to people even if they do not want it to. The third-personal aspect is that moral judgment and blame can apply to people even if, at the limit, they want to live outside that system altogether. From the perspective of morality, there is nowhere outside the system, or at least nowhere for a responsible agent. Taking Kant's term, we may join these two aspects in saying that moral obligation is *categorical*.

I shall come back later to people outside the system. There is more that needs to be said first about what a moral obligation is for someone within the system. It is hard to agree that the course of

action which, on a given occasion, there is most moral reason to take must necessarily count as a moral obligation. There are actions (also policies, attitudes, and so on) that are either more or less than obligations. They may be heroic or very fine actions, which go beyond what is obligatory or demanded. Or they may be actions that from an ethical point of view it would be agreeable or worthwhile or a good idea to do, without one's being required to do them. The point is obvious in terms of people's reactions. People may be greatly admired, or merely well thought of, for actions they would not be blamed for omitting. How does the morality system deal with the considerations that seemingly do not yield obligations?

One way in which the central, deontological, version of morality deals with them is to try to make as many as possible into obligations. (It has a particular motive for the reductionist enterprise of trying to make all ethical considerations into one type.) There are some instructive examples of this in the work of Ross, whose terminology of *prima facie* obligations I have already mentioned. He lists several types of what he regards as general obligations or, as he also calls them, duties.⁴ The first type includes what everyone calls an obligation, keeping promises and, by a fairly natural extension, telling the truth. The second class involves "duties of gratitude": to do good to those who have done services for you. But it is not really clear that these are *duties*, unless the benefactor (as the word "services" may imply) has acquired a right to expect a return—in which case, it will follow from some implied promise, and the obligation will belong with the first type. Good deeds I have not asked for may indeed be oppressive, but I should not simply take that oppression for obligation.⁵

What Ross is trying to force into the mold of obligation is surely a different ethical idea, that it is a sign of good character to want to return benefits. This characteristic is not the same thing as a disposition to do what one is morally obliged to do. A different ethical thought, again, is disguised in Ross's third class, which he calls "duties of justice." What he says about this is extraordinary:

[these duties] rest on the fact or possibility of a distribution of pleasure or happiness or the means thereto which is not in

accordance with the merits of the persons concerned; in which case there arises a duty to upset or prevent such a distribution.

There are such things as duties or obligations of justice, but this incitement to insurrection against the capitalist economy (or any other, come to that) can hardly be the right account of what they are. The requirements of justice concern, in the first place, *what ought to happen*. The way in which a given requirement of justice relates to what a given person has reason to do, or more specifically is under an obligation to do, is a matter of how that person stands to the requirement. In politics, the question of how far personal action stands from the desirable—the *utopia measure*, as it might be called—is itself one of the first, and one of the first ethical, questions.

It is a mistake of morality to try to make everything into obligations. But the reasons for the mistake go deep. Here we should recall that what is *ordinarily* called an obligation does not necessarily have to win in a conflict of moral considerations. Suppose you are under an everyday obligation—to visit a friend, let us say (a textbook example), because you have promised to. You are then presented with a unique opportunity, at a conflicting time and place, to further significantly some important cause. (To make the example realistic, one should put in more detail; and, as often in moral philosophy, if one puts in the detail the example may begin to dissolve. There is the question of your friend's attitude toward the cause and also toward your support of the cause. If he or she favors both, or merely the second, and would release you from the promise if you could get in touch, only the stickiest moralist would find a difficulty. If the friend would not release you, you may wonder what sort of friend you have. . . . But it should not be hard for each person reading this to find some example that will make the point.) You may reasonably conclude that you should take the opportunity to further the cause.⁶ But obligations have a moral stringency, which means that breaking them attracts blame. The only thing that can be counted on to cancel this, within the economy of morality, is that the rival action should represent another and more stringent obligation. Morality encourages the idea, *only an obligation can beat an obligation*.⁷

Yet how can this action of yours have been an obligation, unless it came from some more general obligation? It will not be easy to say what the general obligation is. You are not under an unqualified obligation to pursue this cause, nor to do everything you possibly can for causes you have adopted. We are left with the limp suggestion that one is under an obligation to assist some important cause on occasions that are specially propitious for assisting it. The pressure of the demand within the morality system to find a general obligation to back a particular one—what may be called the *obligation-out, obligation-in* principle—has a clearer result in those familiar cases where some general ethical consideration is focused on to a particular occasion by an emergency, such as the obligation to try to assist someone in danger. I am not under an obligation to assist all people at risk, or to go round looking for people at risk to assist. Confronted⁸ with someone at risk, many feel that they are under an obligation to try to help (though not at excessive danger to themselves, and so on: various sensible qualifications come to mind). In this case, unlike the last, the underlying obligation seems ready made. The immediate claim on me, "In this emergency, I am under an obligation to help," is thought to come from, "One is under this general obligation: to help in an emergency." If we add the thought that many, perhaps any, moral considerations could override some obligation on some occasion, we find that many, perhaps all, such considerations are related to some general obligations, even if they are not the simple and unqualified ones suggested by Ross's reductionism.

Once the journey into more general obligations has started, we may begin to get into trouble—not just philosophical trouble, but conscience trouble—with finding room for morally indifferent actions. I have already mentioned the possible moral conclusion that one *may* take some particular course of action. That means that there is nothing else I am obliged to do. But if we have accepted general and indeterminate obligations to further various moral objectives, as the last set of thoughts encourages us to do, they will be waiting to provide work for idle hands, and the thought can gain a footing (I am not saying that it has to) that I could be better employed than in doing something I am under no obligation to do, and, if I could be, then I ought to be: I am under an obligation not

to waste time in doing things I am under no obligation to do. At this stage, certainly, only an obligation can beat an obligation, and in order to do what I wanted to do, I shall need one of those fraudulent items, a duty to myself. If obligation is allowed to structure ethical thought, there are several natural ways in which it can come to dominate life altogether.

In order to see around the intimidating structure that morality has made out of the idea of obligation, we need an account of what obligations are when they are rightly seen as merely one kind of ethical consideration among others. This account will help to lead us away from morality's special notion of moral obligation, and eventually out of the morality system altogether.

We need, first, the notion of *importance*. Obviously enough, various things are important to various people (which does not necessarily mean that those things are important for those people's interests). This involves a relative notion of importance, which we might also express by saying that someone *finds* a given thing important. Beyond this merely relative idea, we have another notion, of something's being, simply, important (important *überhaupt*, as others might put it, or important *period*). It is not at all clear what it is for something to be, simply, important. It does not mean that it is important to the universe: in that sense, nothing is important. Nor does it mean that it is as a matter of fact something that most human beings find important; nor that it is something people ought to find important. I doubt that there can be an incontestable account of this idea; the explanations people give of it are necessarily affected by what they find important.

It does not matter for the present discussion that this notion is poorly understood. I need only three things of it. One is that there is such a notion. Another is that if something is important in the relative sense to somebody, this does not necessarily imply that he or she thinks it is, simply, important. It may be of the greatest importance to Henry that his stamp collection be completed with a certain stamp, but even Henry may see that it is not, simply, important. A significant ideal lies in this: people should find important a number of things that are, simply, important, as well as many

things that are not, and they should be able to tell the difference between them.

The third point is that the question of importance, and above all the question of what is, simply, important, needs to be distinguished from questions of *deliberative priority*. A consideration has high deliberative priority for us if we give it heavy weighting against other considerations in our deliberations. (This includes two ideas, that when it occurs in our deliberations, it outweighs most other considerations, and also that it occurs in our deliberations. There are some reasons for treating the second idea separately, and I shall touch on one later, but in general it is simpler to consider them together.)

Importance has some connections with deliberative priority, but they are not straightforward. There are many important things that no one can do much about, and very many that a given person can do nothing about. Again, it may not be that person's business to do anything: there is a deliberative division of labor. Your deliberations are not connected in a simple way even with what is important to you. If you find something important, then that will affect your life in one way or another, and so affect your deliberations, but those effects do not have to be found directly in the content of your deliberations.

A consideration may have high deliberative priority for a particular person, for a group of people, or for everyone. In this way priority is relativized, to people. But it should not be relativized in another way: it should not be marked for subject matter, so that things will have moral or prudential deliberative priority. This would be a misunderstanding. It may be said that moral considerations have a high priority from a moral point of view. If this is so, what it will mean is that someone within the moral system gives those considerations a high priority. It does not define a kind of priority. A major point about deliberative priority is that it can relate considerations of different types.⁹ The same thing is true of importance. In a sense, there are kinds of importance, and we naturally say that some things are morally important, others aesthetically important, and so on. But there must be a question at the end, in a particular case or more generally, whether one kind of importance is more important than another kind.

Those who are within the morality system usually think that morality is important. Moreover, morality has by definition something to do with personal conduct, so here importance is likely to have something to do with deliberation. But what it has to do with it depends crucially on the way one understands morality and morality's importance. For utilitarians, what is important is that there should be as much welfare as possible. The connection with deliberation is a subsequent question, and it is entirely open. We saw when we considered indirect utilitarianism how the question is open of what moral considerations should occur in a utilitarian agent's deliberations. More than that, it is open whether any moral considerations at all should occur in them. Some kinds of utilitarian thought have supposed that the best results would follow if people did not think in moral terms at all, and merely (for instance) acted selfishly. With less faith in the invisible hand, others give moral considerations some priority, and some of them, as we have seen, take a highly conscientious line. But for any utilitarian it should always be an empirical question: What are the implications for deliberation of welfare's being important? In this respect, however, there are many utilitarians who belong to the morality system first and are utilitarians second.

At the other extreme, the purest Kantian view locates the importance of morality in the importance of moral motivation itself. What is important is that people should give moral considerations the highest deliberative priority. This view was relentlessly and correctly attacked by Hegel, on the grounds that it gave moral thought no content and also that it was committed to a double-mindedness about the improvement of the world. The content of the moral motivation was the thought of obligation to do certain things, as against mere inclination; the need for that thought implied that individuals were not spontaneously inclined to do those things; its supreme importance implied that it was better so.

Neither view is adequate, and a better view is not going to consist of any simple compromise. Ethical life itself is important, but it can see that things other than itself are important. It contains motivations that indeed serve these other ends but at the same time be seen from within that life as part of what make it worth living.

On any adequate showing, ethical motivations are going to be important, and this has consequences for how we should deliberate. One consequence is that some kinds of ethical consideration will have high deliberative priority. This is only one way in which ethical motivations may affect people's deliberations. They may equally affect their style and their occasion, among other things.¹⁰

There is one kind of ethical consideration that directly connects importance and deliberative priority, and this is obligation. It is grounded in the basic issue of what people should be able to rely on. People must rely as far as possible on not being killed or used as a resource, and on having some space and objects and relations with other people they can count as their own. It also serves their interests if, to some extent at least, they can count on not being lied to. One way in which these ends can be served, and perhaps the only way, is by some kind of ethical life; and, certainly, if there is to be ethical life, these ends have to be served by it and within it. *One* way in which ethical life serves them is by encouraging certain motivations, and *one* form of this is to instill a disposition to give the relevant considerations a high deliberative priority—in the most serious of these matters, a virtually absolute priority, so that certain courses of action must come first, while others are ruled out from the beginning. An effective way for actions to be ruled out is that they never come into thought at all, and this is often the best way. One does not feel easy with the man who in the course of a discussion of how to deal with political or business rivals says, "Of course, we could have them killed, but we should lay that aside right from the beginning." It should never have come into his hands to be laid aside. It is characteristic of morality that it tends to overlook the possibility that some concerns are best embodied in this way, in deliberative silence.

Considerations that are given deliberative priority in order to secure reliability constitute obligations; corresponding to those obligations are rights, possessed by people who benefit from the obligations. One type of obligations is picked out by the basic and standing importance of the interests they serve. These are all negative in force, concerning what we should not do. Another, and now positive, sort involves the obligations of immediacy. Here, a high

deliberative priority is imposed by an emergency, such as the rescue case we considered before. A general ethical recognition of people's vital interests is focused into a deliberative priority by immediacy, and it is immediacy to *me* that generates *my* obligation, one I cannot ignore without blame. Two connected things follow from understanding the obligations of emergency in this way. First, we do not after all have to say that the obligation comes from a more general obligation. The point of the negative obligations does lie in their being general; they provide a settled and permanent pattern of deliberative priorities. In the positive kind of case, however, the underlying disposition is a general concern, which is not always expressed in deliberative priority, and what produces an obligation from it is, precisely, the emergency. We need not accept the *obligation-out, obligation-in* principle.

More important, there are ethical consequences of understanding these obligations in this way. Some moralists say that if we regard immediacy or physical nearness as relevant, we must be failing in rationality or imagination; we are irrational if we do not recognize that those starving elsewhere have as big a claim on us as those starving here. These moralists are wrong, at least in trying to base their challenge simply on the structure of obligations. Of course this point does not dispose of the challenge itself. We should be more concerned about the sufferings of people elsewhere. But a correct understanding of what obligation is will make it clearer how we should start thinking about the challenge. We should not banish the category of immediacy, but we must consider what for us, in the modern world, should properly count as immediacy, and what place we have in our lives for such concerns when they are not obligations.

The obligations considered so far involve (negatively) what is fundamentally important and (positively) what is important and immediate. They are both based ultimately on one conception, that each person has a life to lead. People need help but (unless they are very young, very old, or severely handicapped) not all the time. All the time they need not to be killed, assaulted, or arbitrarily interfered with. It is a strength of contractualism to have seen that such positive and negative obligations will follow from these basic interests.¹¹

The obligations that are most familiarly so called, those of promises, differ from both of these because what I am obliged to do, considered in itself, may not be important at all. But just because of that, they are an example of the same connection, between obligation and reliability. The institution of promising operates to provide portable reliability, by offering a formula that will confer high deliberative priority on what might otherwise not receive it. This is why it is odd for someone to promise not to kill you — if he does not already give it high priority, why should his promising be relied upon to provide it? (There are answers to this question, in special cases, and considering what they might be will help to show how the system works.)

Obligation works to secure reliability, a state of affairs in which people can reasonably expect others to behave in some ways and not in others. It is only one among other ethical ways of doing this. It is one that tries to produce an expectation *that* through an expectation *of*. These kinds of obligation very often command the highest deliberative priority and also present themselves as important — in the case of promises, because they are promises and not simply because of their content. However, we can also see how they need not always command the highest priority, even in ethically well-disposed agents. Reflecting that some end is peculiarly important, and the present action importantly related to it, an agent can reasonably conclude that the obligation may be broken on this occasion, as we noticed before, and indeed this conclusion may be acceptable,¹² in the sense that he can explain within a structure of ethical considerations why he decided as he did. But there is no need for him to call this course another and more stringent obligation. An obligation is a special kind of consideration, with a general relation to importance and immediacy. The case we are considering is simply one in which there is a consideration important enough to outweigh this obligation on this occasion,¹³ and it is cleaner just to say so. We should reject morality's other maxim, that only an obligation can beat an obligation.

When a deliberative conclusion embodies a consideration that has the highest deliberative priority and is also of the greatest importance (at least to the agent), it may take a special form and become

the conclusion not merely that one should do a certain thing, but that one *must*, and that one cannot do anything else. We may call this a conclusion of practical necessity. Sometimes, of course, “must” in a practical conclusion is merely relative and means only that some course of action is needed for an end that is not at all a matter of “must.” “I must go now” may well be completed “. . . if I am to get to the movies” where there is no suggestion that I have to go to the movies: I merely am going to the movies. We are not concerned with this, but with a “must” that is unconditional and *goes all the way down*.

It is an interesting question, how a conclusion in terms of what we must do, or equally of what we cannot do, differs from a conclusion expressed merely in terms of what we have most reason to do; in particular, how it can be stronger, as it seems to be. (How, in deliberation, can anything stronger be concluded in favor of a course of action than that we have most reason to take it?) I shall not try to discuss this question here.¹⁴ What is immediately relevant is that practical necessity is in no way peculiar to ethics. Someone may conclude that he or she unconditionally must do a certain thing, for reasons of prudence, self-protection, aesthetic or artistic concern, or sheer self-assertion. In some of these cases (basic self-defense, for instance), an ethical outlook may itself license the conclusion. In others, it will disapprove of it. The fundamental point is that a conclusion of practical necessity is the same sort of conclusion whether it is grounded in ethical reasons or not.

Practical necessity, and the experience of reaching a conclusion with that force, is one element that has gone into the idea of moral obligation (this may help to explain the sense, which so many people have, that moral obligation is at once quite special and very familiar). Yet practical necessity, even when it is grounded in ethical reasons, does not necessarily signal an obligation. The course of action the agent “must” take may not be associated with others’ expectations, or with blame for failure. The ethically outstanding or possibly heroic actions I mentioned before, in being more than obligations, are not obligatory, and we cannot usually be asked to do them or be blamed for not doing them. But the agent who does such a thing may feel that he must do it, that there is no alternative

for him, while at the same time recognizing that it would not be a demand on others. The thought may come in the form that it is a demand on him, but not on others, because he is different from others; but the difference will then typically turn out to consist in the fact that he is someone who has this very conviction. His feelings, indeed, and his expectations of feelings he will have if he does not act, may well be like those associated with obligations (more like them than morality admits¹⁵).

I have already mentioned Kant’s description of morality as categorical. When he claimed that the fundamental principle of morality was a Categorical Imperative, Kant was not interested in any purely logical distinction between forms of what are literally imperatives. He was concerned with the recognition of an *I must* that is unconditional and goes all the way down, but he construed this unconditional practical necessity as being peculiar to morality. He thought it was unconditional in the sense that it did not depend on desire at all: a course of action presented to us with this kind of necessity was one we had reason to take *whatever we might happen to want*, and it was only moral reasons that could transcend desire in that way. As I have introduced it, however, practical necessity need not be independent of desire in so strong a sense. I distinguished a “must” that is unconditional from one that is conditional on a desire *that the agent merely happens to have*; but a conclusion of practical necessity could itself be the expression of a desire, if the desire were not one that the agent merely happened to have, but was essential to the agent and had to be satisfied. The difference between this conception of practical necessity and Kant’s is not of course merely a matter of definition or of logical analysis. Kant’s idea of practical necessity is basically this more familiar one, but it is given a particularly radical interpretation, under which the only necessary practical conclusions are those absolutely unconditional by any desire. For Kant there could be a practical conclusion that was radically unconditional in this way, because of his picture of the rational self as free from causality, and because there were reasons for action which depended merely on rational agency and not on anything (such as a desire) that the agent might not have had.¹⁶

Kant also describes the conclusion of practical necessity, understood as peculiar to morality, as a recognition of the demands of moral law, and when he speaks of this in psychological terms, he refers to a special feeling or sentiment, a "sense of reverence for the law." Modern moralists are not likely to use those words, but they do not find it hard to recognize what Kant was describing. (Some of them still want to invoke a conception of moral law. Others, reluctant to do so, are using ideas that implicitly involve it.) Kant did not think that the compelling sense of moral necessity, regarded as a feeling, was itself what provided the reason for moral action. As a feeling, it was just a feeling and had no more rational power than any other merely psychological item had. The reason lay not in what that feeling was, but in what it represented, the truth that moral universality was a requirement of practical reason itself.

That truth, as Kant took it to be, meant that morality had an objective foundation, as we saw in Chapter 4, and he took the experience of the moral demand to represent this foundation. However, it must be said that it also significantly misrepresents it. The experience is like being *confronted* with something, a law that is part of the world in which one lives.¹⁷ Yet the power of the moral law, according to Kant, does not lie and could not conceivably lie in anything outside oneself. Its power lies in its objective foundation, and no experience could adequately represent that kind of objectivity. The objectivity comes from this, that the requirements of practical reason will be met only by leading a life in which moral considerations play a basic and characteristic role; and that role is one they perform only if, unlike other motivations, they present themselves in the form of an objective demand. But then what is it for a consideration to present itself as an objective demand? It cannot consist in its presenting itself as so related to that very argument. It must have some other psychological form, and the form will be, to that extent, misleading.

On Kant's assumptions, however, one can at least come to understand how, and why, such an experience is bound to be misleading, and this will help to make it stable to reflection. If Kant is right, I can come to understand what the "sense of reverence for the law" is, and not lose my respect for it or for the moral law. This

stability is helped by a further thought, that there is one sense in which the law is rightly represented by the experience as being outside me: it is equally in other people. The moral law is the law of the notional republic of moral agents. It is a notional republic, but they are real agents and, because it is rationally self-imposed by each of them, it is a real law.

Once we have ceased to believe in Kant's own foundation or anything like it, we cannot read this experience in this way at all. It is the conclusion of practical necessity, no more and no less, and it seems to come "from outside" in the way that conclusions of practical necessity always seem to come from outside—from deeply inside. Since ethical considerations are in question, the agent's conclusions will not usually be solitary or unsupported, because they are part of an ethical life that is to an important degree shared with others. In this respect, the morality system itself, with its emphasis on the "purely moral" and personal sentiments of guilt and self-reproach, actually conceals the dimension in which ethical life lies outside the individual.

When we know what the recognition of obligation is, if we still make it the special center of ethical experience, we are building ethical life around an illusion. Even in Kant's own view, this experience involves a misrepresentation, but it is a necessary and acceptable one, a consequence of transposing objectivity from the transcendental level to the psychological. But if this experience is special only in the psychological mode, then it is worse than a misrepresentation: there is nothing (or nothing special) for it to represent.

Kant's construction also explains how the moral law can unconditionally apply to all people, even if they try to live outside it. Those who do not accept his construction, but still accept the morality system, need to say how moral obligation binds those who refuse it. They need to say how there can be a moral *law* at all.¹⁸ The fact that a law applies to someone always consists in more than a semantic relation; it is not merely that the person falls under some description contained in the law. The law of a state applies to a person because he belongs to a state that can apply power. The law of God

applied because God applied it. Kant's moral law applied because as a rational being one had a reason to apply it to oneself. For the moral law to apply now, it can only be that we apply it.

When we say that someone ought to have acted in some required or desirable way in which he has not acted, we sometimes say that *there was a reason* for him to act in that way—he had promised, for instance, or what he actually did violated someone's rights. Although we can say this, it does not seem to be connected in any secure way with the idea that *he had a reason* to act in that way. Perhaps he had no reason at all. In breaking the obligation, he was not necessarily behaving irrationally or unreasonably, but badly. We cannot take for granted that he had a reason to behave well, as opposed to our having various reasons for wishing that he would behave well. How do we treat him? We recognize in fact, very clumsily in the law, less clumsily in informal practice, that there are many different ways in which people can fail to be what we would ethically like them to be. At one extreme there is general deliberative incapacity. At another extreme is the sincere and capable follower of another creed. Yet again there are people with various weaknesses or vices, people who are malicious, selfish, brutal, inconsiderate, self-indulgent, lazy, greedy. All these people can be part of our ethical world. No ethical world has ever been free of those with such vices (though their classification will be a matter of the culture in question); and any individual life is lined by some of them. There are, equally, various negative reactions to them, from hatred and horror in the most extreme cases, to anger, regret, correction, blame. When we are not within the formal circumstances of the state's law, there is the further dimension of who is reacting: not everyone can or should sustain every complaint. It is another consequence of the fiction of the moral law that this truth does not occur to us. It is as if every member of the notional republic were empowered to make a citizen's arrest.

Within all this there is a range, quite a wide one, of particular deviations that we treat with the machinery of everyday blame. They include many violations of obligations, but not all of them: some of the most monstrous proceedings, which lie beyond ordinary blame, involve violations of basic human rights. Nor, on the

other hand, is there blame only for broken obligations; particularly in bringing up children, actions that merely manifest imperfect dispositions are blamed. But blame always tends to share the particularized, practical character of moral obligation in the technical sense. Its negative reaction is focused closely on an action or omission, and this is what is blamed. Moreover—though there are many inevitable anomalies in its actual working—the aspiration of blame is that it should apply only to the extent that the undesired outcome is the product of voluntary action on the particular occasion.

This institution, as opposed to other kinds of ethically negative or hostile reaction to people's doings (it is vital to remember how many others there are), seems to have something special to do with the idea that the agent had a reason to act otherwise. As I have already said, this is often not so.¹⁹ The institution of blame is best seen as involving a fiction, by which we treat the agent as one for whom the relevant ethical considerations are reasons. The "ought to have" of blame can be seen as an extension into the unwilling of the "ought to have" we may offer, in advice, to those whose ends we share. This fiction has various functions. One is that if we treat the agent as someone who gives weight to ethical reasons, this may help to make him into such a person.

The device is specially important in helping to mediate between two possibilities in people's relations. One is that of shared deliberative practices, where to a considerable extent people have the same dispositions and are helping each other to arrive at practical conclusions. The other is that in which one group applies force or threats to constrain another. The fiction underlying the blame system helps at its best to make a bridge between these possibilities, by a process of continuous recruitment into a deliberative community. At its worst, it can do many bad things, such as encouraging people to misunderstand their own fear and resentment—sentiments they may quite appropriately feel—as the voice of the Law.

The fiction of the deliberative community is one of the positive achievements of the morality system. As with other fictions, it is a real question whether its working could survive a clear understand-

ing of how it works. This is part of the much larger question of what needs to be, and what can be, restructured in the light of a reflective and nonmythical understanding of our ethical practices. It is certain that the practices of blame, and more generally the style of people's negative ethical reactions to others, will change. The morality system, in my view, can no longer help them to do so in a desirable way. One reason is that morality is under too much pressure on the subject of the voluntary.

To the extent that the institution of blame works coherently, it does so because it attempts less than morality would like it to do. When we ask whether someone acted voluntarily, we are asking, roughly, whether he really acted, whether he knew what he was doing, and whether he intended this or that aspect of what happened. This practice takes the agent together with his character, and does not raise questions about his freedom to have chosen some other character. The blame system, most of the time, closely concentrates on the conditions of the particular act; and it is able to do this because it does not operate on its own. It is surrounded by other practices of encouragement and discouragement, acceptance and rejection, which work on desire and character to shape them into the requirements and possibilities of ethical life.

Morality neglects this surrounding and sees only that focused, particularized judgment. There is a pressure within it to require a voluntariness that will be total and will cut through character and psychological or social determination, and allocate blame and responsibility on the ultimately fair basis of the agent's own contribution, no more and no less. It is an illusion to suppose that this demand can be met (as opposed to the less ambitious requirements of voluntariness that take character largely as given). This fact is known to almost everyone, and it is hard to see a long future for a system committed to denying it. But so long as morality itself remains, there is danger in admitting the fact, since the system itself leaves us, as the only contrast to rational blame, forms of persuasion it refuses to distinguish in spirit from force and constraint.

In truth, almost all worthwhile human life lies between the extremes that morality puts before us. It starkly emphasizes a series of contrasts: between force and reason, persuasion and rational conviction, shame and guilt, dislike and disapproval, mere rejec-

tion and blame. The attitude that leads it to emphasize all these contrasts can be labeled its *purity*. The purity of morality, its insistence on abstracting the moral consciousness from other kinds of emotional reaction or social influence, conceals not only the means by which it deals with deviant members of its community, but also the virtues of those means. It is not surprising that it should conceal them, since the virtues can be seen as such only from outside the system, from a point of view that can assign value to it, whereas the morality system is closed in on itself and must consider it an indecent misunderstanding to apply to the system any values other than those of morality itself.

The purity of morality itself represents a value. It expresses an ideal, presented by Kant, once again, in a form that is the most unqualified and also one of the most moving: the ideal that human existence can be ultimately just. Most advantages and admired characteristics are distributed in ways that, if not unjust, are at any rate not just, and some people are simply luckier than others. The ideal of morality is a value, moral value, that transcends luck. It must therefore lie beyond any empirical determination. It must lie not only in trying rather than succeeding, since success depends partly on luck, but in a kind of trying that lies beyond the level at which the capacity to try can itself be a matter of luck. The value must, further, be supreme. It will be no good if moral value is merely a consolation prize you get if you are not in worldly terms happy or talented or good-humoured or loved. It has to be what ultimately matters.

This is in some ways like a religious conception. But it is also unlike any real religion, and in particular unlike orthodox Christianity. The doctrine of grace in Christianity meant that there was no calculable road from moral effort to salvation; salvation lay beyond merit, and men's efforts, even their moral efforts, were not the measure of God's love.²⁰ Moreover, when it was said by Christianity that what ultimately mattered was salvation, this was thought to involve a difference that anyone would recognize as a difference, as *the* difference. But the standpoint from which pure moral value has its value is, once more, only that of morality itself. It can hope to transcend luck only by turning in on itself.

The ideals of morality have without doubt, and contrary to a

vulgar Marxism that would see them only as an ideology of unworldliness, played a part in producing some actual justice in the world and in mobilizing power and social opportunity to compensate for bad luck in concrete terms. But the idea of a value that lies beyond all luck is an illusion, and political aims cannot continue to draw any conviction from it. Once again, the other conceptions of morality cannot help us. They can only encourage the idea, which always has its greedy friends, that when these illusions have gone there can be no coherent ideas of social justice, but only efficiency, or power, or uncorrected luck.

Many philosophical mistakes are woven into morality. It misunderstands obligations, not seeing how they form just one type of ethical consideration. It misunderstands practical necessity, thinking it peculiar to the ethical. It misunderstands ethical practical necessity, thinking it peculiar to obligations. Beyond all this, morality makes people think that, without its very special obligation, there is only inclination; without its utter voluntariness, there is only force; without its ultimately pure justice, there is no justice. Its philosophical errors are only the most abstract expressions of a deeply rooted and still powerful misconception of life.

Postscript



HERE ARE two tensions to which the argument of this book has constantly returned. In terms of philosophy's questions and its centers of interest, there is a tension between ancient and modern. In actual life, the tension is between reflection and practice. I have suggested that in some basic respects the philosophical thought of the ancient world was better off, and asked more fruitful questions, than most modern moral philosophy. Although it had its own limiting concerns, such as the desire to reduce life's exposure to luck, it was typically less obsessional than modern philosophy, less determined to impose rationality through reductive theory. The hopes for philosophy that some of those philosophers could entertain have gone, however, and the world to which ethical thought now applies is irreversibly different, not only from the ancient world but from any world in which human beings have tried to live and have used ethical concepts.

The resources of most modern moral philosophy are not well adjusted to the modern world. I have tried to show that this is partly because it is too much and too unknowingly caught up in it, unreflectively appealing to administrative ideas of rationality. In other ways, notably in its more Kantian forms, it is not involved enough; it is governed by a dream of a community of reason that is too far removed, as Hegel first said it was, from social and historical reality and from any concrete sense of a particular ethical life—farther removed from those things, in some ways, than the religion it



Notes

1. Socrates' Question

1. Plato, *Republic*, 352D.
2. See Chapter 3, note 6, for more on Aristotle's work.
3. Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), explores this and related notions in ancient literature and philosophy. For the idea of morality as transcending luck, see Chapter 10.
4. If some philosophers have found difficulty with this obvious account, it may be because they assume that this "altogether" question would have to be answered by appealing to just one kind of consideration. I shall argue later in this chapter that the assumption is wrong.
5. F. H. Bradley, "My Station and Its Duties", in *Ethical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1951); first published in 1876.
6. The point is made by Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), and by Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Sandel's emphasis on a "socially constituted self" encounters difficulties familiar in neo-Hegelian writers. See also Chapter 10, note 16, and, on MacIntyre, note 13 below.
7. P. T. Geach, *The Virtues: The Stanton Lectures, 1973-74* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); James D. Wallace, *Virtues and Vices* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); MacIntyre, *After Virtue*. The reasons for the neglect chiefly lie in a narrow view of ethical concerns and a concentration on the preoccupations of morality; it may also be that the study of the virtues has been associated with religious assumptions (which are emphati-

cally present in Geach's work). There is an objection worth taking seriously to the idea of a virtue, which is that it calls on the notion of character, and this is a notion that no longer has any, or enough, sense for us. I touch on this question in the Postscript. I believe that the objection, if developed, is an objection to ethical thought itself rather than to one way of conducting it.

8. For example, Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person", *Journal of Philosophy*, 67 (1971); Amartya Sen, "Choice, Orderings and Morality", in Stephan Körner, ed., *Practical Reason* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); R. C. Jeffery, "Preference among Preferences", *Journal of Philosophy*, 71 (1974); A. O. Hirschman, *Shifting Involvements* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), chap. 4.

9. The doctrine is part of Kant's theory of freedom, which, if it can be made intelligible at all, is notoriously difficult to save from inconsistency. For further comment on it, see Chapter 4.

10. I have discussed this in *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

11. The distinction between deontological and teleological is very roughly introduced here. The interest of the distinction is probably to be found at a different level, in a disagreement about where the importance of morality lies: see Chapter 10. The distinction is only one of many that have been drawn. For a luxuriant classification, see W. K. Frankena, *Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973).

12. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge University Press, 1959), sections 17 and 89. He rejected this view in "A Reply to My Critics," in P. A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore* (La Salle: Open Court Publishing Co., 1942). *Ethics* (1912) already seems to reject it, though Moore said only that he refrained from asserting it there.

13. In certain forms, the demand for explicit discursive rationality is as old as Socrates, and does not represent any modern influence, but the most powerful models of justification now active, and the demands for a single currency of reasons, are certainly expressions of modern bureaucratic rationality. The question is related to that of the history of the "bare" self, not socially defined, which was referred to in note 6 above: MacIntyre exaggerates the extent to which this is a purely modern conception. On the question of what rationality may reasonably demand of a decision system, even when that is expressed in formal terms, see Amartya Sen, *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* (San Francisco: Holden Day, 1970), and "Rational Fools", reprinted in his *Choice, Welfare and Measurement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982); A. Sen and B. Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), Introduction, pp. 16–18.

14. This is denied by Edward J. Bond, *Reason and Value* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

15. Discussion of akrasia include: Donald Davidson, "How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?" in Joel Feinberg, ed., *Moral Concepts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); David Pears, *Motivated Irrationality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

16. This is not to forget "what shall we do?" That is first-personal too; the basic question is who the speaker is taking as the plural first person—a speaker who, it is essential to remember, is once more an I.

2. The Archimedean Point

1. Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 408.

2. G. E. Moore, "Proof of an External World," reprinted in his *Philosophical Papers* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1977). On the force of the Moorean answer to skepticism, see Thompson Clarke, "The Legacy of Skepticism," *Journal of Philosophy*, 69 (1972).

3. Renford Bambrough, *Moral Scepticism and Moral Knowledge* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979), p. 15.

4. See Myles Burnyeat, "Can the Sceptic Live his Scepticism?," in Malcolm Schofield, Myles Burnyeat, and Jonathan Barnes, eds., *Doubt and Dogmatism: Studies in Hellenistic Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); reprinted in Myles Burnyeat, ed., *The Skeptical Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

5. Cf. "The Analogy of City and Soul in Plato's *Republic*," in E. N. Lee, A. P. Mourelatos, and R. M. Rorty, eds., *Exegesis and Argument, Studies in Greek Philosophy presented to Gregory Vlastos* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1973).

6. A precise formulation of such instabilities is to be found in the problem of the Prisoners' Dilemma: see e.g. Robert D. Luce and Howard Raiffa, *Games and Decisions* (New York: John Wiley, 1957). The political theory of Hobbes is based on one way of dealing with this problem. For the relevance of such issues to ethics, see Edna Ullmann-Margalit, *The Emergence of Norms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

3. Foundations: Well-Being

1. The Greek word *akrasia* of which this is the translation ranges more widely in Plato's use than the English expression does. I have given a fuller account of some ancient views on these matters in an article on Greek

3. I have offered this idea, with more detail than here, in “The Truth in Relativism,” *Proc. Arist. Soc.*, 75 (1974–75), reprinted in my *Moral Luck*, from which I have adapted a few sentences in what follows. As will be seen, I no longer want to say without qualification as I do there (*Moral Luck*, p. 142), that for ethical outlooks a relativistic standpoint, defined in these terms, is correct.
4. For an example of the emergence of a legend—or, rather, several different legends—see J. C. Holt, *Robin Hood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982).
5. One very interesting contribution to this large subject is Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).
6. For the same reason, fantasy not directed to the past has now shifted from exotic peoples to extraterrestrials. Since they can offer no concrete resistance at all to the most primitive fantasies, the results are pathetically or repulsively impoverished.
7. Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), is interesting on this subject, though he shows a certain weakness for the myth.
8. “When once the veil begins to rend, it admits not of repair. Ignorance is of a peculiar nature: and once dispelled, it is impossible to reestablish it. It is not originally a thing of itself, but is only the absence of knowledge: and though man may be kept ignorant, he cannot be *made* ignorant.” Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*, part 1.
9. This is discussed by Geoffrey Hawthorn in a forthcoming book on counterfactual thinking in the social sciences.
10. Rawls seems not to have considered the issue in specifically historical terms. For him it would, revealingly, belong to “partial compliance theory,” the theory of justice for societies that fall short of the conditions necessary for implementing the full theory.
11. Helpful secondary works are: Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), and also *Adorno* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). Critical theory has paid, particularly in the past decade, a just penalty for its obfuscatory style of thought, and for an unlavely combination of radical rhetoric and professorial authoritarianism. But there is something to be learned from it, particularly if some of its insights are deployed in the theory of justice rather than in connection with freedom, which was the Frankfurt School’s own emphasis.
12. One important question is how far a universal form of justice can be

given a different content in different societies: this idea is central to the view of justice given by Michael Walzer in his helpful *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983). Another question is how we can think the past unjust while knowing that we owe it almost everything we prize. I hope to discuss such questions, and the critical-theory test, in a forthcoming publication based on the Tanner Lectures given at Harvard in May 1983.

13. The best-known and most exciting version of this view was the kind of existentialism that Sartre held for a while after the Second World War, and later came to think as ridiculous as many others had thought it all along. In a less dramatic form, the view has become almost a platitude of much recent philosophy. John Mackie, for instance (*Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, p. 106), was able to say, without finding it at all special, “morality is not to be discovered but made: we have to decide what moral views to adopt,” but it is not clear whether “we” means each of us or all of us together, nor, in either case, what we have to do. In such passages, it is probable that a logical or metaphysical doctrine is being misleadingly put in a psychological form.

10. Morality, the Peculiar Institution

1. I touch briefly on some points later in this chapter. Most discussions of free will do not pay enough attention to the point that causal explanation may have a different impact on different parts of our thought about action and responsibility. It is worth consideration that deliberation requires only *can*, while blame requires *could have*.

2. I have discussed the question of conflict in several essays, in *Problems of the Self* and *Moral Luck*. It is important that, if it were logically impossible for two actual obligations to conflict, I could not get into a situation of their conflicting even through my own fault. What is it supposed that I get into? 3. This point is discussed in my essay “Moral Luck,” in the book of that title. It illustrates the general point that the morality system lays particularly heavy weight on the unsure structure of voluntariness.

4. W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), pp. 21ff.

5. This is so even when the good deeds are part of a general practice that others hope I will join. The point is admirably pressed by Robert Nozick in *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), chap. 5.

6. The example is of a conflict between an obligation and a consideration that is not at first sight an obligation. It may very readily represent

another conflict as well, between private and public. For various considerations on this, and particularly on the role of utilitarian considerations in public life, see the essays in Stuart Hampshire, ed., *Public and Private Morality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

7. Morality encourages the idea, certainly in cases of this kind, but it does not always insist on it, at least in the form that an obligation of mine can be overridden only by another obligation of mine. If some vital interest of mine would have to be sacrificed in order to carry out a promise, particularly if the promise were relatively unimportant, even the severest moralist may agree that I would have the right to break the promise, without requiring that I would be under an obligation to do so (I owe this point to Gilbert Harman). This is correct but, unless the promise is very trivial, the severe moralist will agree, I suspect, only if the interests involved are indeed vital. This suggests an interpretation under which my obligation would indeed be beaten by an obligation, but not one of mine. In insisting that only vital interests count, it is likely that the moralist, when he says that I have the right to safeguard my interest, does not mean simply that I may do that, but that I have what has been called a claim-right to do so: that is to say, others are under an obligation not to impede me in doing so. Then my original obligation will be canceled by an obligation of *the promises*, to waive his or her right to performance.

8. What counts as being confronted is a real question, and a very practical one for doctors in particular. I touch on the question later, in giving an account of immediacy which does not need the *obligation-out, obligation-in* principle. This is notoriously a kind of obligation increasingly unrecognized in modern cities, to the extent that it is not saluted even by people guiltily leaving the scene.

9. The point is related to the discussion of deliberative questions in Chapter 1.

10. It is relevant to recall, as well, a point made in Chapter 1: the deliberative considerations that go with a given ethical motivation, such as a virtue, may not be at all simply related to it.

11. The reference to contractualism brings out the point that the account is, in a certain sense, individualist. For some further remarks on this aspect, see my Postscript.

12. It is a mistake to suppose that it has to be equally acceptable to everyone. Some may have a greater right than others to complain.

13. This *kind* of occasion? Yes. But particularizing facts, such as that this is the second time (to her, this year), can certainly be relevant.

14. I have made a suggestion about it in “Practical Necessity,” *Moral Luck*, pp. 124 – 132.

15. How alike? This touches on an important question that I cannot pursue here, the distinction between guilt and shame. There is such a distinction, and it is relevant to ethics, but it is much more complex than is usually thought. Above all, it is a mistake to suppose that guilt can be distinguished as a mature and autonomous reaction that has a place in ethical experience, whereas shame is a more primitive reaction that does not. Morality tends to deceive itself about its relations to shame. For some suggestive remarks on the distinction, see Herbert Morris, “Guilt and Shame,” in *On Guilt and Innocence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

16. This is connected with the differing conceptions of the self entertained by Kant and by his Hegelian critics: see Chapter 1, note 6. It is important here to distinguish two different ideas. Other people, and indeed I myself, can have an “external” idea of different ideals and projects that I might have had, for instance if I had been brought up differently: there are few reasons for, and many reasons against, saying that if I had been brought up differently, it would not have been me. This is the area of metaphysical necessity. But there is a different area, of practical necessity, concerned with what are possible lines of action and possible projects for me, granted that I have the ideals and character I indeed have. This is the level at which we must resist the Kantian idea that the truly ethical subject is one for whom nothing is necessary except agency itself. This is also closely related to the matter of real interests, discussed in Chapter 3.

17. The model of a moral law helps to explain why the system should have the difficulties it has with those ethical acts that, as I put it before, are more or less than obligations. It is not surprising that something interpreted as law should leave only the three categories of the required, the forbidden, and the permitted. Kant’s own attempts to deal with some problems of these other ethical motives within his framework of duty involve his interpretations (which changed over time) of the traditional distinction between perfect and imperfect duties. On this, see M. J. Gregor, *Laws of Freedom* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963), chaps. 7–11.

18. The question of a categorical imperative and its relation to reasons for action has been pursued by Philippa Foot in several papers, collected in *Virtues and Vices*. I am indebted to these, though our conclusions are different. The moral *ought* was one of several targets assaulted by G. E. M. Anscombe in her vigorous “Modern Moral Philosophy,” reprinted in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, vol. 3 of her *Collected Papers* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981).

19. Of course, much depends on what is to count as having a reason. I do not believe that there can be an absolutely “external” reason for action, one

that does not speak to any motivation the agent already has (as I have stressed, Kant did not think so either). There are indeed distinctions between, for instance, simply drawing an agent's attention to a reason he already has and persuading him to act in a certain way. But it is basically important that a spectrum is involved, and such distinctions are less clear than the morality system and other rationalistic conceptions require them to be. See "Internal and External Reasons," in my *Moral Luck*.

20. This is why I said in Chapter 4 that Kant's conception was like that of the Pelagian heresy, which did adjust salvation to merit.

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