

CHAPTER 1

Morality and Moral Philosophy

In this book we encounter some perplexing moral problems that help us understand the moral philosophy at the core of the book. Each chapter begins with a case study that poses a moral problem. Various aspects of the case are then analyzed in the chapter. The case study that introduces this first chapter may seem to present only a moral *wrong*, not a moral *problem*. On closer inspection, however, this case helps us understand not only moral problems but why we regard such matters as moral at all.

THE WATERGATE COVERUP

In March 1973, a convicted burglar named James McCord wrote to a judge named John Sirica that the White House was covering up the fact that five men had been hired by high White House officials to burglarize Democratic headquarters in the Watergate apartment-hotel complex. A month later, on April 30, 1973, White House counsel John Dean was fired by President Richard Nixon after Dean refused to issue a fictitious report that denied a coverup in the Watergate scandal.

Two months after his firing, Dean gave public testimony before Congress regarding the Watergate scandal that ultimately led to Nixon's resignation. Dean testified in remarkable detail about how the highest-ranking White House officials, including President Nixon, had approved the burglary and then obstructed justice in attempting a coverup of potentially damaging information about their activities. According to Dean, when the men who burglarized Democratic headquarters were arrested, those responsible at the White House intentionally effected the massive coverup. There was never any question of making the full story public; it was assumed in this tight circle that the facts must be concealed. There were, however, different reasons for the coverup: Some White House officials feared prosecution, some feared impeachment, and some feared the overthrow of the country by radicals. Nevertheless, the imperative to cover up was, according to Dean, accepted spontaneously, unanimously, and without serious question.

Millions of people who followed this testimony, including Dean himself, thought that this burglary and the subsequent coverup were *morally wrong*, whether or not they turned out to be *illegal*. They considered such actions to be moral offenses,

even if they were not punishable by law. It was eventually established that the break-in was illegal, and Dean himself was imprisoned for his role, but there was never any official judgment or pronouncement about the immorality of the break-in. Indeed, one of the early witnesses in congressional hearings on the Watergate scandal, Bernard Barker, defended the burglary as both patriotic and morally proper, no matter its legality.

MORALITY

As we reflect on Dean's testimony and the events surrounding Watergate, several philosophical questions emerge about the morality of these activities. What made this burglary wrong? Is it the mere fact of its being a burglary? If so, how can a fact constitute a wrong? Is morality comprised of facts? Do we need a philosophical theory to determine the rightness or wrongness of the burglary—or, rather, does a philosophical theory merely draw on social morality, thus *assuming* rightness or wrongness?

These questions are philosophical, and we will meet such questions many times in this book. As an initial response, it seems clear that the words "ethics" and "morality" cannot be confined to *philosophical* contexts. The terms "ethical theory" and "moral philosophy" refer exclusively to philosophical reflection on morality. The purpose of ethical theory is to introduce clarity, substance, and precision of argument into the domain of morality. Comprehensive ethical theories attempt to provide a normative framework for understanding and responding to problems in living a moral life. Usually such a framework takes the form of a theory of right action, but it may also take the form of a theory of good character.

The term "morality," by contrast to "ethical theory" and "moral philosophy," is used to refer to conventions in society about right and wrong human conduct. These beliefs are expressed through terms such as "good," "bad," "virtuous," "praiseworthy," "right," "wrong," "ought," and "blameworthy." However, several areas of conduct other than ethics also use action-directing words such as "good" and "bad" to evaluate human endeavors. Religion, law, etiquette, and politics are examples. We may ask, then, "What is distinctive about morality?" or, more generally, "How is morality distinct from other areas of human endeavor in which normative judgments occur?"

Morality as a Social Institution

Morality is a social institution, composed of a set of standards pervasively acknowledged by the members of a culture. It is comprised of practices that—together with other kinds of customs, rules, and mores—are transmitted from generation to generation. Morality thus has an enduring social status as a body of guidelines for conduct. Similar to political constitutions and natural languages, morality exists prior to the acceptance (or rejection) of its standards by particular individuals. Individuals do not create morality by making their own rules, and morality cannot be purely a personal policy or code.

We learn these social requirements and their appropriate applications as we grow up, along with other important social rules, and this is one reason why it is sometimes difficult to distinguish moral rules from other rules. For example, we are constantly bombarded in our early years with rules such as “Don’t swim near the rocks,” “Don’t cross the street without looking both ways,” and “See your dentist for an annual checkup.” Most of these rules are instructions in our own interest, teaching us about various kinds of *prudent behavior*.

We also learn rules of several different kinds. We are told by parents, teachers, and peers that certain things ought or ought not to be done because they affect the interests of other people: “Don’t color your sister’s photographs,” “Don’t lie to your father and mother,” “It is better to give than to receive,” and “Respect the rights of others.” These are elementary instructions in morality because they express what society expects of us in terms of taking the interests of other people into account. We thus learn about *moral behavior*. But we learn rules of other types as well.

Morality and Law

One group of rules that we learn early in life are the rules of law, and these rules are often confused with moral rules. This confusion is understandable. Morality and law are both social institutions, and they share concerns over matters of great social importance. They also share in common certain basic principles, obligations, and criteria of evidence. Law can even serve as the public’s agency for translating morality into explicit social guidelines and practices and for stipulating punishments for offenses.

A surprising number of people tend to think “If it’s legal, it’s moral.” Many thousands of people who followed the events in the Watergate scandal took just this view: If nothing legally wrong had been done, then there was no moral fault or blame either. Moral evaluation, however, needs to be carefully distinguished from legal evaluation. The law is not the repository of a society’s moral standards and values, even when the law is directly concerned with moral problems. A law-abiding person is not necessarily morally sensitive or virtuous, and the fact that something is legally acceptable does not imply that it is morally acceptable. For example, a person who has a joint bank account with another person is legally authorized to withdraw all the money from the account, but it hardly follows that the person is morally authorized to do so. What legally is a withdrawal may morally be a theft.

In the Watergate affair, it seems clear in retrospect that the planned burglary was morally wrong even if no court had ever been persuaded that a legal wrong had occurred (as at one time seemed a possible outcome of the case). The actions that took place in the White House constituted moral offenses whether punishable by law or even governed by law. For example, the coverup led to several legally punishable cases of perjury by high officials, including Dean and Attorney General John Mitchell. Their acts would have been condemnable lies from a moral point of view even if these figures had been found innocent of the perjury charges. There also were charges of “political espionage” by White House officials—a legally suspect category in this case, but a most important matter in judging the moral character of those so charged. President Nixon himself was never legally punished, though he

was widely considered to have committed the most egregious moral lapse of all by fostering an environment of immoral conduct in the White House that permitted the scandal to occur. It has often been observed that the Watergate affair provoked widespread lack of confidence in the United States in the moral integrity of politicians and high officials. This is a matter of the highest moral importance in a culture, though it has no direct legal significance.

Finally, it deserves note that we commonly use moral principles to formulate and to criticize the law. In his famous "Letter from the Birmingham City Jail," Martin Luther King, Jr. argued that racial segregation was immoral, even though it was legal in many parts of the United States at the time. King wrote that "any law that degrades human personality is unjust. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority, and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. . . . [It relegates] persons to the status of things. So segregation is not only politically, economically, and sociologically unsound, but it is morally wrong and sinful."¹

The Universality in Morality

The most abstract and sweeping principles of morality—such as, "Do not kill"—are, in effect, found in all cultures. These shared principles are sometimes referred to as the "common morality." Common morality is not a (specific) morality or a theory; it is simply shared morality. In recent years, the favored category to express shared universal moral content has been human rights (see the Feinberg, Okin, and Waldron selections in Chapter 8), but obligations can also be expressed in universal form. Typical of the principles that persons in all cultures seem to affirm are "Tell the truth," "Obtain consent before invading another person's body," "Do not cause pain," "Do not deprive of liberty," and "Do not steal or otherwise deprive of goods." Several of these fundamental moral values were violated by White House officials in the Watergate affair.

These norms constituting shared morality certainly do not comprise all of morality; the morality we share is only a small slice of the entire moral life. Morality more broadly understood includes divergent moral norms and positions that spring from particular cultural, philosophical, and religious roots. Many people, including many philosophers, are skeptical that the common morality has very much content at all. That is, they think that virtually nothing in the way of substantive moral content is shared across cultures. This issue will be considered in depth in Chapters 2, 3, and 8 in this text.

But before we get to those chapters, one widely held belief about morals deserves attention: When we judge an act morally right or wrong (e.g., "The deception at the White House was a moral outrage") or make a judgment about moral character (e.g., "Nixon was absolutely not to be trusted"), we do not believe our declaration is like a judgment of mere taste or preference (e.g., "This banana is delicious"). Mere preferences vary from individual to individual, but sound ethical judgments that derive from the common morality seem to transcend such individual

¹Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," in James Melvin Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

preferences, holding interpersonally despite the fact that it is an individual who makes the judgment. For example, the rule that misleading deception in politics is morally unacceptable seems to be a universalizable moral rule, not merely a custom preferred in a few countries or by a few persons.

Although this argument makes good sense of our beliefs about fundamental moral principles, such as not harming others, it makes far less sense of many particular moral judgments (e.g., "John Dean's testimony was morally courageous") and of codes of ethics intended for specific areas of conduct, such as professional ethics. On the one hand, universality seems to be a way in which morality protects against bias, prejudice, and idiosyncratic preference. On the other hand, a *claim* of universality may itself be no more than an individual or parochial prejudice. How to sort out this problem is one of the central questions in Chapter 2.

THE NATURE OF A MORAL POSITION

This text contains selections by philosophers who take a *moral position* on issues. We now have an understanding of the nature of morality, but virtually nothing has been said about the distinction between taking a moral position and taking some other kind of position. In the Watergate scandal, it was clear from the start that many citizens, politicians, prosecutors, and the like, were taking moral positions about theft, deception, secret wiretapping of private citizens, the moral integrity of the officials involved, and many other moral matters. Less clear is what makes such positions moral, if they are moral. Ronald Dworkin attempts in the following essay to explain the necessary ingredients that distinguish a moral position from a preference, prejudice, or a mere parroting of social platitudes. He also exposes the flaw in thinking that the norms operative in a society constitute a *moral position*.

*The Concept of a Moral Position**

Ronald Dworkin

We might start with the fact that terms like "moral position" and "moral conviction" function in our conventional morality as terms of justification and criticism, as well as of description. It

is true that we sometimes speak of a group's "morals," or "morality," or "moral beliefs," or "moral positions" or "moral convictions," in what might be called an anthropological sense, meaning to refer to whatever attitudes the group displays about the propriety of human conduct, qualities, or goals. We say, in this sense, that the morality of Nazi Germany was based on prejudice, or was irrational. But we also use

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some of these terms, particularly "moral position" and "moral conviction," in a discriminatory sense, to contrast the positions they describe with prejudices, rationalizations, matters of personal aversion or taste, arbitrary stands, and the like. One use—perhaps the most characteristic use—of this discriminatory sense is to offer a limited but important sort of justification for an act, when the moral issues surrounding that act are unclear or in dispute.

Suppose I tell you that I propose to vote against a man running for a public office of trust because I know him to be a homosexual and because I believe that homosexuality is profoundly immoral. If you disagree that homosexuality is immoral, you may accuse me of being about to cast my vote unfairly, acting on prejudice or out of a personal repugnance which is irrelevant to the moral issue. I might then try to convert you to my position on homosexuality, but if I fail in this I shall still want to convince you of what you and I will both take to be a separate point—that my vote was based upon a moral position, in the discriminatory sense, even though one which differs from yours. I shall want to persuade you of this, because if I do I am entitled to expect that you will alter your opinion of me and of what I am about to do. Your judgment of my character will be different—you might still think me eccentric (or puritanical or unsophisticated) but these are types of character and not faults of character. Your judgment of my act will also be different, in this respect. You will admit that so long as I hold my moral position, I have a moral right to vote against the homosexual, because I have a right (indeed a duty) to vote my own convictions. You would not admit such a right (or duty) if you were still persuaded that

I was acting out of a prejudice or a personal taste.

I am entitled to expect that your opinion will change in these ways, because these distinctions are a part of the conventional morality you and I share, and which forms the background for our discussion. They enforce the difference between positions we must respect, although we think them wrong, and positions we need not respect because they offend some ground rule of moral reasoning. A great deal of debate about moral issues (in real life, although not in philosophy texts) consists of arguments that some position falls on one or the other side of this crucial line.

It is this feature of conventional morality that animates Lord Devlin's argument that society has the right to follow its own lights. We must therefore examine that discriminatory concept of a moral position more closely, and we can do so by pursuing our imaginary conversation. What must I do to convince you that my position is a moral position?

(a) I must produce some reasons for it. This is not to say that I have to articulate a moral principle I am following or a general moral theory to which I subscribe. Very few people can do either, and the ability to hold a moral position is not limited to those who can. My reason need not be a principle or theory at all. It must only point out some aspect or feature of homosexuality which moves me to regard it as immoral: the fact that the Bible forbids it, for example, or that one who practices homosexuality becomes unfit for marriage and parenthood. Of course, any such reason would presuppose my acceptance of some general principle or theory, but I need not be able to state what it is, or realize that I am relying upon it.

Not every reason I might give will do, however. Some will be excluded by general criteria stipulating sorts of reasons which do not count. We might take note of four of the most important such criteria:

(i) If I tell you that homosexuals are morally inferior because they do not have heterosexual desires, and so are not "real men," you would reject that reason as showing one type of prejudice. Prejudices, in general, are postures of judgment that take into account considerations our conventions exclude. In a structured context, like a trial or a contest, the ground rules exclude all but certain considerations, and a prejudice is a basis of judgment which violates these rules. Our conventions stipulate some ground rules of moral judgment which obtain even apart from such special contexts, the most important of which is that a man must not be held morally inferior on the basis of some physical, racial or other characteristic he cannot help having. Thus a man whose moral judgments about Jews, or Negroes, or Southerners, or women, or effeminate men are based on his belief that any member of these classes automatically deserves less respect, without regard to anything he himself has done, is said to be prejudiced against that group.

(ii) If I base my view about homosexuals on a personal emotional reaction ("they make me sick"), you would reject that reason as well. We distinguish moral positions from emotional reactions, not because moral positions are supposed to be unemotional or dispassionate—quite the reverse is true—but because the moral position is supposed to justify the emotional reaction, and not vice versa. If a man is unable to produce such reasons, we do not deny the fact of his emotional involvement, which may

have important social or political consequences, but we do not take this involvement as demonstrating his moral conviction. Indeed, it is just this sort of position—a severe emotional reaction to a practice or a situation for which one cannot account—that we tend to describe, in lay terms, as a phobia or an obsession.

(iii) If I base my position on a proposition of fact ("homosexual acts are physically debilitating") which is not only false, but is so implausible that it challenges the minimal standards of evidence and argument I generally accept and impose upon others, then you would regard my belief, even though sincere, as a form of rationalization, and disqualify my reason on that ground. (Rationalization is a complex concept, and also includes, as we shall see, the production of reasons which suggest general theories I do not accept.)

(iv) If I can argue for my own position only by citing the beliefs of others ("everyone knows homosexuality is a sin"), you will conclude that I am parroting and not relying on a moral conviction of my own. With the possible (though complex) exception of a deity, there is no moral authority to which I can appeal and so automatically make my position a moral one. I must have my own reasons, though of course I may have been taught these reasons by others.

No doubt many readers will disagree with these thumbnail sketches of prejudice, mere emotional reaction, rationalization and parroting. Some may have their own theories of what these are. I want to emphasize now only that these are distinct concepts, whatever the details of the differences might be, and that they have a role in deciding whether to treat another's position as a moral

conviction. They are not merely epithets to be pasted on positions we strongly dislike.

(b) Suppose I do produce a reason which is not disqualified on one of these (or on similar) grounds. That reason will presuppose some general moral principle or theory, even though I may not be able to state that principle or theory, and do not have it in mind when I speak. If I offer, as my reason, the fact that the Bible forbids homosexual acts, or that homosexual acts make it less likely that the actor will marry and raise children, I suggest that I accept the theory my reason presupposes, and you will not be satisfied that my position is a moral one if you believe that I do not. . . .

(c) But do I really have to have a reason to make my position a matter of moral conviction? Most men think that acts which cause unnecessary suffering, or break a serious promise with no excuse, are immoral, and yet they could give no reason for these beliefs. They feel that no reason is necessary, because they take it as axiomatic or self-evident that these are immoral acts. It seems contrary to common sense to deny that a position held in this way can be a moral position.

Yet there is an important difference between believing that one's position is self-evident and just not having a reason for one's position. The former presupposes a positive belief that no further reason is necessary, that the immorality of the act in question does not depend upon its social effects, or its effects on the character of the actor, or its proscription by a deity, or anything else, but follows from the nature of the act itself. The claim that a particular position is axiomatic, in other words, does supply a reason of a special sort, namely that the act is immoral in and of itself, and this

special reason, like the others we considered, may be inconsistent with more general theories I hold.

The moral arguments we make presuppose not only moral principles, but also more abstract positions about moral reasoning. In particular, they presuppose positions about what kinds of acts can be immoral in and of themselves. When I criticize your moral opinions, or attempt to justify my own disregard of traditional moral rules I think are silly, I will likely proceed by denying that the act in question has any of the several features that can make an act immoral—that it involves no breach of an undertaking or duty, for example, harms no one including the actor, is not proscribed by any organized religion, and is not illegal. I proceed in this way because I assume that the ultimate grounds of immorality are limited to some such small set of very general standards. I may assert this assumption directly or it may emerge from the pattern of my argument. In either event, I will enforce it by calling positions which can claim no support from any of these ultimate standards *arbitrary*, as I should certainly do if you said that photography was immoral, for instance, or swimming. Even if I cannot articulate this underlying assumption, I shall still apply it, and since the ultimate criteria I recognize are among the most abstract of my moral standards, they will not vary much from those my neighbors recognize and apply. Although many who despise homosexuals are unable to say why, few would claim affirmatively that one needs no reason, for this would make their position, on their own standards, an arbitrary one.

(d) This anatomy of our argument could be continued, but it is already long enough to justify some conclusions. If

the issue between us is whether my views on homosexuality amount to a moral position, and hence whether I am entitled to vote against a homosexual on that ground, I cannot settle the issue simply by reporting my feelings. You will want to consider the reasons I can produce to support my belief, and whether my other views and behavior are consistent with the theories these reasons presuppose. You will have, of course, to apply your own understanding, which may differ in detail from mine, of what a prejudice or a rationalization is, for example, and of when one view is inconsistent with another. You and I may end in disagreement over whether my position is a moral one, partly because of such differences in understanding, and partly because one is less likely to recognize these illegitimate grounds in himself than in others.

Dworkin's thoughtful analysis raises a number of questions. Reasons for a belief can be defended sincerely and dispassionately, yet have little or nothing to do with morality. Such reasons may even be supported by what Dworkin refers to as "general" (normative) theories, yet the theories too may have little or nothing to do with morality or moral philosophy. Dworkin might say that these general theories must be *moral* theories, but then he would risk begging the question of what a moral position is.

Dworkin seems to think that only a restricted class of general ethical theories counts as providing "very general standards" and "ultimate grounds" for our more particular moral judgments. He notes that moral reasons "presuppose some general moral principle or theory," by which he presumably means a well-defended *moral theory*. Chapters 4 through 7 in this book explore the issue of what counts as an acceptable moral theory, and we can postpone further discussion of these matters until we come to those chapters.

THE OBJECT OF MORALITY

Another important question is, "What is the object, point, or goal of morality?" We often try to understand why we have institutions in terms of their goals, functions, or objects. For example, the object of medicine is to improve health and combat disease, the object of business is to provide a service and produce a profit, and the object of social research is to develop knowledge about social life. It seems reasonable, then, to try to understand why we have the institution of morality in terms of its object, goal, or function. This assumes, of course, that there is some specifiable object of morality. This assumption may turn out to be mistaken, but it is no more implausible than the assumption that the object of medicine, social research, or business can be made explicit.

G. J. Warnock has presented a widely discussed thesis about the object of morality. He holds that morality functions to ameliorate or counteract the tendency for things to "go badly" in human relationships. Conditions naturally and inevitably deteriorate in human affairs, in his estimation, as a result of our limited resources,

limited sympathy, and limited information. For example, we have institutions that house prisoners because they are persons who do not have enough of what they want in life, fail in their responsibilities to others, and make things "go badly" in society. Of course, one need not go to the extreme of prison life to observe deteriorating human relationships. Child abuse, battered women, litigation, broken contracts, contested divorces, political refugees, and dissolving partnerships are everyday examples.

In the following selection, Warnock argues that the object of morality is to contribute to the betterment of the human condition by countering the limited sympathies that persons have for one another, which can lead to unfortunate or even tragic situations.

*The Object of Morality**

G. J. Warnock

It seems to me that to understand some species of evaluation (as contrasted perhaps with mastering it as a mere drill) is essentially a matter of grasping what its object is, what it is done *for*; and indeed if—*only* if—one understands this, can one be in any position to assess the appropriateness, or even relevance, of the standards and criteria employed.

Consider, for instance, the "grading" of candidates in a school-leaving examination. Clearly, in considering how this is or should be done, it is essential to be clear as to what it is being done for. Is it the object, for instance, to determine and indicate how well candidates are judged to *have* done certain work at school? Or is it, differently, to indicate how well they are judged *likely* to do certain things in [the] future, for instance in employment or at universities? Conceivably one might hold that these come to the same, on the ground that what a candidate has done is the only

sound, or only assessable, indicator of what he may be expected to do; but if that is not so, clearly the two objects would make appropriate and relevant the employment of different criteria. Then again, it might be the object, or part of the object, to reward or reprove, encourage or stimulate, the examinees themselves; and this too would make "grading" a different sort of exercise.

Now it is not impossible to raise the question: what is *moral* evaluation for? What is its point? Why do we distinguish between, say, actions as morally right or wrong, between people or qualities of character as good or bad? Why do we teach children to do this, by precept or example? Why do we think it worth doing? What are we trying to achieve, or bring about, by doing it? Well, it is by and large—with qualifications already noted—evaluation *of* the actions of rational beings. It does not seem plausible that in doing this we are simply, so to speak, disinterestedly awarding marks, for no particular reason or purpose, to ourselves or others. There is, it seems obvious here, some general

*From G. J. Warnock, *The Object of Morality* (London: Methuen & Co., 1971), pp. 15–18, 21–23, 26.

practical end in view; and if so, it may seem manifest that the general object must be to bring it about, in some way or other, that rational beings act, in some respects or other, *better* than they would otherwise be liable to do. Put more pompously, the general object of moral evaluation must be to contribute in some respects, by way of the actions of rational beings, to the amelioration of the human predicament—that is, of the conditions in which *these* rational beings, humans, actually find themselves. Accordingly, I take it to be necessary to understanding in this case to consider, first, what it is in the human predicament that calls for amelioration, and second, what might reasonably be suggested (to put it guardedly) as the specific contribution of “morality” to such amelioration. How are things liable to go wrong? And how exactly—or, perhaps, plausibly—can morality be understood as a contribution to their going better? . . .

It seems reasonable, and in the present context is highly relevant, to say, without necessarily going quite so far as Hobbes did,¹ that the human predicament is inherently such that things are liable to go badly. This seems to be inherently so, but not completely hopelessly so; that is, there are circumstances, not in the least likely to change significantly or to be changed by our own efforts, which cannot but tend to make things go badly, but also something at least can be done, many different things in fact, to make them go at least somewhat better than they would do, if no such things were done at all. . . .

Now some human needs, wants, and interests are, special and exceptional circumstances apart, just naturally satisfied by the human environment and situation, and others frustrated. For instance, there is naturally available in the atmosphere of the planet, without any intervention of ours, enough air for everybody to breathe (not always clean air, but that is another matter); and there are doubtless some things that people want to do, or perhaps would like to do, or wish that they could do, which are simply physically impossible—either completely so, for everybody, or impossible in certain conditions, or for certain people. But, uncontroversially, over an enormous range of needs, wants, and interests, these are neither just naturally satisfied, nor naturally, ineluctably frustrated. In an enormous range of cases, something both needs to be done, and also at least in principle could be done. And of course this is where practical problems arise. . . .

What we need now to bring in might be called limited rationality, and limited sympathies. In the first place it may be said—certainly with extreme vagueness, but still with pretty evident truth—that human beings in general are not just naturally disposed always to do what it would be best that they should do, even if they see, or are perfectly in a position to see, what that is. Even if they are not positively neurotic or otherwise maladjusted, people are naturally somewhat prone to be moved by short-run rather than long-run considerations, and often by the pursuit of more blatant, intense, and obtrusive satisfactions rather than of those cooler ones that on balance would really be better. . . .

Next, limited sympathies. This may even be too mild a term for some of the things that I have in mind. One may say

¹*Leviathan*, I, c. 13.

for a start, mildly, that most human beings have some natural tendency to be more concerned about the satisfaction of their own wants, etc., than those of others. A man who does not like being hungry, and who is naturally inclined to take such steps as he can to satisfy his hunger, may very well care less, even not at all, about the hunger of others, and may not care at all whether anything is done to satisfy them. Even if he does care to some extent about others, it is quite likely to be only about *some* others—family, friends, class, tribe, country, or “race.” There is also, besides complete or comparative indifference, such a thing as active malevolence, perhaps even purely disinterested malevolence; a man will sometimes be not only unconcerned about, but actively malevolent towards, others whom he may see as somehow in competition with himself, and sometimes perhaps even towards some whose frustrations or sufferings are not even supposed to be for the advancement of any interest of his own. There are two obvious ways in which, consequentially, things in the human predicament are liable to go badly. For people are not simply confronted, whether as individuals or groups, with the problems of getting along satisfactorily in material conditions that may, in varying degrees, be ungenial or hostile. They are also highly vulnerable to other people; and they often need the help of other people. But, given “limited sympathies,” it cannot be assumed that needed help will naturally be forthcoming; and it cannot even be assumed that active malevolence will *not* be forthcoming. And perhaps above all, there may be the impossibility of trust. Whether, in pursuit of some end of my own, I need your help, or merely your non-interference, I may well be unable

to trust you either to co-operate or to keep out of it, if I think that you are not only much less concerned about my ends and interests than your own, but possibly even actively hostile to my attainment of my ends. If so, then it may be impossible for either of us to do, either separately or together, things that would be advantageous to us both, and which perhaps we both clearly see would be advantageous to us both; and it may be necessary for us individually to do things, for instance in self-protection, the doing of which may be exceedingly laborious, wasteful, and disagreeable. It will be obvious that all this applies as fully to relations between groups as between individuals; and indeed that distrust and active hostility between groups has been, in the human predicament, as frequent and constant as between individuals, and vastly more damaging.

So far we have not, I think, said anything seriously disputable, or at all unfamiliar. It is obvious that human beings have, in general, an *interest* in the course of events in which they are involved: for, though they may indeed want some things which they would not be at all the better for having, they do have many entirely harmless and proper and reasonable wants; and they also have interests and actual needs, satisfaction of which may be absolutely necessary for their well-being. But the course of events is not at all likely, without their intervention, to go in a way at all satisfactory to them; and even with intervention, there is still so much that may go wrong. Resources are limited; knowledge, skills, information, and intelligence are limited; people are often not rational, either in the management of their own affairs or in the adjustment of their own affairs in relation to others.

Then, finally, they are vulnerable to others, and dependent on others, and yet inevitably often in competition with others; and, human sympathies being limited, they may often neither get nor give help that is needed, may not manage to cooperate for common ends, and may be constantly liable to frustration or positive injury from directly hostile interference by other persons. Thus it comes about that—as Hobbes of course most memorably insisted—there is in what may be called the human predicament a certain “natural” tendency for things to go very badly; meaning thereby not, of course, in this connection, *morally* badly, but badly merely in the sense that, given the above-mentioned wholly indisputable facts about people and the circumstances in which they exist, there is the very evident possibility of very great difficulty in securing, for all or possibly even any of them, much that they want, much that it would be in their interest to have, even much that they need. And the facts that make this so are facts about the *human* predicament; there is probably no great interest in speculating about possible circumstances of other conceivable species of rational beings, but still it is worth bearing in mind that the facts we have so summarily surveyed are *contingent* facts. It is easy enough to see in general terms how very different the

situation would be if the beings concerned were less vulnerable, less aggressive, less egotistical, less irrational, more intelligent, more self-sufficient, and more favoured by material circumstances. . . .

Now, the general suggestion that (guardedly) I wish to put up for consideration is this: that the “general object” of morality, appreciation of which may enable us to *understand* the basis of moral evaluation, is to contribute to betterment—or non-deterioration—of the human predicament, primarily and essentially by seeking to countervail “limited sympathies” and their potentially most damaging effects. It is the proper business of morality, and the general object of moral evaluation, not of course to add to our available resources, nor—directly anyway—to our knowledge of how to make advantageous use of them, nor—again, not directly—to make us more rational in the judicious pursuit of our interests and ends; its proper business is to expand our sympathies, or, better, to reduce the liability to damage inherent in their natural tendency to be narrowly restricted. We may note at once that, if this is, as I think, in a sense the most important of the built-in tendencies of things to go wrong, the present suggestion fits well with the common idea that there is something peculiarly *important* about morality.

If Warnock is correct about the object of morality, his analysis helps explain pervasive features of the moral life. We are all aware that many persons are disposed to attend to the concerns of some favored persons in their lives to the exclusion or detriment of others. We are also familiar with the human tendency not to intercede to prevent harm from occurring to other persons, especially when those persons are strangers or live in distant lands. It is noncontroversial that we must avoid *causing* harm to others, even when they are complete strangers. Much more controversial is

the claim that morality actually requires us to *contribute* to and *promote* the betterment of the human condition by giving our time and resources to improve the lives of others—for example, by preventing harmful conditions or eliminating starvation or aggression in wars that occur in foreign nations.

In Chapter 4, we will examine a theory that takes the very strong view that we must *maximize* the welfare of others—the primary object of morality in this theory. We will evaluate the correctness of this strong thesis in several subsequent chapters.

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF MORALITY

Four ways of studying moral beliefs and moral philosophy have dominated the literature of ethics. Two of these approaches describe and analyze morality without taking moral positions. These approaches are therefore called “nonnormative.” Two other approaches do involve taking moral positions, and are therefore called “normative.” This division of approaches to the study of morality can be outlined as follows:

- A Nonnormative approaches
 - 1 Descriptive ethics
 - 2 Metaethics
- B Normative approaches
 - 3 General normative ethics
 - 4 Practical normative ethics

It would be a mistake to regard these categories as expressing approaches that cannot be used together. They are often undertaken jointly by a single author in a single article or book. Nonetheless, these distinctions are important and serviceable when understood as broad polar contrasts exemplifying models of inquiry.

Nonnormative Approaches

First among the two nonnormative fields of inquiry into morality is *descriptive ethics*, or the factual description and explanation of moral behavior and beliefs. Anthropologists, sociologists, and historians who study moral behavior employ this approach when they explore whether and in what ways moral attitudes, codes, and beliefs differ from person to person and from society to society.

Descriptive ethics investigates a wide variety of moral beliefs and behavior, including methods of brutality, the treatment of the aged, kinship systems, morality in professional organizations, and abortion practices. Although philosophers do not generally concentrate on descriptive ethics in their work, some have combined descriptive ethics with philosophical ethics by analyzing, for example, the ethical practices of Native American tribes. These philosophers, like social scientists, have raised questions about the apparent relativity of moral judgments and rules (issues addressed in Chapter 2 of this text).

Metaethics (literally meaning “above ethics”) is the second nonnormative approach to morality. It involves analysis of the meanings of central terms in ethics

such as “right,” “obligation,” “good,” “virtue,” and “responsibility.” The proper analysis of the term “morality” is an example we have already discussed. Attention will be paid to the meanings of moral terms throughout this text. In addition, the structure or logic of moral reasoning is examined in metaethics, including the nature of moral justification and inference. Such problems are explored in Chapter 3.

Normative Approaches

We can now consider the third and fourth ways of studying morality. *General normative ethics* is the philosophical attempt to formulate and defend basic moral principles and standards of virtue. In contrast to the term “morality,” as analyzed above, the terms “ethical theory” and “moral philosophy” refer to reflection on the nature and justification of right actions. Many people go through life with an understanding of morality largely dictated by their culture. Other persons are not satisfied simply to conform to the morality of society. They want difficult questions answered: Is what our society forbids wrong? Are social values the best values? What is the purpose of morality? Does religion determine morality? Do the moral rules of society fit together in a unified whole? If there are conflicts and inconsistencies in our practices and beliefs, how should they be resolved? What should people do when facing a moral problem for which society has, as yet, provided no instruction?

Moral philosophers seek to answer such questions and to put moral beliefs and social practices of morality into a more unified and defensible package of guidelines and concepts. Sometimes this task involves challenging traditional moral beliefs by assessing the quality of moral arguments and suggesting modifications in existing beliefs. Morality, we might say, consists of what persons ought to do in order to conform to society’s norms of behavior, whereas ethical theory concerns the philosophical reasons for or against the morality that is stipulated by society or by some social group.

Ideally, any ethical theory will provide reasons for adopting a system of moral principles or standards of virtue and will defend claims about the range of their applicability. Some philosophers have argued that there is one and only one fundamental principle determining right action. It is, roughly, the following: An action is morally right if, and only if, it produces at least as great a balance of value over disvalue as any available alternative action. This is known as the principle of utility, and philosophers who subscribe to it are referred to as “utilitarians.” One member of the team of burglars in the Watergate scandal offered a half-hearted utilitarian defense of his actions by contending that a favorable balance of good over harm resulted from the burglary.

Nonutilitarians claim that one or more fundamental principles of ethics differ from the principle of utility. These are usually principles of strict obligation, such as “Never treat another person merely as a means to your own goals.” This principle means that it is immoral, for example, to deceive, coerce, or fail to consult with others merely in order to promote your goals. Many philosophers who accept a nonutilitarian account of the principles of moral obligation are referred to as “deontologists.” These problems in ethical theory are examined in Chapters 4 through 7 in this text.

The principles, virtues, and forms of reasoning found in general normative ethics are sometimes used to reflect on moral problems such as abortion, widespread hunger, fairness in journalism, and truthfulness in law and business. The use of moral action-guides in these contexts is commonly referred to as “practical ethics” or “applied ethics” (“practical normative ethics” in the outline above). These terms came into vogue in the 1970s when philosophical ethics began to address issues in professional ethics as well as social problems such as capital punishment, abortion, environmental responsibility, and affirmative action. Several of these problems are attended to in Chapters 8 to 10 of this text.

In recent years the teaching of practical ethics in professional schools has been conducted largely by analysis of case studies, where the hope is to teach students how to identify moral principles relevant to cases, as well as forms of reasoning that might be employed. The present text follows the model of using cases, but without engaging in extensive case analysis. Each chapter begins with a brief case relevant to the more abstract matters of theory discussed in the chapter—like the Watergate case explored in this chapter—and the case is then invoked throughout the chapter to illustrate specific issues and principles.

It is important to appreciate when reflecting on these cases that there are sharp limits to what may be expected of moral philosophy in the way of applying principles and resolving moral problems. The fundamental business of moral philosophy has always been to provide a theory or justification of moral rules, not a specification or application of the rules directly to problems of social morality. Moral philosophy helps us think clearly about these problems, but it is no panacea for resolving them.

THE REMAINDER OF THIS TEXT

Now that we have some idea of morality and its object, as well as some idea of how it can be studied and perhaps augmented or applied, the remaining nine chapters can be outlined.

Chapter 2 continues the considerations begun in Chapter 1 by examining relativism, moral disagreements, plural and conflicting values, and egoism. In Chapter 3, attention shifts to the topic of justification in ethics, including problems of how to justify ultimate moral principles, theories of justification, the distinction between facts and values, and the justification of morality. It is useful to have studied these topics before considering the major theories of normative ethics: utilitarian theories, deontological and Kantian theories, virtue theories, and Humean theories. Presentations of these theories in Chapters 4 through 7 are woven together with a detailed analysis of the works of the writers often regarded as their primary historical spokesperson: the English philosopher John Stuart Mill, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, and the Scottish philosopher David Hume.

Chapters 8 through 10 then proceed to topics that have been the focus of sustained inquiry in recent years: rights, justice, and liberty. These chapters are not

developed in conjunction with the study of historical figures of major influence, but several recent philosophical works that have made a major impact in philosophy are examined. These include works by figures we will have already encountered in Chapters 2 through 7, including John Rawls, Robert Nozick, Joel Feinberg, John Mackie, Alasdair MacIntyre, and John Stuart Mill.

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