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THE NATURE OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY

I SHOULD like, if I can, to interest you to-night in one particular question about Moral Philosophy. It is a question which resembles most philosophical questions, in respect of the fact that philosophers are by no means agreed as to what is the right answer to it: some seem to be very strongly convinced that one answer is correct, while others are equally strongly convinced of the opposite. For my own part I do feel some doubt as to which answer is the right one, although, as you will see, I incline rather strongly to one of the two alternatives. I should like very much, if I could, to find some considerations which seemed to me absolutely convincing on the one side or the other; for the question seems to me in itself to be an exceedingly interesting one.

I have said that the question is a question *about* Moral Philosophy; and it seems to me in fact to be a very large and general question which affects the whole of Moral Philosophy. In asking it, we are doing no less than asking what it is that people are doing when they study Moral Philosophy at all: we are asking what sort of questions it is which it is the business of Moral Philosophy to discuss and try to find the right answer to. But I intend, for the sake of simplicity, to confine myself to asking it in two particular instances. Moral Philosophy has, in fact,

to discuss a good many different ideas; and though I think this same question may be raised with regard to them all, I intend to pick out two, which seem to me particularly fundamental, and to ask it with regard to them only.

My first business must be to explain what these two ideas are.

The name Moral Philosophy naturally suggests that what is meant is a department of philosophy which has something to do with morality. And we all understand roughly what is meant by morality. We are accustomed to the distinction between moral good and evil, on the one hand, and what is sometimes called physical good and evil on the other. We all make the distinction between a man's moral character, on the one hand, and his agreeableness or intellectual endowments, on the other. We feel that to accuse a man of immoral conduct is quite a different thing from accusing him merely of bad taste or bad manners, or from accusing him merely of stupidity or ignorance. And no less clearly we distinguish between the idea of being under a moral obligation to do a thing, and the idea of being merely under a legal obligation to do it. It is a common-place that the sphere of morality is much wider than the sphere of law: that we are morally bound to do and avoid many things, which are not enjoined or forbidden by the laws of our country; and it is also sometimes held that, if a particular law is unjust or immoral, it may even be a moral duty to disobey it—that is to say that there may be a positive conflict between moral and legal obligation; and the mere fact that this is held, whether truly or falsely, shows, at all events, that the one idea is quite distinct from the other.

The name Moral Philosophy, then, naturally suggests that it is a department of philosophy concerned with morality in this common sense.

And it is, in fact, true that one large department of Moral Philosophy is so concerned. But it would be a mistake to think that the whole subject is *only* concerned with morality. Another important department of it is, as I shall try to show, concerned with ideas which are *not* moral ideas, in this ordinary sense, though, no doubt, they may have something to do with them. And of the two ideas which I propose to pick out for discussion, while one of them is a moral idea, the other belongs to that department of Moral Philosophy, which is not concerned solely with morality, and is not, I think, properly speaking, a moral idea at all.

Let us begin with the one of the two, which is a moral idea.

The particular moral idea which I propose to pick out for discussion is the one which I have called above the idea of moral obligation—the idea of being morally bound to act in a particular way on a particular occasion. But what is, so far as I can see, precisely the same idea is also called by several other names. To say that I am under a moral obligation to do a certain thing is, I think, clearly to say the same thing as what we commonly express by saying that I ought to do it, or that it is my duty to do it. That is to say, the idea of moral obligation is identical with the idea of the moral “ought” and with the idea of duty. And it also seems at first sight as if we might make yet another identification.

The assertion that I ought to do a certain thing seems as if it meant much the same as the assertion that it would be wrong of me *not* to do the thing in question: at all events it is quite clear that, whenever it is my duty to do anything, it would be wrong of me not to do it, and that whenever it would be wrong of me to do anything, then it is my duty to refrain from doing it. In the case of these two ideas, the idea of what is wrong, and the idea of what is my duty or what I ought to do, different

views may be taken as to whether the one is more fundamental than the other, or whether both are equally so; and on the question: *If* one of the two is more fundamental than the other, which of the two is so? Thus some people would say, that the idea of “wrong” is the more fundamental, and that the idea of “duty” is to be defined in terms of it: that, in fact, the statement “It is my duty to keep that promise” merely means “It would be wrong of me not to keep it”; and the statement “It is my duty not to tell a lie” merely means “It would be wrong of me to tell one.” Others again would apparently say just the opposite: that duty is the more fundamental notion, and “wrong” is to be defined in terms of it. While others perhaps would hold that neither is more fundamental than the other; that both are equally fundamental, and that the statement “it would be wrong to do so and so” is only equivalent to, not identical in meaning with, “I ought not to do it.” But whichever of these three views be the true one, there is, I think, no doubt whatever about the equivalence notion of the two ideas; and no doubt, therefore, that whatever answer be given to the question I am going to raise about the one, the same answer must be given to the corresponding question about the other.

The moral idea, then, which I propose to discuss, is the idea of duty or moral obligation, or, what comes to the same thing, the idea of what is wrong—morally wrong. Everybody would agree that this idea—or, to speak more accurately, one or both of these two ideas—is among the most fundamental of our moral ideas, whether or not they would admit that all others, for example the ideas of moral goodness, involve a reference to this one in their definition, or would hold that we have some others which are independent of it, and equally fundamental with it.

But there is a good deal of difficulty in getting clear as to what this idea of moral obligation itself is. Is there in fact only one idea which we call by this name? Or is it possible that on some occasions when we say that so and so is a duty, we mean something different by this expression from what we do on others? And that similarly when we say that so and so is morally wrong, we sometimes use this name "morally wrong" for one idea and sometimes for another; so that one and the same thing may be "morally wrong" in one sense of the word, and yet *not* morally wrong in another? I think, in fact, there are two different senses in which we use these terms; and to point out the difference between them, will help to bring out clearly more the nature of each. And I think perhaps the difference can be brought out most clearly by considering the sort of moral rules with which we are all of us familiar.

Everybody knows that moral teachers are largely concerned in laying down moral rules, and in disputing the truth of rules which have been previously accepted. And moral rules seem to consist, to a very large extent, in assertions to the effect that it is always wrong to do certain actions or to refrain from doing certain others; or (what comes to the same thing) that it is always your duty to refrain from certain actions, and positively to do certain others. The Ten Commandments for example, are instances of moral rules; and most of them are examples of what are called negative rules—that is to say rules which assert merely that it is wrong to do certain positive actions, and therefore our duty to refrain from these actions; instead of rules which assert of certain positive actions, that it is our duty to do them and therefore wrong to refrain from doing them. The fifth commandment, which tells us to honour

our father and mother, is apparently an exception; it seems to be a positive rule. It is not, like the others, expressed in the negative form "Thou shalt *not* do so and so," and it is apparently really meant to assert that we ought to do certain positive actions, not merely that there are some positive action from which we ought to refrain. The difference between this one and the rest will thus serve as an example of the difference between positive and negative moral rules, a difference which is sometimes treated as if it were of great importance. And I do not wish to deny that there may be some important difference between seeing only that certain positive actions are wrong, and seeing also that, in certain cases, to refrain from doing certain actions is just as wrong as positively to do certain others. But this distinction between positive and negative rules is certainly of much less importance than another which is, I think, liable to be confused with it. So far as this distinction goes it is only a distinction between an assertion that it is wrong to do a positive action and an assertion that it is wrong to refrain from doing one: and each of these assertions is equivalent to one which asserts a duty—the first with an assertion that it is a duty to refrain, the second with an assertion that a positive action is a duty. But there is another distinction between some moral rules and others, which is of much greater importance than this one, and which does, I think, give a reason for thinking that the term "moral obligation" is actually used in different senses on different occasions.

I have said that moral rules seem to consist, *to a large extent*, in assertions to the effect that it is always wrong to do certain *actions* or to refrain from doing certain others, or the equivalent assertions in terms of duty. But there is a large

class of moral rules, with which we are all of us very familiar, which do not come under this definition. They are rules which are concerned not with our *actions*, in the natural sense of the word, but with our feelings, thoughts and desires. An illustration of this kind of rule can again be given from the Ten Commandments. Most of the ten, as we all know, are concerned merely with actions; but the tenth at least is clearly an exception. The tenth says "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, nor his wife, nor his servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is his," and, unless "covet" is merely a mistranslation of a word which stands for some kind of action, we plainly have here a rule which is concerned with our *feelings* and not with our actions. And one reason which makes the distinction between rules of this kind and rules concerned with actions important, is that our feelings are not, as a rule, directly within the control of our will in the sense in which many of our actions are. I cannot, for instance, by any single act of will directly prevent from arising in my mind a desire for something that belongs to some one else, even if, when once the desire has arrived, I can by my will prevent its continuance; and even this last I can hardly do *directly* but only by forcing myself to attend to other considerations which may extinguish the desire. But though I thus cannot prevent myself altogether from coveting my neighbour's possessions, I can altogether prevent myself from stealing them. The action of stealing, and the feeling of covetousness, are clearly on a very different level in this respect. The action is *directly* within the control of my will, whereas the feeling is not. *If* I will not to take the thing (though of course some people may find a great difficulty in willing this) it does in general follow directly that I do not take it;

whereas, if I will not to desire it, it emphatically does not, even in general, follow directly that no desire for it will be there. This distinction between the way in which our feelings and our actions are under the control of our wills is, I think, a very real one indeed; we cannot help constantly recognising that it exists. And it has an important bearing on the distinction between those moral rules which deal with actions and those which deal with feelings, for the following reason. The philosopher Kant laid down a well-known proposition to the effect that "ought" implies "can": that is to say, that it cannot be true that you "ought" to do a thing, unless it is true that you *could* do it, *if* you chose. And as regards one of the senses in which we commonly use the words "ought" and "duty," I think this rule is plainly true. When we say absolutely of ourselves or others, "I ought to do so and so" or "you ought to," we imply, I think, very often that the thing in question is a thing which we *could* do, *if* we chose; though of course it may often be a thing which it is very difficult to choose to do. Thus it is clear that I cannot truly say of anyone that he ought to do a certain thing, if it is a thing which it is physically impossible for him to do, however desirable it may be that the thing should be done. And in this sense it is clear that it cannot be truly said of me that I ought not to have a certain feeling, or that I ought not to have had it, if it is a feeling which I could not, by any effort of my will, prevent myself from having. The having or the prevention of a certain feeling is not, of course, strictly ever a *physical* impossibility, but it is very often impossible, in exactly the same sense, in which actions are physically impossible—that is to say that I could not possibly get it or prevent it, even if I would. But this being so, it is plain that such a moral rule as that I ought not

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to covet my neighbour's possessions is, if it means to assert that I ought not, in that sense in which "ought" implies "can," a rule which cannot possibly be true. What it appears to assert is, absolutely universally, of *every* feeling of covetousness, that the feeling in question is one which the person who felt it *ought* not to have felt. But in fact a very large proportion of such feelings (I am inclined to say the vast majority) are feelings which the person who felt them could not have prevented feeling, if he would: they were beyond the control of his will. And hence it is quite emphatically *not* true that none of these feelings *ought* to have been felt, if we are using "ought" in the sense which implies that the person who felt them *could* have avoided them. So far from its being true that absolutely *none* of them ought to have been felt, this is only true of those among them, probably a small minority, which the person who felt them *could* have avoided feeling. If, therefore, moral rules with regard to feelings are to have a chance of being *nearly* true, we must understand the "ought" which occurs in them in some other sense. But with moral rules that refer to actions the case is very different. Take stealing for example. Here again what the Eighth Commandment appears to imply is that absolutely every theft which has ever occurred was an act which the agent ought not to have done; and, if the "ought" is the one which implies "can," it implies, therefore, that every theft was an act which the agent, if he had chosen, could have avoided. And this statement that every theft which has been committed was an act which the thief, *if* he had so willed, could have avoided, though it may be doubted if it is absolutely universally true, is not a statement which is clearly absurd, like the statement that every covetous desire could have been avoided by the will of the

person who felt it. It is probable that the vast majority of acts of theft have been acts which it was in the power of the thief to avoid, if he had willed to do so; whereas this is clearly not true of the vast majority of covetous desires. It is, therefore, quite possible that those who believe we ought never to steal are using "ought" in a sense which implies that stealing always *could* have been avoided; whereas it is I think quite certain that many of those who believe that we ought to avoid all covetous desires, do not believe for a moment that every covetous desire that has ever been felt was a desire which the person who felt it could have avoided feeling, if he had chosen. And yet they certainly do believe, in some sense or other, that no covetous desire *ought* ever to have been felt. The conclusion is, therefore, it seems to me, unavoidable that we do use "ought," the moral "ought," in two different senses; the one a sense in which to say that I ought to have done so and so does really imply that I could have done it, if I had chosen, and the other a sense in which it carries with it no such implication. I think perhaps the difference between the two can be expressed in this way. If we express the meaning of the first "ought," the one which does imply "can," by saying that "I ought to have done so and so" means "It actually *was* my duty to do it"; we can express the meaning of the second by saying that *e.g.* "I ought not to have felt so and so" means *not* "it *was* my duty to avoid that feeling," but "it *would* have been my duty to avoid it, *if* I had been able." And corresponding to these two meanings of "ought" we should, I think, probably distinguish two different sorts of moral rules, which though expressed in the same language, do in fact mean very different things. The one is a set of rules which assert (whether truly or falsely) that it always actually *is* a duty to do or

to refrain from certain actions, and assert therefore that it always is in the power of the agent's will to do or to refrain from them; whereas the other sort only assert that so and so *would* be a duty, if it *were* within our power, without at all asserting that it always is within our power.

We may, perhaps, give a name to the distinction I mean, by calling the first kind of rules—those which do assert that something actually is a duty—“rules of duty,” and by calling the second kind—those which recommend or condemn something not in the control of our wills—“ideal rules”: choosing this latter name because they can be said to inculcate a moral “ideal”—something the attainment of which is not directly within the power of our wills. As a further example of the difference between ideal rules and rules of duty we may take the famous passage from the New Testament (Luke 6, 27) “Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you.” Of these four rules, the three last may be rules of duty, because they refer to things which are plainly, as a rule, at least, in the power of your will; but the first, if “love” be understood in its natural sense as referring to your feelings, is plainly only an “ideal” rule, since such feelings are obviously not directly under our own control, in the same way in which such actions as doing good to, blessing or praying for a person are so. To love certain people, or to feel no anger against them, is a thing which it is quite impossible to attain directly by will, or perhaps ever to attain completely at all. Whereas your behaviour towards them is a matter within your own control: even if you hate a person, or feel angry with him, you can so control yourself as not to do him harm, and even to confer benefits upon him. To do good to your enemies may, then, really be your duty; but it

cannot, in the strict sense, be your duty not to have evil feelings towards them: all that can possibly be true is that it would be your duty if you were able. Yet I think there can be no doubt that what Christ meant to condemn was the occurrence of such feelings altogether; and since, if what he meant to assert about them in condemning them, would have been certainly false, if he had meant to say that you *could* avoid ever feeling them, I think it is clear that what he meant to assert was *not* this, or not this only, but something else, which may quite possibly be true. That is to say, he was asserting an ideal rule, not merely a rule of duty.

It will be seen that this distinction which I am making coincides, roughly at all events, with the distinction which is often expressed as the distinction between rules which tell you what you ought to *be* and rules which tell you merely what you ought to *do*; or as the distinction between rules which are concerned with your inner life—with your thoughts and feelings—and those which are concerned only with your external actions. The rules which are concerned with what you ought to *be* or with your inner life are, for the most part at all events, “ideal” rules; while those which are concerned with what you ought to do or your external actions are very often, at least, rules of duty. And it is often said that one great difference between the New Testament and the Old is its comparatively greater insistence on “ideal” rules—upon a change of heart—as opposed to mere rules of duty. And that there is a comparatively greater insistence on ideal rules I do not wish to deny. But that there are plenty of ideal rules in the Old Testament too must not be forgotten. I have already given an example from the Ten Commandments: namely the rule which says you ought not to covet anything which belongs to your neighbour. And another is

supplied by the Old Testament commandment, "Love thy neighbour as thyself," if by "love" is here meant a feeling which is not within our own control, and not merely that the Jew is to *help* other Jews by his external actions. Indeed, however great may be the difference between the Old Testament and the New in respect of comparative insistence on ideal rules rather than rules of duty, I am inclined to think that there is at least as great a difference, illustrated by this very rule, in another, quite different, respect—namely in the kind of rules, *both ideal and of duty*, which are insisted on. For whereas by "thy neighbour" in the Old Testament there is plainly meant only other Jews, and it is not conceived either that it is the duty of a Jew to help foreigners in general, or an ideal for him to love them; in the New Testament, where the same words are used, "my neighbour" plainly is meant to include all mankind. And this distinction between the view that beneficent action and benevolent feelings should be confined to those of our own nation, and the view that both should be extended equally to all mankind,—a distinction which has nothing to do with the distinction between being and doing, between inner and outer, but affects both equally—is, I am inclined to think, at least as important a difference between New Testament and Old, as the comparatively greater insistence on "ideal" rules. However, the point upon which I want at present to insist is the distinction between ideal rules and rules of duty. Both kinds are commonly included among moral rules, and, as my examples have shown, are often mentioned together as if no great difference were seen between them. What I want to insist on is that there is a great difference between them: that whereas rules of duty do directly assert of the idea of duty, in the sense in which to say that something is your duty implies

that you *can* do it, that certain things are duties, the "ideal" rules do *not* assert this, but something different. Yet the "ideal" rules certainly do, in a sense, assert a "moral obligation." And hence we have to recognise that the phrase "moral obligation" is not merely a name for one idea only, but for two very different ideas; and the same will, of course, be true of the corresponding phrase "morally wrong."

When, therefore, I say that the idea of "moral obligation" is one of the fundamental ideas with which Moral Philosophy is concerned, I think we must admit that this one name really stands for two different ideas. But it does not matter for my purpose which of the two you take. Each of them is undoubtedly a moral idea, and whatever answer be given to the question we are going to raise about the one, will also certainly apply to the other.

But it is now time to turn to the other idea, with which I said that Moral Philosophy has been largely concerned, though it is not, strictly speaking, a moral idea, at all.

And I think, perhaps, a good way of bringing out what this idea is, is to refer to the Ethics of Aristotle. Everybody would admit that the fundamental idea, with which Aristotle's Ethics is concerned, is an idea which it is the business of Moral Philosophy to discuss; and yet I think it is quite plain that this idea is not a moral idea at all. Aristotle does not set out from the idea of moral obligation or duty (indeed throughout his treatise he only mentions this idea quite incidentally); nor even from the idea of moral goodness or moral excellence, though he has a good deal more to say about that; but from the idea of what he calls "the human good," or "good for man." He starts by raising the question what the good for man *is*, and his whole book is arranged in the form of giving a detailed answer to

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that question. And I think we can gather pretty well what the idea is, which he calls by this name, by considering what he says about it. There are two points, in particular, which he insists upon from the outset: first, that nothing can be good, in the sense he means, unless it is something which is worth having for its own sake, and not merely for the sake of something else; it must be good *in itself*; it must not, like wealth (to use one example which he gives) be worth having merely for the sake of what you can do with it; it must be a thing which is worth having even if nothing further comes of it. And secondly (what partly covers the former, but also, I think, says something more) it must, he says, be something that is "self-sufficient": something which, even if you had nothing else would make your life worth having. And further light is thrown upon his meaning when he comes to tell you what he thinks the good for man is: the good, he says, is "mental activity—where such activity is of an excellent kind, or, if there are several different kinds of excellent mental activity, that which has the best and most perfect kind of excellence; and also" (he significantly adds) "mental activity which lasts through a sufficiently long life." The word which I have here translated "excellence" is what is commonly translated "virtue"; but it does not mean quite the same as we mean by "virtue," and that in a very important respect. "Virtue" has come to mean exclusively *moral* excellence; and if that were all Aristotle meant, you might think that what he means by "good" came very near being a moral idea. But it turns out that he includes among "excellences," intellectual excellence, and even that he thinks that the best and most perfect excellence of which he speaks is a particular kind of intellectual excellence, which no one would think of calling a moral quality, namely, the sort of excellence which

makes a man a good philosopher. And as for the word which I have translated "activity," the meaning of this can be best brought out by mentioning the reason which Aristotle himself gives for saying that mere excellence itself is not (as some of the Greeks had said) the good for man. He says, truly enough, that a man may possess the greatest excellence—he may be a very excellent man—even when he is asleep, or is doing nothing; and he points out that the possession of excellence when you are asleep is not a thing that is desirable *for its own sake*—obviously only for the sake of the effects it may produce when you wake up. It is not therefore, he thinks, mere mental excellence, but the *active exercise* of mental excellence—the state of a man's mind, when he not only possesses excellent faculties, moral or intellectual, but is actively engaged in using them, which really constitutes the human good.

Now, when Aristotle talks of "the good for man," there is, I think, as my quotation is sufficient to show, a certain confusion in his mind between what is *good* for man and what is *best* for man. What he really holds is that *any* mental activity which exhibits excellence and is pleasurable is *a* good; and when he adds that, if there are many excellences, *the* good must be mental activity which exhibits the *best* of them, and that it must last through a sufficiently long life, he only means that this is necessary if a man is to get the *best* he can get, not that this is the *only* good he can get. And the idea which I wish to insist on is not, therefore, the idea of "*the* human good," but the more fundamental idea of "good"; the idea, with regard to which he holds that the working of our minds in some excellent fashion is the only good thing that any of us can possess; and the idea of which "better" is the comparative, when he says that mental activity

which exhibits some sorts of excellence is *better* than mental activity which exhibits others, though both are good, and that excellent mental activity continued over a longer time is *better* than the same continued for a shorter. This idea of what is "good," in the sense in which Aristotle uses it in these cases, is an idea which we all of us constantly use, and which is certainly an idea which it is the business of Moral Philosophy to discuss, though it is not a moral idea. The main difficulty with regard to it is to distinguish it clearly from other senses in which we use the same word. For, when we say that a thing is "good," or one thing "better" than another, we by no means always mean that it is better in this sense. Often, when we call a thing good we are not attributing to it any characteristic which it would possess *if it existed quite alone*, and if nothing further were to come of it; but are merely saying of it that it is a sort of thing from which other good things do in fact come, or which is such that, when accompanied by other things, the whole thus formed is "good" in Aristotle's sense, although, by itself, it is not. Thus a man may be "good," and his character may be "good," and yet neither are "good" in this fundamental sense, in which goodness is a characteristic which a thing would possess, if it existed quite alone. For, as Aristotle says, a good man may exist, and may have a good character, even when he is fast asleep; and yet if there were nothing in the Universe but good men, with good characters, all fast asleep, there would be nothing in it which was "good" in the fundamental sense with which we are concerned. Thus "moral goodness," in the sense of good character, as distinguished from the actual working of a good character in various forms of mental activity, is certainly not "good" in the sense in which good means "good for its own

sake." And even with regard to the actual exercise of certain forms of moral excellence, it seems to me that in estimating the value of such exercise relatively to other things, we are apt to take into account, not merely its intrinsic value—the sort of value which it would possess, if it existed quite alone—but also its effects: we rate it higher than we should do if we were considering only its intrinsic value, because we take into account the other good things which we know are apt to flow from it. Certain things which have intrinsic value are distinguished from others, by the fact that more good consequences are apt to flow from them; and where this is the case, we are apt, I think, quite unjustly, to think that their intrinsic value must be higher too. One thing, I think, is clear about intrinsic value—goodness in Aristotle's sense—namely that it is only actual occurrences, actual states of things over a certain period of time—not such things as men, or characters, or material things, that can have any intrinsic value at all. But even this is not sufficient to distinguish intrinsic value clearly from other sorts of goodness: since even in the case of actual occurrences, we often call them good or bad for the sake of their effects or their promise of effects. Thus we all hope that the state of things in England, as a whole, will really be better some day than it has been in the past—that there will be progress and improvement: we hope, for instance, that, if we consider the whole of the lives lived in England during some year in the next century, it may turn out that the state of things, as a whole, during that year will be really better than it ever has been in any past year. And when we use "better" in this way—in the sense in which progress or improvement means a change to a *better* state of things—we are certainly thinking partly of a state of things which has a greater

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intrinsic value. And we certainly do not mean by improvement merely *moral* improvement. An improvement in moral conditions, other things being equal, may no doubt be a gain in intrinsic value; but we should certainly hold that, moral conditions being equal, there is yet room for improvement in other ways—in the diminution of misery and purely physical evils, for example. But in considering the degree of a real change for the better in intrinsic value, there is certainly danger of confusion between the degree in which the actual lives lived are really intrinsically better, and the degree in which there is improvement merely in the *means* for living a good life. If we want to estimate rightly what would constitute an intrinsic improvement in the state of things in our imagined year next century, and whether it would on the whole be really “good” at all, we have to consider what value it would have if it were to be the last year of life upon this planet; if the world were going to come to an end, as soon as it was over; and therefore to discount entirely all the promises it might contain of future goods. This criterion for distinguishing whether the kind of goodness which we are attributing to anything is really intrinsic value or not, the criterion which consists in considering whether it is a characteristic which the thing would possess, if it were to have absolutely no further consequences or accompaniments, seems to me to be one which it is very necessary to apply if we wish to distinguish clearly between different meanings of the word “good.” And it is only the idea of what is good, where by “good” is meant a characteristic which has this mark, that I want now to consider.

The two ideas, then, with regard to which I want to raise a question, are first the moral idea of “moral obligation” or “duty,” and secondly the non-moral idea of “good” in this special sense.

And the question with regard to them, which I want to raise, is this. With regard to both ideas many philosophers have thought and still think—not only *think*, but seem to be absolutely convinced, that when we apply them to anything—when we assert of any action that it ought not to have been done, or of any state of things that it was or would be good or better than another, then it *must* be the case that *all* that we are asserting of the thing or things in question is simply and solely that some person or set of persons actually does have, or has a tendency to have a certain sort of feeling towards the thing or things in question: that there is absolutely no more in it than this. While others seem to be convinced, no less strongly, that there *is* more in it than this: that when we judge that an action is a duty or is really wrong, we are *not* merely making a judgment to the effect that some person or set of persons, have, or tend to have a certain sort of feeling, when they witness or think of such actions, and that similarly when we judge that a certain state of things was or would be better than another, we are *not* merely making a judgment about the feelings which some person or set of persons would have, in witnessing or thinking of the two states of things, or in comparing them together. The question at issue between these two views is often expressed in other less clear forms. It is often expressed as the question whether the ideas of duty and of good or value, are or are not, “objective” ideas: as the problem as to the “objectivity” of duty and intrinsic value. The first set of philosophers would maintain that the notion of the “objectivity” of duty and of value is a mere chimera; while the second would maintain that these ideas really are “objective.” And others express it as the question whether the ideas of duty and of good are “absolute” or purely “relative:’

whether there is any such thing as an absolute duty or an absolute good, or whether good and duty are purely relative to human feelings and desires. But both these ways of expressing it are, I think, apt to lead to confusion. And another even less clear way in which it is put is by asking the question: Is the assertion that such and such a thing is a duty, or has intrinsic value, ever *a dictate of reason*? But so far as I can gather, the question really at issue, and expressed in these obscure ways, is the one which I have tried to state. It is the question whether when we judge (whether truly or falsely) that an action is a duty or a state of things good, *all* that we are thinking about the action or the state of things in question, is simply and solely that we ourselves or others have or tend to have a certain feeling towards it when we contemplate or think of it. And the question seems to me to be of great interest, because, if this is all, then it is evident that all the ideas with which Moral Philosophy is concerned are merely psychological ideas; and all moral rules, and statements as to what is intrinsically valuable, merely true or false psychological statements; so that the whole of Moral Philosophy and Ethics will be merely departments of Psychology. Whereas, if the contrary is the case, then these two ideas of moral obligation and intrinsic value, will be no more purely psychological ideas than are the ideas of shape or size or number; and Moral Philosophy will be concerned with characteristics of actions and feelings and states of affairs, which these actions and feelings and states of affairs would or might have possessed, even if human psychology had been quite different from what it is.

Which, then, of these two views is the true one? Are these two ideas merely psychological ideas in the sense which I have tried to explain, or are they not?

As I have said, I feel some doubts myself whether they are or not: it does not seem to me to be a matter to dogmatize upon. But I am strongly inclined to think that they are not merely psychological; that Moral Philosophy and Ethics are not mere departments of Psychology. In favour of the view that the two ideas in question are merely psychological, there is, so far as I am aware, nothing whatever to be said, except that so many philosophers have been absolutely convinced that they are. None of them seem to me to have succeeded in bringing forward a single argument in favour of their view. And against the view that they are, there seem to me to be some quite definite arguments, though I am not satisfied that any of these arguments are absolutely conclusive. I will try to state briefly and clearly what seem to me the main arguments against the view that these are merely psychological ideas; although, in doing so, I am faced with a certain difficulty. For though, as I have said, many philosophers are absolutely convinced, that "duty" and "good" do merely stand for psychological ideas, they are by no means agreed *what* the psychological ideas are for which they stand. Different philosophers have hit on very different ideas as being the ideas for which they stand; and this very fact that, if they *are* psychological ideas at all, it is so difficult to agree as to *what* ideas they are, seems to me in itself to be an argument against the view that they are so.

Let me take each of the two ideas separately, and try to exhibit the sort of objection there seems to be to the view that it is merely a psychological idea.

Take first the idea of moral obligation. What purely psychological assertion can I be making about an action, when I assert that it was "wrong," that it ought not to have been done?

In this case, one view, which is in some ways the most plausible that can be taken, is that in every case I am merely making an assertion about my own psychology. But what assertion about my own psychology can I be making? Let us take as an example, the view of Prof. Westermarck, which is as plausible a view of this type as any that I know of. He holds that what I am judging when I judge an action to be wrong, is merely that it is of a sort which *tends* to excite in me a peculiar kind of feeling—the feeling of moral indignation or disapproval. He does not say that what I am judging is that the action in question *is actually* exciting this feeling in me. For it is obviously not true that, when I judge an action to be much more wrong than another, I am always actually feeling much indignation at the thought of either, or much more indignation at the thought of the one than at that of the other; and it is inconceivable that I should constantly be making so great a mistake as to my own psychology, as to think that I am actually feeling great indignation when I am not. But he thinks it is plausible to say that I am making a judgment as to the *tendency* of such actions to excite indignation in me; that, for instance, when I judge that one is much more wrong than the other, I am merely asserting the fact, taught me by my past experience, that, if I were to witness the two actions, under similar circumstances, I should feel a much more intense indignation at the one than at the other.¹

¹ E. Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas*, Vol. I, pp. 4, 13, 17-18, 100-101. On p. 105, however, Westermarck suggests a view inconsistent with this one: namely that, when I judge an action to be wrong, I am not *merely* asserting that it has a tendency to excite moral indignation in me, but am also asserting that other people *would be* convinced that it has a tendency to excite moral indignation in them, if they “knew the act and all its attendant circumstances as well as [I do], and if, at the same time their emotions were as refined as [mine].”

But there is one very serious objection to such a view, which I think that those who take it are apt not fully to realise. If this view be true, then when I judge an action to be wrong, I am merely making a judgment about my own feelings towards it; and when you judge it to be wrong, you are merely making a judgment about yours. And hence the word “wrong” in my mouth, means something entirely different from what it does in yours; just as the word “I” in my mouth stands for an entirely different person from what it does in yours—in mine it stands for me, in yours it stands for you. That is to say when I judge of a given action that it was wrong, and you perhaps of the very same action that it was not, we are not in fact differing in opinion about it at all; any more than we are differing in opinion if I make the judgment “I came from Cambridge to-day” and you make the judgment “I did not come from Cambridge to-day.” When I say “That was wrong” I am merely saying “That sort of action excites indignation in me, when I see it”; and when you say “No; it was not wrong” you are merely saying “It does not excite indignation in *me*, when I see it.” And obviously both judgments may perfectly well be true together; just as my judgment that I did come from Cambridge to-day and yours that you did not, may perfectly well be true together. In other words, and this is what I want to insist on, if this view be true, then there is absolutely no such thing as a difference of opinion upon moral questions. If two persons think they differ in opinion on a moral question (and it certainly seems as if they sometimes *think* so), they are always, on this view, making a mistake, and a mistake so gross that it seems hardly possible that they should make it: a mistake as gross as that which would be involved in thinking that when you say “I did not come from Cambridge to-day” you

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are denying what I say when I say "I did." And this seems to me to be a very serious objection to the view. Don't people, in fact, sometimes really differ in opinion on a moral question? Certainly all appearances are in favour of the view that they do: and yet, if they do, that can only be if when I think a thing to be wrong, and you think it not to be wrong, I mean by "wrong" the very *same* characteristic which you mean, and am thinking that the action possesses this characteristic while you are thinking it does not. It must be the very *same* characteristic which we both mean; it cannot be, as this view says it is, merely that I am thinking that it has to my feelings the very same relation, which you are thinking that it has not got to yours; since, if this were all, then there would be no difference of opinion between us.

And this view that when we talk of wrong or duty, we are not merely, each of us, making a statement about the relation of the thing in question to our own feelings, may be reinforced by another consideration. It is commonly believed that some moral rules exhibit a *higher* morality than others: that, for instance a person who believes that it is our duty to do good to our enemies, has a higher moral belief, than one who believes that he has no such duty, but only a duty to do good to his friends or fellow-countrymen. And Westermarck himself believes that, some moral beliefs, "mark a stage of higher refinement in the evolution of the moral consciousness."* But what, on his view can be meant by saying that one moral belief is higher than another? If A believes that it is his duty to do good to his enemies and B believes that it is not, in what sense can A's belief be higher than B's? Not, on this view, in the sense that what A believes is true, and what B believes is not; for what A is believing is merely that the idea of not doing good

to your enemies tends to excite in him a feeling of moral indignation, and what B believes is merely that it does not tend to excite this feeling in *him*: and both beliefs may perfectly well be true; it may really be true that the same actions do excite the feeling in A, and that they don't in B. What then, could Westermarck mean by saying that A's morality is higher than B's? So far as I can see, what, on his own views, he would have to mean is merely that he himself, Westermarck, shares A's morality and does not share B's: that it is true of him, as of A, that neglecting to do good to enemies excites his feelings of moral indignation and not true of him as it is of B, that it does *not* excite such feelings in him. In short he would have to say that what he means by calling A's morality the higher is merely "A's morality is *my* morality, and B's is not." But it seems to me quite clear that when we say one morality is higher than another, we do not merely mean that it is our own. We are not merely asserting that it has a certain relation to our own feelings, but are asserting, if I may say so, that the person who has it has a better moral taste than the person who has not. And whether or not this means merely, as I think, that what the one believes is true, and what the other believes is false, it is at all events inconsistent with the view that in all cases we are merely making a statement about our own feelings.

For these reasons it seems to me extremely difficult to believe that when we judge things to be wrong, each of us is merely making a judgment about *his own* psychology. But if not about our own, then about whose? I have already said that the view that, if the judgment is merely a psychological one at all, it is a judgment about our own psychology, is in some ways more plausible than any other view. And I think we can now see that any other view is *not* plausible. The alternatives

* Ibid. p. 89.

are that I should be making a judgment about the psychology of all mankind, or about that of some particular section of it. And that the first alternative is not true, is, I think, evident from the fact that, when I judge an action to be wrong, I may emphatically *not* believe that it is true of all mankind that they would regard it with feelings of moral disapproval. I may know perfectly well that some would not. Most philosophers, therefore, have not ventured to say that this is the judgment I am making; they say, for instance, that I am making a judgment about the feelings of the particular society to which I belong—about, for instance, the feelings of an impartial spectator in that society. But, if this view be taken, it is open to the same objections as the view that I am merely making a judgment about my own feelings. If we could say that every man, when he judges a thing to be wrong, was making a statement about the feelings of all mankind, then when A says "This is wrong" and B says "No, it isn't," they would really be differing in opinion, since A would be saying that all mankind feel in a certain way towards the action, and B would be saying that they don't. But if A is referring merely to his society and B to his, and their societies are different, then obviously they are not differing in opinion at all: it may perfectly well be true both that an impartial spectator in A's society does have a certain sort of feeling towards actions of the sort in question, and that an impartial spectator in B's does not. This view, therefore, implies that it is impossible for two men belonging to different societies ever to differ in opinion on a moral question. And this is a view which I find it almost as hard to accept as the view that *no* two men ever differ in opinion on one.

For these reasons I think there are serious

objections to the view that the idea of moral obligation is merely a psychological idea.

But now let us briefly consider the idea of "good," in Aristotle's sense, or intrinsic value.

As regards this idea, there is again a difference of opinion among those who hold that it is a psychological idea, as to *what* idea it is. The majority seem to hold that it is to be defined, somehow, in terms of desire; while others have held that what we are judging when we judge that one state of things is or would be intrinsically better than another, is rather that the belief that the one was going to be realized would, under certain circumstances, give more pleasure to some man or set of men, than the belief that the other was. But the same objections seem to me to apply whichever of these two views be taken.

Let us take desire. About whose desires am I making a judgment, when I judge that one state of things would be better than another?

Here again, it may be said, first of all, that I am merely making a judgment about my own. But in this case the view that my judgment is merely about my own psychology is, I think, exposed to an obvious objection to which Westermarck's view that my judgments of moral obligation are about my own psychology was not exposed. The obvious objection is that it is evidently not true that I do in fact always desire more, what I judge to be better: I may judge one state of things to be better than another, even when I know perfectly well not only that I don't desire it more, but that I have no tendency to do so. It is a notorious fact that men's strongest desires are, as a rule, for things in which they themselves have some personal concern; and yet the fact that this is so, and that they know it to be so, does not prevent them from judging that changes, which would not affect them personally,

would constitute a very much greater improvement in the world's condition, than changes which would. For this reason alone the view that when I judge one state of things to be better than another I am merely making a judgment about my own psychology, must, I think, be given up: it is incredible that we should all be making such mistakes about our feelings, as, on this view, we should constantly be doing. And there is, of course, besides, the same objection, as applied in the case of moral obligation: namely that, if this view were true, no two men could ever differ in opinion as to which of two states was the better, whereas it appears that they certainly sometimes do differ in opinion on such an issue.

My judgment, then, is not merely a judgment about my own psychology: but, if so, about whose psychology is it a judgment? It cannot be a judgment that all men desire the one state more than the other; because that would include the judgment that I myself do so, which, as we have seen, I often know to be false, even while I judge that the one state really is better. And it cannot, I think, be a judgment merely about the feelings or desires of an impartial spectator in my own society; since that would involve the paradox that men belonging to different societies could never differ in opinion as to what was better. But we have here to consider an alternative, which did not arise in the case of moral obligation. It is a notorious fact that the satisfaction of some of our desires is incompatible with the satisfaction of others, and the satisfaction of those of some men with the satisfaction of those of others. And this fact has suggested to some philosophers that what we mean by saying that one state of things would be better than another, is merely that it is a state in which more of the desires, of those who were in it, would be

satisfied at once, than would be the case with the other. But to this view the fundamental objection seems to me to be that whether the one state was better than the other would depend not merely upon the number of desires that were simultaneously satisfied in it, but upon what the desires were desires for. I can imagine a state of things in which all desires were satisfied, and yet can judge of it that it would not be so good as another in which some were left unsatisfied. And for this reason I cannot assent to the view that my judgment, that one state of things is better than another is merely a judgment about the psychology of the people concerned in it.

This is why I find it hard to believe that either the idea of moral obligation or the idea of intrinsic value is merely a psychological idea. It seems to me that Moral Philosophy cannot be merely a department of Psychology. But no doubt there may be arguments on the other side to which I have not done justice.

THE END