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## Modern Moral Philosophy

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## A WORD TO YOUNG MINISTERS

When I worked as a General Superintendent in the North-East, welcoming and encouraging a man in the early days of his ministry was a task very near to my heart. After years of retirement my thoughts often wander in this direction and I want to pass on one or two thoughts for what they may be worth.

A long illness gave me fresh thoughts on sick visiting, some of them since reinforced in conversation with others. It is a most important part of the minister's work, especially when the patient is in hospital, away from his own home and in strange, possibly frightening, surroundings. There is much that can be done to encourage him, to fortify heart and mind, and so cooperate with the doctors' efforts to restore bodily health; the two are so inextricably intertwined. When I was a student at Oxford Dr. Selbie of Mansfield College used to advise us when sick visiting to read the Scriptures and pray wherever it was possible. I was once greatly saddened when a man who was seriously ill said to me "My minister never prayed". This was a fatal illness, though the minister may not have known it. But having said all this, let me add with great emphasis—don't overdo it. All visits to the sick should be short—strain or embarrassment or pain can easily be caused by too long a stay so that the invalid may even dread a visit.

How important it is before reaching conclusions and making judgments to make sure one knows **all** the facts. I once heard of a prominent church member of whom people said that he must be a heavy drinker because he had been observed to stagger as he left a train and walked towards home. His minister had the sense, when the rumour reached him, to call and talk with the man only to discover that he suffered from a serious heart condition. And then there are those people who prove awkward customers! An easy way out is to write them off and not be bothered with them, but a little more knowledge can change the picture completely. It will result in a more sympathetic and understanding approach; it may indicate that the difficult person needs expert help and can be guided to it. I recall a simple example of a ministerial friend of mine whose Church Secretary seemed often impossible to work with. One day the underlying truth came out; his great ambition had been to be a minister himself, but his home circumstances had prevented it, and now at last he could talk of this, accept his present situation and lay the unhappy ghost.

One thing more, I sometimes think that a special occupational hazard of ministers is criticising others, listening to gossip about them, even repeating it. I confess that I have not always avoided listening to such gossip, but I have always despised myself for doing it. It is a habit most unworthy of a Christian minister. This is a time for closed ranks and united efforts if the Christian Church is to make the contribution it should and could to the world of our time.

JOHN BARRETT

## MODERN MORAL PHILOSOPHY

This is the first of three short papers. In it I will offer a brief account of how things stand generally in the above subject at the present time. In the second I will try to bring into focus some of the main problems which confront us in Christian Ethics today. In the third I shall put forward a personal opinion about how the connexion between the Christian faith and morality should be seen.

### I

It is important to distinguish between the moral philosopher and the moralist. The latter is concerned to tell men what they ought, or ought not, to do and believes himself qualified to do so. The moral philosopher claims no such qualifications and is engaged upon a different task. His concern is to understand what moralists, as such, are doing. What is a moral judgment? How are claims that some action or state of affairs has positive or negative moral value related to the contention that such-and-such is, or is not, the case, with which they are frequently supported? Here, as elsewhere, philosophy is 'talk about talk': a second-order, not a first-order, discipline. Its value lies in the fact that, when people do not understand the sort of talk in which they are engaging—whether it be religious, scientific, moral, or whatever—they almost invariably end up by talking nonsense.

The fundamental question, then, is: What is the **meaning** of moral language as such? There has been a change in the concept of meaning which is reflected in moral philosophy. Put very summarily, it is the change from the concept of meaning as referent to that of meaning as use. 'What are we talking **about**?' may seem a very natural question to ask when we are trying to get at meaning; and it is easy to assume that all meaningful discourse must (logically) refer to something. The trouble is that there are lots of utterances, which cannot be analysed into elements each of which refers to some object that is there in the world, but which are nonetheless meaningful. It was the recognition of this that led philosophers to the conclusion that the question to ask about meaning is not, or not invariably, 'What do these words refer to?' but 'What job are these words being used to do?' The different sorts of meaningful discourse are to be accounted for by the different work which language is doing in each. The change from the concept of meaning as referent to that of meaning as use may be seen by comparing the earlier with the later work of Wittgenstein as I have tried to show in a recent small book.<sup>1</sup>

So long as the doctrine that meaning is referent held the field, philosophers assumed that words like 'good', 'right', 'obligatory', with their opposites and cognates, must refer to something; that if, for instance, an act is right, there must be something there, its rightness, just as the roundness of a round ball is there. They recognised that moral properties cannot be identified with those of any other kind. Sometimes moralists had supposed that they can. Some hedonists, for example, had said that 'right' means 'producing happiness'; some religious

moralists, that 'good' means 'in accordance with God's will'. This is the notorious 'naturalistic fallacy'.<sup>5</sup> It is called a fallacy because the question, for instance, 'Is what produces happiness right?', makes perfectly good sense, but if 'right' did mean 'producing happiness', it would come to no more than 'Is what produces happiness productive of happiness?' and that question is as insignificant as any other of the form 'Is X X?'. Whatever definition (D) you propose for moral words like 'good' or 'right', the question 'Is what is D good (or right)?' does not appear to men in general to be self-answering as it must, if D were the correct definition of 'good' (or 'right'). It was this consideration which led modern moral philosophers such as G. E. Moore and W. D. Ross<sup>6</sup> to two conclusions: (i) that moral terms refer to 'non-natural' properties of actions or states of affairs; they have an objective reference and are *sui generis*; (ii) that these non-natural properties are apprehended by a faculty of moral intuition which all normal men possess. This way of thinking about moral language has had a great attraction for religious believers. It fits what many of them have wanted to say about the objectivity of the moral law and the voice of God within men. Why will it not do?<sup>7</sup>

There are two main objections to it. (i) The claim to know objective moral truths by intuition falls foul of the criticism which can be brought to bear upon any claim to intuitive knowledge. If I say 'I know that X', three logical conditions must be fulfilled. (a) It must be true that X. On anyone's lips 'I know that Edinburgh is the capital of England' would be nonsense. (b) I must believe that X. 'I know that London is the capital of England but I do not believe it' is self-contradictory. (c) I must be able to offer evidence which justifies my claim. True, there may be wide difference of opinion as to what constitutes such evidence, but that is beside the present point. This latter is that what makes 'I know' different from 'I believe' (even 'I believe truly') is that, in the former case, something which counts as evidence exists and can be indicated. The trouble with claims to know anything *by intuition* is that they appear to be logically indistinguishable from claims to believe it very firmly. And, of course, people can believe all kinds of things very firmly indeed and be mistaken.<sup>8</sup> (ii) The other objection to the kind of view which we have been considering is that it fails to take account of the fact that moral evaluation is logically a different sort of activity from statement of fact—even of *sui generis*, 'non-natural' moral fact. In order to understand this objection, we must turn now to the second concept of meaning—meaning as use—and the account of moral language to which it has given rise.

## II

Perhaps the best way into this account is by a consideration of the difference between what one is doing when one says that something *is* the case and when one says that something *ought to be* the case. Hume, it may be recalled, said

that the great defect which he had discovered in moralists was their failure to notice this difference.<sup>9</sup> What precisely is it? To say that X is Y is to describe X. To say that X ought to be Y may look superficially like a description of X—or at least a statement of fact about it—but if one asks what job this utterance does, or purports to do, the answer is clearly that it aims to get something done, to get X made Y. Similarly with other moral terms, such as 'good' or 'right', if one asks what job they are being used to do, it amounts to something more than description. These words are employed to grade, to commend or discommend, to register approval or disapproval. To utter them is more like casting a vote or giving a piece of advice than painting a representational picture.

Moral philosophers, who ask to understand moral discourse by thinking of its meaning as use rather than referent, take up the 'naturalistic fallacy' argument but re-interpret it slightly. It is not, they say, that words such as 'good' are misconceived if they are taken to refer to any but 'non-natural' properties; it is rather that it is impossible at the same time (a) to conceive of them as descriptions and (b) to allow that their job is commendation, grading etc. If I say of some action everything that can be said of it in factual terms—the time and place of its occurrence, who did it, what it consisted in, etc.—I still have not said whether I consider it a good or a bad action. If for example, I tell you that John Smith on Sunday afternoon gave money to a beggar in Hyde Park, you still do not know whether I think he did right or not. However far the factual description is prolonged the evaluative question goes unanswered. Evaluation is a different sort of linguistic activity from describing.

Two main types of view concerning moral judgments have emerged, in the light of the conception of meaning as use; they are known respectively as emotivism and prescriptivism. The former<sup>10</sup> is the notorious theory that moral terms do nothing more than express or stimulate reactions. To say 'Stealing is wrong' is to say no more than 'Stealing—ugh!' This theory did not last long. Clearly men do not talk about what they consider moral issues as they do about matters of taste. If I said 'Cream puffs—yum, yum!' and you asked me 'Why?', I should wonder what on earth you meant. But if I said 'Capital punishment is wrong' and you asked me why, I should not be in the least puzzled. It is normal to expect a man to have a reason for his moral judgments as it is not for his likes and dislikes.

Prescriptivism<sup>11</sup> has recognised this difference and, whilst taking moral judgments to be expressive or evaluative, rather than descriptive, has tried to bring out what is distinctive about about them. They guide actions or choices. There is an essential connexion between them and what men do, so that it is, to say the least, 'logically odd' to make such a remark as 'I consider X morally wrong but I intend to do it (or 'I advise you to do it')'. Moreover, one must be prepared to see the reasons which one gives for a moral judgment universalized. Suppose I say 'Capital punishment is wrong' and when asked

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why, reply 'Because it requires one man to take another's life'. You may counter with, 'Do you think war wrong?' If I reply 'No', or 'Not invariably', there are two courses open to me. I can concede that it is inconsistent to disapprove of one thing because it requires one man to take another's life, and not of another which does so; and then, as a rational being, give up my objection to capital punishment. Or I can indicate some difference between war and capital punishment—e.g. that the former is sometimes necessary for the defence of civilisation—which entitles me to approve of the one and not the other. Of course, I must be ready to see this point of difference universalized in its turn.

It will be apparent that what prescriptivism tries to do is to define the characteristics of moral discourse, which distinguish it from any other sort of discourse. The main objection to it is that it does not seem to have completed the list. A judgment may be action-guiding, reason-supported, open to universalization, etc. and still not be **moral**. Suppose I say "All black objects ought to be destroyed". That is action-guiding. Asked why, I reply 'Because this will make the world brighter.' That is a reason. Confronted with the question 'Do you think that all maroon objects ought to be painted crimson?'. I answer 'Certainly'. So I am prepared to see my reason universalized. But does all this make 'All black objects ought to be destroyed' a **moral** judgment? Surely not.

The question to which moral philosophers are now giving their attention is: What further characteristics, besides those listed by prescriptivists, do moral judgments, as such, have? They are moving away from the view that, in the last analysis, morality is entirely a matter of choice or decision: that simply anything can count as moral good or evil, right or wrong, if men choose that it shall. Let me conclude this first paper by noting two respects in which this view, that 'good' and 'ought' can be used to commend anything that one chooses to commend, seems suspect.

(i) Not just anything which may be truly said about an object makes sense as a reason for commending it." Suppose I say 'That is a good knife' and when asked why, reply 'It has a yellow handle.' This will strike you as bizarre. But if I say 'It cuts well', that will not. Or again: if I say that Mary Smith is a good daughter and asked why, reply, 'She thinks loyalty to country more important than to parents', your natural response will be 'She what?'. But if I reply 'She cares for her father in his old age', it will be Ah, yes'. Now why the difference in these cases? What we can take meaningfully as a criteria of goodness in knives or daughters is logically limited—by what? You may say 'By what a knife is for' and that seems fair enough. But are you going on to say 'And by what a daughter is for'? Are daughters for anything? There is some connexion between what a daughter is and what a good or dutiful daughter is, but it does not appear to hinge on the concept of function. I shall return to what I think it does hinge on in my third paper.

(ii) Not just any reason that one may choose to give for an action can count as a moral reason. Suppose I say 'Capital punishment ought to be abolished' and asked why, reply 'Because it happens, as a rule, early in the morning', that is absurd. But if I reply 'Because it does not deter would-be murderers', that is not. (This latter may not be an adequate reason; it may not even be true as a statement of fact; my only point is that it is recognisable as a **moral** reason.) What is the grounding here? What makes the one reply morally relevant but not the other? One answer which has been offered is that what deters would-be murderers is something which all men want. In so far, as you can show that an act is the way to something which all men want, you can give a reason for it which has (a) the compelling, and (b) the universal, character which moral reasons do have. Against this view, however, it has been pointed out that it is very difficult to indicate any wants which **all** men do have (would-be murderers presumably do not want what deters them from such action, though they may want what would deter others). And again, to say that what men want determines what they think morally good or evil would be, in some cases at least, to put the cart before the horse; the moral judgments which men make may determine what they want, not vice versa. It will be seen that it is not easy to find a logical grounding in what is the case for what it is held **ought to be** the case. Preachers are always saying things like, 'You are children of the light, **therefore you ought to walk as children of the light**', so the problem is very apposite so far as they are concerned. I have promised to return to it. We must wait to see if I can solve it.

W. D. HUDSON

1. **Ludwig Wittgenstein** Lutterworth paperback: Makers of Modern Theology series.
2. Cf. G. E. Moore, **Principia Ethica**.
3. Cf. Moore, op. cit; W. D. Ross, **The Right and the Good, Foundations of Ethics**.
4. I discuss this point of view at length in my Paperback **Ethical Intuitionism** (New Studies in Ethics series).
5. Cf. A. J. Ayer, **The Problem of Knowledge** on intuition.
6. **Treatise III.i.1.**
7. On Emotivism cf. C. L. Stevenson, **Ethics and Language** or, more briefly, A. J. Ayer, **Language, Truth and Logic**.
8. R. M. Hare is the leading exponent of Prescriptivism; see his **The Language of Morals and Freedom and Reason**.
9. An admirably clear picture of modern moral philosophy is given in G. J. Warnock, **Contemporary Moral Philosophy** (New Studies in Ethics series).
10. Cf. Philippa Foot, 'Moral Beliefs', **Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society**; and criticism thereof in D. Z. Phillips and H. O. Mounce, 'On Morality's Having a Point', **Philosophy** 1965.

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