that charity is a virtue must attempt to discover the relative merits of every different form of charity. Casuistry forms, therefore, part of the ideal of ethical science: Ethics cannot be complete without it. The defects of Casuistry are not defects of principle; no objection can be taken to its aim and object. It has failed only because it is far too difficult a subject to be treated adequately in our present state of knowledge. The casuist has been unable to distinguish, in the cases which he treats, those elements upon which their value depends. Hence he often thinks two cases to be alike in respect of value, when in reality they are alike only in some other respect. It is to mistakes of this kind that the pernicious influence of such investigations has been due. For Casuistry is the goal of ethical investigation. It cannot be safely attempted at the beginning of our studies, but only at the end.

5. But our question 'What is good?' may have still another meaning. We may, in the third place, mean to ask, not what thing or things are good, but how 'good' is to be defined. This is an enquiry which belongs only to Ethics, not to Casuistry; and this is the enquiry which will occupy us first.

It is an enquiry to which most special attention should be directed; since this question, how 'good' is to be defined, is the most fundamental question in all Ethics. That which is meant by 'good' is, in fact, except its converse 'bad,' the only simple object of thought which is peculiar to Ethics. Its definition is, therefore, the most essential point in the definition of Ethics; and moreover a mistake with regard to it entails a far larger number of erroneous ethical judgments than any other. Unless this first question be fully understood, and its true answer clearly recognised, the rest of Ethics is as good as useless from the point of view of systematic knowledge. True ethical judgments, of the two kinds last dealt with, may indeed be made by those who do not know the answer to this question as well as by those who do; and it goes without saying that the two classes of people may lead equally good lives. But it is extremely unlikely that the most general ethical judgments will be equally valid, in the absence of a true answer to this question: I shall presently try to shew that the gravest errors have been largely due to
beliefs in a false answer. And, in any case, it is impossible that, till the answer to this question be known, any one should know what is the evidence for any ethical judgment whatsoever. But the main object of Ethics, as a systematic science, is to give correct reasons for thinking that this or that is good; and, unless this question be answered, such reasons cannot be given. Even, therefore, apart from the fact that a false answer leads to false conclusions, the present enquiry is a most necessary and important part of the science of Ethics.

6. What, then, is good? How is good to be defined? Now, it may be thought that this is a verbal question. A definition does indeed often mean the expressing of one word's meaning in other words. But this is not the sort of definition I am asking for. Such a definition can never be of ultimate importance in any study except lexicography. If I wanted that kind of definition I should have to consider in the first place how people generally used the word 'good'; but my business is not with its proper usage, as established by custom. I should, indeed, be foolish, if I tried to use it for something which it did not usually denote: if, for instance, I were to announce that, whenever I used the word 'good,' I must be understood to be thinking of that object which is usually denoted by the word 'table.' I shall, therefore, use the word in the sense in which I think it is ordinarily used; but at the same time I am not anxious to discuss whether I am right in thinking that it is so used. My business is solely with that object or idea, which I hold, rightly or wrongly, that the word is generally used to stand for. What I want to discover is the nature of that object or idea, and about this I am extremely anxious to arrive at an agreement.

But, if we understand the question in this sense, my answer to it may seem a very disappointing one. If I am asked 'What is good?' my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked 'How is good to be defined?' my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it. But disappointing as these answers may appear, they are of the very last importance. To readers who are familiar with philosophic terminology, I can express their imp-
first instance, be capable of similar definition, but which must
in the end be reducible to simplest parts, which can no longer
be defined. But yellow and good, we say, are not complex:
they are notions of that simple kind, out of which definitions
are composed and with which the power of further defining
ceases.

8. When we say, as Webster says, ‘The definition of horse
is "A hoofed quadruped of the genus Equus,"’ we may, in fact,
mean three different things. (1) We may mean merely: ‘When
I say “horse,” you are to understand that I am talking about
a hoofed quadruped of the genus Equus.’ This might be called
the verbal definition: and I do not mean that good is
indefinable in that sense. (2) We may mean, as Webster ought
to mean: ‘When most English people say “horse,” they mean
a hoofed quadruped of the genus Equus.’ This may be called
the verbal definition proper, and I do not say that good is
indefinable in this sense either; for it is certainly possible to
discover how people use a word: otherwise, we could never
have known that ‘good’ may be translated by ‘gut’ in German
and by ‘bon’ in French. But (3) we may, when we define
horse, mean something much more important. We may mean
that a certain object, which we all of us know, is composed in
a certain manner: that it has four legs, a head, a heart, a liver,
etc., etc., all of them arranged in definite relations to one
another. It is in this sense that I deny good to be definable.
I say that it is not composed of any parts, which we can sub-
stitute for it in our minds when we are thinking of it. We
might think just as clearly and correctly about a horse, if we
thought of all its parts and their arrangement instead of thinking
of the whole: we could, I say, think how a horse differed from
a donkey just as well, just as truly, in this way, as now we do,
only not so easily; but there is nothing whatsoever which we
could so substitute for good; and that is what I mean, when
I say that good is indefinable.

9. But I am afraid I have still not removed the chief
difficulty which may prevent acceptance of the proposition that
good is indefinable. I do not mean to say that the good, that
which is good, is thus indefinable; if I did think so, I should not
be writing on Ethics, for my main object is to help towards
discovering that definition. It is just because I think there
will be less risk of error in our search for a definition of ‘the
good,’ that I am now insisting that good is indefinable. I must
try to explain the difference between these two. I suppose it
may be granted that ‘good’ is an adjective. Well ‘the good,
‘that which is good,’ must therefore be the substantive to which
the adjective ‘good’ will apply: it must be the whole of that to
which the adjective will apply, and the adjective must always
truly apply to it. But if it is that to which the adjective will
apply, it must be something different from that adjective itself;
and the whole of that something different, whatever it is, will
be our definition of the good. Now it may be that this some-
thing will have other adjectives, beside ‘good,’ that will apply
to it. It may be full of pleasure, for example; it may be
intelligent; and if these two adjectives are really part of its
definition, then it will certainly be true, that pleasure and in-
telligence are good. And many people appear to think that,
if we say ‘Pleasure and intelligence are good,’ or if we say
‘Only pleasure and intelligence are good,’ we are defining ‘good.’
Well, I cannot deny that propositions of this nature may some-
times be called definitions; I do not know well enough how
the word is generally used to decide upon this point. I only
wish it to be understood that is not what I mean when
I say there is no possible definition of good, and that I shall
not mean this if I use the word again. I do most fully believe
that some true proposition of the form ‘Intelligence is good
and intelligence alone is good’ can be found; if none could be
found, our definition of the good would be impossible. As it is,
I believe the good to be definable; and yet I still say that good
itself is indefinable.

10. ‘Good,’ then, if we mean by it that quality which we
assert to belong to a thing, when we say that the thing is good,
is incapable of any definition, in the most important sense of
that word. The most important sense of ‘definition’ is that in
which a definition states what are the parts which invariably
compose a certain whole; and in this sense ‘good’ has no
definition because it is simple and has no parts. It is one of
Those innumerable objects of thought which are themselves incapable of definition, because they are the ultimate terms by reference to which whatever is capable of definition must be defined. That there must be an indefinite number of such terms is obvious, on reflection; since we cannot define anything except by an analysis, which, when carried as far as it will go, refers us to something, which is simply different from anything else, and which by that ultimate difference explains the peculiarity of the whole which we are defining: for every whole contains some parts which are common to other wholes also. There is, therefore, no intrinsic difficulty in the contention that 'good' denotes a simple and indefinable quality. There are many other instances of such qualities.

Consider yellow, for example. We may try to define it, by describing its physical equivalent; we may state what kind of light-vibrations must stimulate the normal eye, in order that we may perceive it. But a moment's reflection is sufficient to show that those light-vibrations are not themselves what we mean by yellow. They are not what we perceive. Indeed we should never have been able to discover their existence, unless we had first been struck by the patent difference of quality between the different colours. The most we can be entitled to say of those vibrations is that they are what corresponds in space to the yellow which we actually perceive.

Yet a mistake of this simple kind has commonly been made about 'good.' It may be true that all things which are good are also something else, just as it is true that all things which are yellow produce a certain kind of vibration in the light. And it is a fact, that Ethics aims at discovering what are those other properties belonging to all things which are good. But far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good; that these properties, in fact, were simply not 'other,' but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness. This view I propose to call the 'naturalistic fallacy' and of it I shall now endeavour to dispose.

11. Let us consider what it is such philosophers say. And first it is to be noticed that they do not agree among themselves. They not only say that they are right as to what good is, but they endeavour to prove that other people who say that it is something else, are wrong. One, for instance, will affirm that good is pleasure, another, perhaps, that good is that which is desired; and each of these will argue eagerly to prove that the other is wrong. But how is that possible? One of them says that good is nothing but the object of desire, and at the same time tries to prove that it is not pleasure. But from his first assertion, that good just means the object of desire, one of two things must follow as regards his proof:

(1) He may be trying to prove that the object of desire is not pleasure. But, if this be all, where is his Ethics? The position he is maintaining is merely a psychological one. Desire is something which occurs in our minds, and pleasure is something else which so occurs; and our would-be ethical philosopher is merely holding that the latter is not the object of the former. But what has that to do with the question in dispute? His opponent held the ethical proposition that pleasure was the good, and although he should prove a million times over the psychological proposition that pleasure is not the object of desire, he is no nearer proving his opponent to be wrong. The position is like this. One man says a triangle is a circle: another replies 'A triangle is a straight line, and I will prove to you that I am right: for' (this is the only argument) 'a straight line is not a circle.' 'That is quite true,' the other may reply; 'but nevertheless a triangle is a circle, and you have said nothing whatever to prove the contrary. What is proved is that one of us is wrong, for we agree that a triangle cannot be both a straight line and a circle: but which is wrong, there can be no earthly means of proving, since you define triangle as straight line and I define it as circle.'—Well, that is one alternative which any naturalistic Ethics has to face; if good is defined as something else, it is then impossible either to prove that any other definition is wrong or even to deny such definition.

(2) The other alternative will scarcely be more welcome. It is that the discussion is after all a verbal one. When A says 'Good means pleasant' and B says 'Good means desired,' they may merely wish to assert that most people have used the word
for what is pleasant and for what is desired respectively. And
this is quite an interesting subject for discussion: only it is not
a whit more an ethical discussion than the last was. Nor do I
think that any exponent of naturalistic Ethics would be willing
to allow that this was all he meant. They are all so anxious to
persuade us that what they call the good is what we really
ought to do. ‘Do, pray, act so, because the word “good” is
generally used to denote actions of this nature’: such, on this
view, would be the substance of their teaching. And in so far
as they tell us how we ought to act, their teaching is truly
ethical, as they mean it to be. But how perfectly absurd is the
reason they would give for it! ‘You are to do this, because
most people use a certain word to denote conduct such as this.’
‘You are to say the thing which is not, because most people
call it lying.’ That is an argument just as good!—My dear
sirs, what we want to know from you as ethical teachers, is not
how people use a word; it is not even, what kind of actions
they approve, which the use of this word ‘good’ may certainly
imply: what we want to know is simply what is good. We
may indeed agree that what most people do think good, is
actually so; we shall at all events be glad to know their
opinions: but when we say their opinions about what is good,
we do mean what we say; we do not care whether they call
that thing which they mean ‘horse’ or ‘table’ or ‘chair,’ ‘gut
or ‘bon’ or ‘ἀγαθός’; we want to know what it is that they so
call. When they say ‘Pleasure is good,’ we cannot believe
that they merely mean ‘Pleasure is pleasure’ and nothing more
than that.

12. Suppose a man says ‘I am pleased’; and suppose that
is not a lie or a mistake but the truth. Well, if it is true, what
does that mean? It means that his mind, a certain definite
mind, distinguished by certain definite marks from all others,
has at this moment a certain definite feeling called pleasure.
‘Pleased’ means nothing but having pleasure, and though we
may be more pleased or less pleased, and even, we may admit
for the present, have one or another kind of pleasure; yet in so
far as it is pleasure we have, whether there be more or less
of it, and whether it be of one kind or another, what we have is
one definite thing, absolutely indefinable, some one thing that
is the same in all the various degrees and in all the various
kinds of it that there may be. We may be able to say how it is
related to other things: that, for example, it is in the mind,
that it causes desire, that we are conscious of it, etc., etc. We
can, I say, describe its relations to other things, but define it we
can not. And if anybody tried to define pleasure for us as
being any other natural object; if anybody were to say, for
instance, that pleasure means the sensation of red, and were to
proceed to deduce from that that pleasure is a colour, we should
be entitled to laugh at him and to distrust his future statements
about pleasure. Well, that would be the same fallacy which I
have called the naturalistic fallacy. That ‘pleased’ does not
mean ‘having the sensation of red,’ or anything else whatever,
does not prevent us from understanding what it does mean. It
is enough for us to know that ‘pleased’ does mean ‘having the
sensation of pleasure,’ and though pleasure is absolutely in-
definable, though pleasure is pleasure and nothing else whatever,
yet we feel no difficulty in saying that we are pleased. The
reason is, of course, that when I say ‘I am pleased,’ I do not
mean that ‘I’ am the same thing as ‘having pleasure.’ And
similarly no difficulty need be found in my saying that ‘pleasure
is good’ and yet not meaning that ‘pleasure’ is the same thing
as ‘good,’ that pleasure means good, and that good means
pleasure. If I were to imagine that when I said ‘I am pleased,’
I meant that I was exactly the same thing as ‘pleased,’ I should
not indeed call that a naturalistic fallacy, although it would be
the same fallacy as I have called naturalistic with reference to
Ethics. The reason of this is obvious enough. When a man
confuses two natural objects with one another, defining the one
by the other, if for instance, he confuses himself, who is one
natural object, with ‘pleased’ or with ‘pleasure’ which are
others, then there is no reason to call the fallacy naturalistic.
But if he confuses ‘good,’ which is not in the same sense a
natural object, with any natural object whatever, then there is
a reason for calling that a naturalistic fallacy; its being made
with regard to ‘good’ marks it as something quite specific, and
this specific mistake deserves a name because it is so common.
14 THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF ETHICS

As for the reasons why good is not to be considered a natural object, they may be reserved for discussion in another place. But, for the present, it is sufficient to notice this: Even if it were a natural object, that would not alter the nature of the fallacy nor diminish its importance one whit. All that I have said about it would remain quite equally true: only the name which I have called it would not be so appropriate as I think it is. And I do not care about the name: what I do care about is the fallacy. It does not matter what we call it, provided we recognise it when we meet with it. It is to be met with in almost every book on Ethics; and yet it is not recognised: and that is why it is necessary to multiply illustrations of it, and convenient to give it a name. It is a very simple fallacy indeed. When we say that an orange is yellow, we do not think our statement binds us to hold that ‘orange’ means nothing else than ‘yellow,’ or that nothing can be yellow but an orange. Supposing the orange is also sweet! Does that bind us to say that ‘sweet’ is exactly the same thing as ‘yellow,’ that ‘sweet’ must be defined as ‘yellow’? And supposing it be recognised that ‘yellow’ just means ‘yellow’ and nothing else whatever, does that make it any more difficult to hold that oranges are yellow? Most certainly it does not: on the contrary, it would be absolutely meaningless to say that oranges were yellow, unless yellow did in the end mean just ‘yellow’ and nothing else whatever—unless it was absolutely indefinable. We should not get any very clear notion about things, which are yellow—we should not get very far with our science, if we were bound to hold that everything which was yellow, meant exactly the same thing as yellow. We should find we had to hold that an orange was exactly the same thing as a stool, a piece of paper, a lemon, anything you like. We could prove any number of absurdities; but should we be the nearer to the truth? Why, then, should it be different with ‘good’? Why, if good is good and indefinable, should I be held to deny that pleasure is good? Is there any difficulty in holding both to be true at once? On the contrary, there is no meaning in saying that pleasure is good, unless good is something different from pleasure. It is absolutely useless, so far as Ethics is concerned, to prove, as Mr Spencer

tries to do, that increase of pleasure coincides with increase of life, unless good means something different from either life or pleasure. He might just as well try to prove that an orange is yellow by shewing that it always is wrapped up in paper.

13. In fact, if it is not the case that ‘good’ denotes something simple and indefinable, only two alternatives are possible: either it is a complex, a given whole, about the correct analysis of which there may be disagreement; or else it means nothing at all, and there is no such subject as Ethics. In general, however, ethical philosophers have attempted to define good, without recognising what such an attempt must mean. They actually use arguments which involve one or both of the absurdities considered in § 11. We are, therefore, justified in concluding that the attempt to define good is chiefly due to want of clearness as to the possible nature of definition. There are, in fact, only two serious alternatives to be considered, in order to establish the conclusion that ‘good’ does denote a simple and indefinable notion. It might possibly denote a complex, as ‘horse’ does; or it might have no meaning at all. Neither of these possibilities has, however, been clearly conceived and seriously maintained, as such, by those who presume to define good; and both may be dismissed by a simple appeal to facts.

(1) The hypothesis that disagreement about the meaning of good is disagreement with regard to the correct analysis of a given whole, may be most plainly seen to be incorrect by consideration of the fact that, whatever definition be offered, it may be always asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good. To take, for instance, one of the more plausible, because one of the more complicated, of such proposed definitions, it may easily be thought, at first sight, that to be good may mean to be that which we desire to desire. Thus if we apply this definition to a particular instance and say ‘When we think that A is good, we are thinking that A is one of the things which we desire to desire,’ our proposition may seem quite plausible. But, if we carry the investigation further, and ask ourselves ‘Is it good to desire to desire A?’ it is apparent, on a little reflection, that this question is itself as intelligible, as the original question ‘Is A good?’—that we are,
in fact, now asking for exactly the same information about the desire to desire A for which we formerly asked with regard to A itself. But it is also apparent that the meaning of this second question cannot be correctly analysed into "Is the desire to desire A one of the things which we desire to desire?" we have not before our minds anything so complicated as the question "Do we desire to desire to desire to desire A?". Moreover any one can easily convince himself by inspection that the predicate of this proposition—good—is positively different from the notion of "desiring to desire" which enters into its subject: That we should desire to desire A is good' is not merely equivalent to "That A should be good is good." It may indeed be true that what we desire to desire is always also good; perhaps, even the converse may be true: but it is very doubtful whether this is the case, and the mere fact that we understand very well what is meant by doubting it, shews clearly that we have two different notions before our minds.

(2) And the same consideration is sufficient to dismiss the hypothesis that 'good' has no meaning whatsoever. It is very natural to make the mistake of supposing that what is universally true is of such a nature that its negation would be self-contradictory: the importance which has been assigned to analytic propositions in the history of philosophy shews how easy such a mistake is. And thus it is very easy to conclude that what seems to be a universal ethical principle is in fact an identical proposition; that, if, for example, whatever is called 'good' seems to be pleasant, the proposition 'Pleasure is the good' does not assert a connection between two different notions, but involves only one, that of pleasure, which is easily recognised as a distinct entity. But whoever will attentively consider with himself what is actually before his mind when he asks the question 'Is pleasure (or whatever it may be) after all good? can easily satisfy himself that he is not merely wondering whether pleasure is pleasant. And if he will try this experiment with each suggested definition in succession, he may become expert enough to recognise that in every case he has before his mind a unique object, with regard to the connection of which with any other object, a distinct question may be asked. Every one does in fact understand the question 'Is this good?' When he thinks of it, his state of mind is different from what it would be, were he asked 'Is this pleasant, or desired, or approved?' It has a distinct meaning for him, even though he may not recognise in what respect it is distinct. Whenever he thinks of 'intrinsic value,' or 'intrinsic worth,' or says that a thing 'ought to exist,' he has before his mind the unique object—the unique property of things—which I mean by 'good.' Everybody is constantly aware of this notion, although he may never become aware at all that it is different from other notions of which he is also aware. But, for correct ethical reasoning, it is extremely important that he should become aware of this fact; and, as soon as the nature of the problem is clearly understood, there should be little difficulty in advancing so far in analysis.

14. 'Good,' then, is indefinable; and yet, so far as I know, there is only one ethical writer, Prof. Henry Sidgwick, who has clearly recognised and stated this fact. We shall see, indeed, how far many of the most reputed ethical systems fall short of drawing the conclusions which follow from such a recognition. At present I will only quote one instance, which will serve to illustrate the meaning and importance of this principle that 'good' is indefinable, or, as Prof. Sidgwick says, an 'unanalysable notion.' It is an instance to which Prof. Sidgwick himself refers in a note on the passage, in which he argues that 'ought' is unanalysable.

'Bentham,' says Sidgwick, 'explains that his fundamental principle states the greatest happiness of all those whose interest is in question as being the right and proper end of human action'; and yet 'his language in other passages of the same chapter would seem to imply' that he means by the word "right" "conducive to the general happiness." Prof. Sidgwick sees that, if you take these two statements together, you get the absurd result that 'greatest happiness is the end of human action, which is conducive to the general happiness'; and so absurd does it seem to him to call this result, as Bentham calls it, 'the fundamental principle of a moral system,' that he suggests that Bentham cannot have meant it. Yet Prof. Sidgwick

1 Methods of Ethics, Bk. i, Chap. iii, § 1 (6th edition).