

Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong

Jonathan Harrison



Muirhead Library of Philosophy

OUR KNOWLEDGE OF
RIGHT AND WRONG



MUIRHEAD

ETHICS
In 12 Volumes

I	A History of English Utilitarianism	<i>Albee</i>
II	Reason and Goodness	<i>Blanshard</i>
III	Moral Sense	<i>Bonar</i>
IV	Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong	<i>Harrison</i>
V	Ethics (Vol I)	<i>Hartmann</i>
VI	Ethics (Vol II)	<i>Hartmann</i>
VII	Ethics (Vol III)	<i>Hartmann</i>
VIII	Ethical Knowledge	<i>Kupperman</i>
IX	The Modern Predicament	<i>Paton</i>
X	The Good Will	<i>Paton</i>
XI	Natural Rights	<i>Ritchie</i>
XII	Ethics and Christianity	<i>Ward</i>

OUR KNOWLEDGE OF RIGHT AND WRONG

JONATHAN HARRISON

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1971 by Routledge

Published 2013 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY, 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 1971 George Allen & Unwin Ltd

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

The publishers have made every effort to contact authors/copyright holders of the works reprinted in the *Muirhead Library of Philosophy*. This has not been possible in every case, however, and we would welcome correspondence from those individuals/companies we have been unable to trace.

These reprints are taken from original copies of each book. In many cases the condition of these originals is not perfect. The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of these reprints, but wishes to point out that certain characteristics of the original copies will, of necessity, be apparent in reprints thereof.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-29569-7 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-84910-4 (pbk)

MUIRHEAD LIBRARY OF PHILOSOPHY

An admirable statement of the aims of the Library of Philosophy was provided by the first editor, the late Professor J. H. Muirhead, in his description of the original programme printed in Erdmann's *History of Philosophy* under the date 1890. This was slightly modified in subsequent volumes to take the form of the following statement:

'The Muirhead Library of Philosophy was designed as a contribution to the History of Modern Philosophy under the heads: first of Different Schools of Thought – Sensationalist, Realist, Idealist, Intuitivist; secondly of different Subjects – Psychology, Ethics, Aesthetics, Political Philosophy, Theology. While much had been done in England in tracing the course of evolution in nature, history, economics, morals and religion, little had been done in tracing the development of thought on these subjects. Yet "the evolution of opinion is part of the whole evolution".'

'By the co-operation of different writers in carrying out this plan it was hoped that a thoroughness and completeness of treatment, otherwise unattainable, might be secured. It was believed also that from writers mainly British and American fuller consideration of English Philosophy than it had hitherto received might be looked for. In the earlier series of books containing, among others, Bosanquet's *History of Aesthetic*, Pfleiderer's *Rational Theology since Kant*, Albee's *History of English Utilitarianism*, Bonar's *Philosophy and Political Economy*, Brett's *History of Psychology*, Ritchie's *Natural Rights*, these objects were to a large extent effected.

'In the meantime original work of a high order was being produced both in England and America by such writers as Bradley, Stout, Bertrand Russell, Baldwin, Urban, Montague, and others, and a new interest in foreign works, German, French and Italian, which had either become classical or were attracting public attention, had developed. The scope of the Library thus became extended into something more international, and it is entering on the fifth decade of its existence in the hope that it may contribute to that mutual understanding between countries which is so pressing a need of the present time.'

The need which Professor Muirhead stressed is no less pressing today, and few will deny that philosophy has much to do with enabling us to meet it, although no one, least of all Muirhead himself, would regard that as the sole, or even the main, object of philosophy. As Professor Muirhead continues to lend the distinction of his name to the

Library of Philosophy it seemed not inappropriate to allow him to recall us to these aims in his own words. The emphasis on the history of thought also seemed to me very timely: and the number of important works promised for the Library in the very near future augur well for the continued fulfilment, in this and other ways, of the expectations of the original editor.

H. D. LEWIS

OUR KNOWLEDGE OF RIGHT AND WRONG

BY
JONATHAN HARRISON

LONDON · GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD
NEW YORK · HUMANITIES PRESS, INC

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1971

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention. All rights reserved. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, 1956, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, electrical, chemical, mechanical, optical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner. Enquiries should be addressed to the Publishers.

© George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1971

BRITISH ISBN 0 04 1700252

U.S. SBN 391-00096-9

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

in 11 point Imprint type

BY BILLING & SONS LIMITED
GUILDFORD AND LONDON

PREFACE

This book falls into two parts. It would be an over-simplification to say that the first part was true, but not new, and that the second part was new, but not true. Some of the first part is new, and it may even be that some of the second part is true. The second part of the book, however, is not nearly as clear as I could wish. My excuse must be that I felt that if I spent any more time trying to get the second part any clearer, I would never finish the book at all. Whether this is a good excuse will depend upon its merits, which I must leave my reader to determine.

My thanks are due to the Philosophy Department at Northwestern University for giving me a light teaching programme when I was working on the final chapters; to Professor H. H. Price for his generous encouragement – he told me, among other things, that it was better to finish a bad book than not to finish a book at all; to my late wife for her moral support; and to Mrs. Vera Peetz who, besides encouraging me, has taken a very great deal of trouble in reading the proofs and correcting a large number of careless mistakes of my own.

J.H.
Nottingham 1970

This page intentionally left blank

CONTENTS

I	First-Order/Second-Order	13
II	Is Knowledge of Morality a Delusion?	20
III	Some Preliminary Distinctions	35
IV	Moral Judgments as <i>A Priori</i> and Analytic: The Place of Demonstrative Reasoning in Ethics	69
V	Moral Judgments as <i>A Priori</i> and Synthetic: Intuitionism and the Naturalistic Fallacy	73
VI	Moral Judgments as Synthetic, Contingent and Empirical: Subjectivism	108
VII	Ideal Observer Theories	151
VIII	Moral Sense Theories; The Universaliza- tion Principle	182
IX	God's Commands and Man's Duties	201
X	Morality and Moral Codes	229
XI	Evolution and Ethics	239
XII	Non-Propositional Theories	250
XIII	Moral Judgment and Some Practical Uses of Language	261
XIV	To Be or Not To Be	304
XV	Some Other Moral Judgments	341
XVI	Reasons for Actions	379
	Index	400

This page intentionally left blank

CHAPTER I

FIRST-ORDER/SECOND-ORDER

It is very natural for those unacquainted with moral philosophy to suppose that moral philosophers spend their time propounding and discussing various theories about the difference between right and wrong, between actions which are duties and those which are not, between the things which are good and ought to be sought after and the things which are bad and ought to be avoided, the difference between virtue and vice, and between good men and bad. Such discussions, it is assumed, are aimed at answering such questions as 'What actions are right, and what actions are wrong?', 'What sorts of action ought we to perform, and what other sorts of action ought we to refrain from performing?', 'What things ought men to aim at, for themselves and for others?' and 'What traits of character are virtues, and what traits of character are vices?' It is further supposed that, if moral philosophers were successful in their quest, ordinary men, should they come to know of the answers which had been given to these questions, would be helped thereby to solve any moral problems with which they might be faced: that these theories would give them some practical guidance in the conduct of their life, would tell them how to live, and at what they ought to aim.

In fact, only a proportion of moral philosophy is directed at answering questions such as these. Modern moral philosophers sometimes distinguish between first-order questions and second-order questions. Questions of the type of which I have just given examples would be called first-order questions, and they ask what actions are right and wrong, what actions are duties, and at what ought we to aim? Second-order questions are questions *about* first-order questions, and they ask such things as 'What exactly are we asking, when we ask whether an action is right?' or 'What is meant by "right"?' or 'How do we answer questions which ask whether a given action is right or wrong, and how does the method – if it can be called that – of answering such questions differ from the method by which we answer other sorts of question, for example, historical questions or scientific questions?'

Philosophers who distinguish between first-order and second-order moral questions would not limit this distinction to ethics. They would hold that ethics is one of a number of first-order enquiries, such as history, physics, biology, economics, and that each one of these enquiries gives rise to a second-order enquiry, the object of which is to investigate the methods and concepts of the respective first-order enquiry, the nature of the assertions those pursuing it make and of the evidence by which they are properly established, their relation to other enquiries, and the extent to which such first-order enquiries can give us knowledge. Such enquiries are sometimes called 'meta-enquiries', and philosophers talk about 'meta-history' or 'meta-biology', though more often the more old-fashioned phrases 'the philosophy of history' or 'the philosophy of biology' are preferred.

A great many modern philosophers would hold that the *only* function of philosophy was to engage in meta-enquiries of the sort I have mentioned; that philosophers can give us no first-order knowledge of the actual world, but only second-order knowledge about the nature of this knowledge, and how it is obtained by others.¹ This answer is particularly attractive to empiricist philosophers, for if you hold that information about the world can only be obtained by observation and experiment, philosophers, who neither observe nor experiment, will inevitably seem peculiarly ill fitted to get it. Some modern philosophers, however, have held that philosophy does have another function, which is to synthesize the specialized information given by particular first-order enquiries into the aspects of the world with which they are especially concerned, to get the general gist of it, and to piece it together in order to present a synoptic view of the world as a whole.² Such a task must inevitably get more difficult as the various first-order enquiries amass more and more information, become more and more specialized, and more and more technical.

Philosophers in the past, and some contemporary modern philosophers, have held that the function of philosophy is not confined to pursuing meta-enquiries, nor in condensing and combining information about the world acquired by others, but

¹ A defence of a wider view of the function of philosophy may be found in 'Clarity is not Enough,' by H. H. Price, in a volume of the same name edited by H. D. Lewis (Allen & Unwin, 1963).

² See C. D. Broad, *Scientific Thought*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1923). Introduction.

that there are certain questions about the world which cannot be answered by the ordinary first-order enquiries, but which can be answered by philosophers, without recourse to observation and experiment, by the exercise of reason alone. The most important of the questions have been 'Is there a God?', and 'If so, what is he like, and what is his relation to the world he has created?' But nowadays those philosophers who think that philosophy can provide the answer to such questions are in a minority.

To return to the distinction between first-order and second-order *ethical* questions, there is at least one reason why the distinction is important. A great many modern moral philosophers would hold that moral philosophers are in no better position to answer first-order ethical questions than anyone else;¹ that such questions are best answered by the ordinary good man, who has by practice developed and made more sensitive his moral perception; that moral philosophers are neither better nor more morally discerning than other people, and that the type of ratiocination at which a philosophical training may be supposed to make one more adept does not enter into the solution of moral problems. If, of course, first-order questions were the only sort of question, moral philosophy, for such philosophers, would be pointless, but, since they are not the only sort of question, moral philosophy is not prohibited by those philosophers entirely, but merely confined to the solution of second-order questions. The statement that reasoning is not involved in solving moral problems would be, for example, a partial answer to the question 'How do we know what is right?' In attempting to provide an answer to such second-order questions, it is held, moral philosophers are performing an enlightening, if purely academic, task, for these are not questions which ordinary people usually find it necessary to ask, or would be particularly well-fitted to answer; nor does the fact that reasoning of the sort a philosopher may be expected to be better at than other people is not involved in answering first-order questions mean that it is not the most important thing involved in answering second-order questions about the first.

The division of the questions of moral philosophy into first-order questions and second-order ones, however, does not seem to me to be exhaustive. Moral philosophers quite properly discuss

¹ The view that it is not part of the business of a moral philosopher to answer moral questions has been held, for example, by A. J. Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic* (Gollancz, 1946), Chapter VI.

a very large number of questions which are neither moral questions nor questions about moral questions, though, of course, what answer we give to these would have a bearing upon what answers we give to certain moral questions. Examples of the sort of thing I have in mind would be problems about motives and choice and the freedom of the will. Moral philosophers discuss problems concerning the interpretation of the writings of other moral philosophers, problems concerning the bearing of other studies, such as theology, biology, medicine, psychology, physiology, anthropology, economics, politics and law, upon moral philosophy. Other philosophical problems, the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the mind/body problem, also have a bearing upon moral philosophy. It would also be unwise to consider second-order questions about ethics entirely in isolation from similar second-order questions about other branches of knowledge. Indeed, a neat classification of the problems of moral philosophy is impossible; any questions may be of interest to the moral philosopher, and it is impossible to say off-hand which problems will be relevant and which will not.

The important question now arises, whether it is possible to separate first-order questions about moral philosophy from second-order questions; whether it is possible to commit oneself to some second-order assertion about the meaning of ethical words or the manner in which ethical knowledge, if there is any, is obtained, without committing oneself to some answer to a first-order question, i.e., without committing oneself to the view that such-and-such a thing is good, or such-and-such an action right. On the face of it, it seems impossible to divorce the two kinds of question. In support of this view it can be argued that someone committing himself to any first-order moral view is implicitly claiming that the method by which he has arrived at it is sound, and therefore committing himself to the second-order view that methods of this kind are sound methods of reaching moral views. It can also be argued that anyone claiming that a certain method of arriving at a moral view is a sound one – which is a second-order moral view – is committing himself to claiming that views arrived at in this way are sound, that is, committing himself to a first-order moral view.

On the other hand, it certainly looks as if it should be possible to hold a theory about the definition of ethical terms, i.e., to hold a second-order moral view, without having any first-order theory

at all about what things these terms apply to. Where second-order theories about the nature of scientific reasoning are concerned, it is possible to hold, say, that any theory established inductively is correct, without committing oneself to any view about what theories actually are established inductively. Similarly, the contention, whether true or not, that moral judgments are known to be true by a moral sense, or the contention that moral judgments are known to be true by reason, does not commit the person making these contentions to any view about what moral judgments the moral sense or reason does establish. Furthermore, it is possible to reason correctly on any given subject, without being able explicitly to state what the principles according to which one reasons are. As Locke said, it was not the case that man could not reason until Aristotle discovered the principle of the syllogism, and, just as one can play a game well without being able to say how one does it, one can reason well, without being able to say what in general constitutes the difference between good reasoning and bad.

Nevertheless many moral philosophers in the past who have been purporting to say according to what principles correct moral reasoning proceeds, have in fact done nothing more than give some very general moral judgment, which is in just as much need of justification as the moral judgments of which it is supposed to be the rationale. If one says that moral arguments with factual premises and a moral conclusion are valid, then all one is doing is to make the moral judgment that these actions of which the premises are true have a certain moral quality. For example, if I say that all ethical arguments which reason from the fact that an action has good consequences to the fact that it ought to be done are valid arguments, then all I am doing is to assert that one ought to act in such a way as to produce good consequences, which assertion is itself a moral judgment, and not a principle which can be used to test the validity of moral judgments. This, however, does not mean that ethics and meta-ethics cannot be kept separate, but simply that some moral philosophers have failed to separate them.

It must also not be forgotten that though a meta-ethical view *by itself* does not entail any ethical view, it may do so in conjunction with some other additional premises. For example, the meta-ethical view that 'right' means 'conducive to the survival of the race' does not entail any view at all about what actions are in fact

right, but if you add the premise that warfare is not conducive to the survival of the race, then the moral view that warfare is wrong does follow.

Not only are there first-order and second-order problems in moral philosophy; there are also third-order problems. Third-order problems, of course, are problems about second-order problems. To the extent that philosophy consists in a consideration of the nature and methods of disciplines which study the world or make value-judgments about the world, it is a meta-enquiry, and the philosophy of history and the philosophy of science consist at least partly in a discussion of meta-problems about history and about science. What might be called the philosophy of philosophy, therefore, consists of meta-meta-problems, and the philosophy of moral philosophy consists in a third-order consideration of the nature of second-order problems about moral problems and the manner in which they may be solved.

It seems fairly obvious that the problems of meta-philosophy are not solved in the way in which problems about the nature of the world are solved, and problems about meta-ethics are not solved in the way problems about ethics are solved. I shall later, for example, argue that we do not have a moral sense. But it does not just so happen that we do not have a moral sense, though, had nature been organised differently, we might have had. Hence meta-ethical problems are solved by *a priori* reflection rather than by observation. But reflection upon what? The facts with which second-order moral philosophy starts is that we have in the English language, together with equivalents in other languages, words such as 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad', 'duty', 'ought' and so on, which words have, roughly, the function of appraising people and things and states of affairs and of directing behaviour. It is, of course, just a matter of fact that languages possess words which have this function, and just a matter of fact that these particular words, and not others, perform this function. But those engaged in second-order moral philosophy are not so much interested in the fact that a particular word has the function it does, so much as that there is a function, which some particular word has, the nature of this function, and a comparison of this function with the function of other non-ethical words. Such statements are not known to be true by observation and experience, but by means of reflection on the functions of words. That the

function, which in chess a pawn has, is a different function from the function a king has, is not an empirical statement, though the statement that the function of a king is different from the function of a pawn is an empirical statement. Similarly, that the function which it so happens the word 'good' has is a different function – and that it is different in such-and-such ways – from the function which the word 'green' has, is not an empirical statement, though that the word 'good' has a different function from the word 'green' is an empirical statement. Hence meta-ethics consists in solving problems which can be solved by reflection, rather than by observation. Meta-ethical truths are known in the same manner in which we know that, though it is an empirical fact that the English phrase 'larger than' means what it does mean, it is necessarily the case that if two terms A and B are related by the relation which is 'named' by the English phrase 'larger than', and B is related in the same way to another term C, then A must be larger than C.

CHAPTER II

IS KNOWLEDGE OF MORALITY A DELUSION?

Perhaps the first question we ought to consider is whether or not the whole of our apparent knowledge of morality is not some all-prevalent, insidious, but nevertheless inescapable delusion. Views roughly to this effect have been hinted at by Greek Sophists, Marxist economists, Freudian psychologists and Existentialist moralists. However, in the following pages I shall examine the question in my own way.

Hume, who rejects the views of those who deny the reality of moral distinctions,¹ himself produces little argument against the view he so cavalierly dismisses, and most moral philosophers have followed him in not taking it very seriously, or ignoring it altogether.

By the question 'Is knowledge of morality a delusion?' I do not mean 'Is it a delusion that men ever act morally?' Philosophers who answer this latter question in the affirmative presumably maintain something like this. Men never behave as they ought or, if they do, this is only from base or selfish motives. They never perform kind or generous or noble or unselfish actions, but only persuade others or delude themselves that they do. Consequently all men are bad, or, at least morally indifferent, and it is a delusion to think that virtue is ever exemplified in the motives or actions of human beings at all.

It should be noticed that those who hold this view are implicitly assuming that there is nothing radically wrong with man's moral faculties as such. They are not disputing, but, rather, implicitly presupposing, that some motives or traits of character are better than others, and also that we know that they are; they are just maintaining that, as a matter of fact, men do not have the better ones. They do not doubt that some ways of behaving are better than others, that there are some things which men ought to do, and others which they ought not to do; they are just asserting that men never behave in the better ways, or do

¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford University Press, 2nd edition, 1902), pp. 169-70.

as they ought, unless it suits them. They do not wish to maintain that there is anything radically wrong with man's capacity for making moral judgments; they themselves are quite prepared to make moral judgments, uncomplimentary ones, about mankind as a whole. It is man's moral achievements, not his moral insight, that they think badly of, though they must also think badly of man's moral insight, to the extent that they are presumably bound to maintain that the vast majority of mankind have too high an opinion of their own virtue. Even those who think we have no duties because our will is not free, are not suggesting that there is anything wrong with man's moral *insight*. His moral insight tells him the hypothetical proposition that he would have certain duties, if he were free, but unfortunately, he is not free.

The view I want to discuss is the more interesting and more radical one that there is something fundamentally wrong with the belief, which most men seem to have, that there *is* a better or a worse in matters of conduct; with the belief that some things are fitting, admirable or obligatory, while others are base, ignoble or wrong. Whereas those who hold the view, which I do not intend to discuss here, that morality is a delusion, in the sense that it is a delusion that men ever behave well, those who hold this latter view maintain that it is a delusion that there *are* proper or improper ways of behaving at all. Presumably, since that all men behave badly, or that sin is ineradicable from human nature, are themselves moral assessments, it would be just as much a delusion that men are all evil as that some of them are good. We must distinguish, therefore, between the claim to see through *men*, and the more interesting claim to see through *morality*.

We must beware, of course, of saying that morality is a delusion that it is *better* to be without, for this would presuppose that some things were *better* than others, and this would presuppose the falsity of the very view which is being contended for. But perhaps it could be said that all that is being contended is that a morality which demands sacrifice, a morality of duty, a morality of categorical imperatives which must be obeyed, irrespectively of the interests of the agent, is a delusion; but that it is no delusion that some things are better *for* people than others; no delusion, for example, that food is better for people than starvation, and hence no delusion that it is better for people to be free from the delusion of morality than to remain its slave.

The view that morality is a delusion, in this more radical sense,

however, is not at all clear. Those who maintain it may mean one or other of the following three things.

1. They may mean that the moral judgments which we normally and often unreflectingly believe, are all *false*, and the things we describe as having moral attributes do not ever have them. According to this view, it is always *false* that we have a duty to do something, whether we want to do it or not, and always false that some men are admirable, others vile, and that some ways of behaving are better and more desirable than others.

2. They may mean that certain words, like 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad', 'ought' and 'ought not', and others which it would be tedious to enumerate, are words *without meaning*. Consequently, though men think they are saying things which are true and important when they use these words, they are in fact saying nothing at all. They suppose that they are talking sense when they use such words, but this supposition is delusive. It is a delusion, of course, which may have a profound effect on the behaviour of the men who suffer from it, but a rational man will not have it, for a rational man would not suppose he was talking sense when he was in fact talking nonsense.

3. It may be held that, though moral words are not meaningless and do express moral judgments, some of which are in fact true, men are never in a position to *know which* of these moral judgments are true and which false, and that the only proper attitude to such judgments is one of complete and total scepticism. Men's moral beliefs, or at any rate some of them, may be true, but men never have any good reason, or even any reason at all, for supposing that any given belief is true, and so all such beliefs are alike irrational. A rational man will realize that the truth on moral matters is something he can never attain, and will take up the only proper attitude to such issues, which is one of thorough-going scepticism.

It is worth noticing that no-one ought to hold all three of these views, or even any two of them, simultaneously. The second is straightforwardly incompatible with the first and the third; if moral words are meaningless, then they can express no moral judgments which can be described as being all false, which is what the first view holds, and no moral judgments which can be described as unfounded, which is what they are according to the third view. And though there is, so far as I can see, no *logical* incompatibility of the normal sort between the first view and the

third, for there is no reason why it should not be the case that, though all moral judgments are in fact false, we never *know* which of them are true and which of them are false, no philosopher ought to maintain both views for, if he asserts that they are all false, he is implicitly claiming that at least one person, namely himself, knows or has reason for thinking that they are all false, and so implicitly claiming that not all moral judgments can be unfounded. *His own* moral judgments must be in a specially privileged position, exempt from the rule that no-one can ever know, or even have any real reason for thinking, that any moral judgment is true rather than false, or false rather than true.

The second of the three views is, I suppose, the most difficult for anyone to find credible. It is true that, when God gave man the gift of speech, he gave him also, as the other side of the coin, the capacity to talk nonsense, which capacity man has, ever since, made the fullest use of. Nevertheless, it is difficult to believe that a whole class of sentences, or a whole area of discourse, can as such be meaningless, particularly when it has survived, and so presumably performed a useful function, since time immemorial. But the arguments which have been used to show that moral discourse, though it may be abused, must in general be meaningful, are not very convincing. It is true that ethical terms are used and so, presumably, there are rules for their use and so, if for a word to have meaning is for its use to be governed by rules, moral terms must have a meaning. But meaning admits of degrees. Theological discourse cannot be wholly meaningless, but it might be, as some have maintained, *in the last resort* meaningless, and the same might be said for moral discourse. People do not *fully* understand everything they read or hear. Their understanding is frequently partial, and when it is only partial, it is impossible for them to tell whether what they only partially understand is fully meaningful, or only partially so. It is because of men's partial understanding, it might be argued, that they have continued to use theological discourse, although theological discourse is meaningless, and the same is true of the language of morals. I do not myself think this view is very plausible, however, though I do not see how it can be refuted.

The view that all *judgments* (not just moral ones) are false would appear to be self-contradictory. If all judgments are false, then, since that all judgments are false is itself a judgment, *it* is false, and so some judgments are true. It might be possible to escape from this difficulty by arguing, plausibly or otherwise, that no

judgment can be about a class of judgments of which it is a member; any judgment about judgments must be of an order one higher than the judgments it is about. Hence the judgment that all judgments are false, must be about judgments of the order n , but since it itself will be of the order $n+1$, it will not be about itself, and so will not imply its own falsity.

However, even the view that only all *moral* judgments are false is initially faced with what might appear to be an insuperable objection. Not *all* moral judgments can be false, because some moral judgments are the contradictories of others, and if a given moral judgment is false, its contradictory must be true. The statement that incest is *not* wrong is just as much a moral judgment as the statement that incest *is* wrong. The statement that it is not our duty to help others is just as much a moral judgment as the statement that it is our duty to help others. It is possible for someone to *refrain from making* either judgment, or to say that he does not know which of them is true, but it scarcely seems possible to deny that one or other of them must be true.

There are various possible ways of escaping the above difficulty. Firstly, it is possible to say that statements such as 'It is our duty to help others' and 'It is not our duty to help others' are not strict contradictories, but only contradictories on a given assumption, and that this assumption is false. To take an example from a sphere other than the sphere of morals, it might be argued that 'The King of France is bald' and 'The King of France is not bald' are not contradictories, but only contradictories on the assumption that there is a King of France. If there is a King of France, it must be the case that he is either bald or not bald, and that he cannot be both; but if there is not a King of France, then it may be (or even must be) the case that neither are true. (It might be held, incidentally, that this is because they are both false, or because they are both neither true nor false.) Similarly, it might be argued that 'It is our duty to help others' and 'It is not our duty to help others' are not strict contradictories, but only contradictories on the assumption that we can help what we do. If we *can* help what we do, then it must either be the case that it is, or that it is not, our duty to help others, but if we can *not* help what we do, then these statements are either both false, or (what is less plausible) both neither true nor false. Such a view, however, does not maintain that there is anything wrong with our moral faculties as such, but merely that there is something

wrong with a factual assumption, namely, that we can help what we do, which most of our moral beliefs presuppose. Consequently I shall not discuss it any further.

Secondly, we may escape the argument which maintains that since some moral judgments contradict others, some moral judgments must be true, by denying that truth and falsity are applicable to moral judgments at all. Those philosophers who have held this view, however, have not generally wished to say that there was anything radically wrong with our moral faculties, so much as that moral philosophers had totally misunderstood the nature of moral discourse, which is not to report the discoveries which our moral faculties enable us to make, but to do something more like commanding, exhorting or persuading. Consequently discussion of this view will be reserved for a later chapter.

The only way I can think of of escaping the above refutation – that since some moral judgments are the contradictories of others they cannot all be false – of the view that all moral beliefs are false is this. Moral beliefs may be divided into two classes, which I shall call ‘positive’ and ‘innocuous’ respectively. Among positive moral beliefs I shall count both the opinion that a certain thing ought to be done and the opinion that it ought not to be done; among innocuous moral beliefs I shall count the opinion that a certain thing is permissible but that, since it does not matter if we do not do it, it is not actually obligatory, that is, it is also permissible to omit it. Among positive moral beliefs would be the belief that a certain action or man was worthy of praise or of blame; among innocuous moral beliefs would be the opinion that a certain action or man was neither worthy of praise nor of blame. Though there is something logically wrong with the view that all moral beliefs are false, there is nothing, so far as I can see, *logically* wrong with the view that only non-innocuous moral beliefs are false.

What we have called innocuous moral beliefs, however, are just as moral as positive ones are, and the view that only such moral beliefs are true is just as much a moral theory, though a queer one, as any that have been held. Hence it is not as radical a view as the one that the whole area of our moral beliefs is a delusion. According to it, men are the victims of a delusion only when they hold *positive* moral views, and a holder of the theory who holds no *positive* moral view, though he does hold a *moral* view, is not a victim of this delusion at all. However, since it is itself a moral theory of sorts, it cannot be supported by any *general* argument,

if such an argument is possible, which argument would purport to show that *all* moral beliefs were false or that there was something radically and inveterately wrong with our faculty for arriving at and considering moral judgments, for the user of such an argument would be cutting the ground from under his own feet, or sawing off the branch on which he himself was sitting. For if his argument did show that moral beliefs were false, it would show, *a fortiori*, that the belief that all innocuous moral beliefs were true, was false.

Before going on to consider what sort of argument might be used in support of the 'anti-moralist' position that *all* ethical beliefs are false, let us consider arguments in favour of this rather queer moral position, which anyone who held that only innocuous moral judgments are true must be committed to, which view might be called 'moral nihilism', according to which, roughly, everything is permissible.

Sometimes it has been held that though in fact everything is alike permissible, those who are of the contrary opinion are so because they are the dupes of certain interested people.¹ Sometimes it is suggested that it is the strong who are responsible for this deception; the strong, who govern us, persuade us that it is, among other things, our duty to obey the law, which law the strong make in their own interest, whereas in fact we have neither this nor any other duty. Sometimes a view directly opposite to this is held, namely, that it is the *weak* who dupe the *strong*; the weak, who realize that the strong have the power to take at will both their lives and their property, have cleverly persuaded the strong, as their best means of defence against them, that it is their duty not to do these things.

Both the view that the strong dupe the weak, and that the weak dupe the strong, seem to me to have difficulties which are insuperable. First of all, it is not just the strong, or the weak, who benefit from the performance of duty, but everybody. We do not benefit from *every* performance of what is generally supposed to be a duty; sometimes other people have what is generally supposed to be a duty, the performance of which would harm us; and sometimes we ourselves have what is generally supposed to be a duty to sacrifice our own interests to that of others. Nevertheless, it is obvious that in a society where people did not think they had duties, and were not in any way guided by the moral beliefs

¹ See Plato, *The Republic*, Book I.

which to some extent guide us, *everybody* would be very badly off indeed. Secondly, it is just an empirical fact that the weak as well as the strong (or the strong as well as the weak) suppose they have duties. Therefore the strong (or the weak) must not have duped others only; they must also have somehow succeeded in duping themselves. Lastly the person holding the theory that we have been duped into thinking we have duties is implicitly claiming that he himself has seen through the machinations of those responsible for this delusion, i.e. he is claiming that he himself is exempt from some of the weaknesses which beset his neighbours. On the whole, it is unlikely that he is right.

Some psychiatrists seem to be opposed to what they are pleased to call 'morality', and appear to suppose themselves to hold something approximating to the view that all things are permissible. Some seem to think that, by and large, morality is bad for people, and that people in general, and their patients in particular, would be better off without it. They sometimes class man's belief that there are certain things he ought to do as a delusion, along, perhaps, with his belief that there is a God, and that we have immortal souls. In forming such an opinion it seems very likely that these people have been to a large extent influenced by the effect of certain moral prohibitions upon the health and happiness of some of their patients. Some people – and these are the people who seem more likely than most to find their way into psychiatrists' consulting rooms – appear to think that certain forms of sexual relationship – or perhaps even any form of sexual relationship – are immoral, and it would also appear that they would live much more satisfactory lives if they were not prevented or impeded from forming such relationships by their belief that they are immoral. Well, perhaps these beliefs are harmful, and perhaps, too, they are not only harmful, but mistaken, and the things these psychiatrists' patients think are wrong not wrong at all. Nevertheless, we must not be misled by the charming English euphemism by which it is customary to speak of departures from the commonly accepted standard of sexual behaviour as 'immorality' into supposing that sexual morality is the whole of morality, or that sexual prohibitions are the only prohibitions. It is very unlikely that any psychiatrist would wish to say that murder or rape was not wrong, on the ground that preventing themselves from committing it was bad for their patients. Perhaps, too, psychiatrists think they are opposed to morality, when they are merely op-

posed to a stringent or exacting morality, or merely to a stringent or exacting sexual morality. Or perhaps they are inclined to think they think that all positive moral judgments are false, when all they really think is that a certain sub-class of positive moral judgments are false, namely, those stating that certain people deserve to be praised, or, more particularly, blamed, for performing certain actions, or that some men are better than others. It may be that, because all men are alike actuated by self-interest, no men are better than any others, or that, because all human actions are the inevitable outcome of a heredity and environment over which the agent has no control, no one can very properly be praised or blamed for what he does. Nevertheless, these are not the only sorts of moral judgment there are, and, unless our psychiatrist is prepared to hold the view that murder and cruelty and violence are not wrong, he does not adhere to the moral nihilist position we are at the moment discussing. Indeed, once it is seen that what I have called 'moral nihilism', since it maintains the moral proposition that all things are permissible, is itself a moral position, it is difficult to see how anyone could hold it. One might maintain, in one's study, as a flight of speculative fancy, that absolutely all moral beliefs, not simply what we have called positive ones, have something radically and inherently wrong with them and, in a way, escape confrontation with hard reality by the mere fact that such a view, if it militates against any moral view, militates against all alike, and so is somehow felt to be not quite serious. A man who holds it may say to his daughter, or his servant, or his pupil, 'It is false that it is wrong to sleep with whom you please,' and his pronouncement is deprived of all seriousness or effect by the fact that he is, or ought to be, if he sticks to the logical consequences of his own view, also prepared to say to them, 'It is also false that it is perfectly all right to sleep with whom you please'. Pointing in both directions at once, he escapes responsibility for pointing in either. The view we have called moral nihilism, however, is not intellectually frivolous in this way; where two moral propositions are contradictory, it asserts one, and denies the other. The very fact that one assumes some responsibility in putting it forward – or would do so, if there were any chance of one's being taken seriously – means that it is the less likely to be held, and so, though logically less vulnerable than the view that all moral beliefs are false, it is at the same time psychologically less attractive.

When we go on to consider what sort of argument could be used in an attempt to support the anti-moralist view that *all* moral beliefs (not just the ones which are not innocuous) are false, I think it is clear that such arguments do not support the view that they are all false, but the different view that no one has any reason, or any good reason, for supposing them to be true, and that consequently such beliefs are all alike irrational, which brings us to a discussion of the third of the three views distinguished above.

The view that no one has any reason, or any good reason, for his moral beliefs escapes the objection which appeared conclusive against the view that all moral beliefs were false. According to this view, it is not both false that cruelty is wrong, and also false that cruelty is not wrong; one of these is true, and the other false, but no one has ever any good reason for believing the one rather than the other. It is held that all our moral beliefs are unfounded, because it is held that it is always possible to explain how it comes about that any man, or any community of men, accepts certain beliefs and not others. The sorts of explanation which might be given are these.

When one considers certain classes of belief – moral, religious and political beliefs are the most outstanding examples of the sort of thing I have in mind – one cannot fail to be impressed by the fact that different beliefs are distributed unevenly about the globe and that, furthermore, they tend to *stay* distributed that way over fairly long periods of time. This distribution – partly, though not entirely, because of the fact that people move about – is somewhat higgledy-piggledy, but in certain areas you find Christians, while in others you find Buddhists; in some areas you find democrats, in others you find communists; in some areas you find people who regard polygamy with abhorrence, whereas in others you find that people regard it as the right and proper form of matrimony. This is doubtless largely due to the fact that we tend very largely to accept our moral, religious and political beliefs from those round about us, our parents, or those responsible for our upbringing, in particular. Though we sometimes react against these beliefs, we generally react against them only within a context, i.e. react against some of them while accepting others, and it is quite likely that our rejection of them is no more rational than our acceptance of them would have been. Hence it is at least plausible to suggest that we have the moral, political

and religious beliefs we do have, not because we perceive that there are good grounds for accepting them, but because they have been stamped upon us in our youth. If the President of the United States of America had been born in Leningrad and the Prime Minister of Soviet Russia had been born in New York, it is difficult to believe that, had their force of character and political acumen brought each to equally high positions in the other's country, each would not have been condemning the beliefs which each now so enthusiastically supports. It is difficult not to believe that if by an accident of birth the Archbishop of Canterbury had been born a Jew, he would not now be employing his outstanding talents in furthering a very different cause.

I think it must be allowed that it is obvious that irrational forces do play a very large part in moulding our political, religious and – which is what we are here concerned with – moral beliefs. Our moral beliefs are bound to be irrationally affected by the moral beliefs of the people amongst whom we are brought up, by our emotions, our interests, our social and economic position, and even by our physiological state, which may predispose some to a melancholy asceticism, and others to a cheerful worldliness (though, by and large, only the former go to the lengths of writing books on moral philosophy). It must be remembered, however, that the view we are considering holds, not simply that, in forming the moral beliefs we do, we are at every moment liable to be irrationally motivated by such logically irrelevant but causally effective factors as a middle-class upbringing, a domineering mother, or a poor digestion, but that absolutely every belief which has ever been held is influenced solely by such factors. Now the reason why I said previously that such arguments as these would be very unsatisfactory if used in favour of the view that all moral beliefs are false is that the fact that I arrive at a certain opinion irrationally does not mean that it is *false*. I may irrationally believe, solely because I want to, that there are a class of beings whose function it is to watch over me, help and care for me, and my life and property – but so there are (I speak, of course, of the police force). I may wake up unreasonably convinced that evil will befall me, and so it may. Things I believe for the worst of reasons, or without any reason at all, may, nevertheless be true. Hence an argument to the effect that all moral beliefs are unfounded does not at all show that they are all false. To show that a moral belief is false, one must oneself use the type of

argument, whatever it may be, appropriate to a moral issue, and this is a very odd thing for people who wish to discredit moral argument in general to do.

Hence you do not show that a belief is *false* merely by being able to produce a causal explanation of how it comes to be held. Do you, by giving such a causal explanation, show it to be *irrational*? Now the facts which seem to show that moral beliefs, amongst others, are irrational, can be put, if we wish, in a much less damaging way. There can be a history of truth and discovery, as well as one of error and blind alleys, and the ideal historian would have to explain not only why people came to make certain mistakes at certain times and not others, but also why they came to hit upon truths at certain times and not at others. The fact that there is a perfectly good causal explanation of how it comes about that the Greeks believed the sun went round the earth, but we do not, does not mean that our belief that the earth goes round the sun is irrational. Why, then, should the fact that it is possible to explain why the Greeks did not believe that infanticide was wrong, while we do, mean our belief that it is wrong is irrational? Perhaps both man's insights and his errors alike admit of a causal explanation. Perhaps Jones would not have believed some mistaken theory were it not for his great respect for the teacher who propounded it. On the other hand, perhaps Smith would not have hit upon an important truth were it not for his detestation of the eminent men whose opinions it overthrew. One may be made to think aright by being influenced by the people among whom one is brought up, as well as prevented from doing this by them. One's position in life may free one from certain blindnesses, as well as prevent one from having certain insights. A physiological state of one kind may produce delusions, but so a different physiological state may sharpen one's capacity for following difficult arguments which men in a different physiological state cannot follow. Some drugs may refine our faculties, though others blunt them.

The fact, then, that a man would not have believed a given doctrine had he not lived in a certain environment, at a certain period of history, been brought up in a certain way, had certain wishes, or possessed a certain type of physiological make-up does not by itself tend to show that his belief in this doctrine is irrational, or that he has no good reasons for accepting it. Beliefs, in other words, may have *necessary* conditions in the past history

of the believer – in events in his life which are such that, if they had not occurred, he would not have believed what he did – without being made irrational thereby. But what if they have *sufficient* conditions in the past history of the believer, in events which are such that, if they occur, he *must* believe what he does? What if certain things happen to a man which enable us to say, not just that, if they had not happened, he would not have believed such-and-such a thing, but that, since they have happened, he must believe such and such a thing? Even this, it seems to me, would not force us to say that his beliefs must be irrational. A knowledge of a man's past life may, for all I can see to the contrary, enable us to say that, at a later date, he will form, in a certain way, a certain belief which goes against the evidence, or that, at a later date, he will quite correctly perform certain mental operations which result in his apprehending a truth.

There is, however, another sense in which our beliefs may have sufficient conditions in our past lives. The statement that our beliefs have sufficient conditions in the past histories of the believers may mean that we believe certain things *only* because we were jealous of our fathers, frightened of losing our money, or addicted to opium. Since the word 'only' means, in this context, 'and not for any other reason', it does indeed follow that the beliefs of people who arrive at their conclusions *only* for these reasons are irrational. But though an empirical investigation of the *genesis* of our beliefs might well show that they all had necessary conditions, or even that they all had sufficient conditions, in the first of the two senses distinguished above, could such an investigation show that they had sufficient conditions in the second of these two senses?

It seems to me that, should a sociologist or a psychologist or a physiologist pronounce that our moral beliefs are irrational, on the grounds of something he has discovered by means of a study of sociology or psychology or physiology, then he is unwittingly stepping out of the sphere in which his training makes him an expert into one in which it does not. We have already seen that, should someone claim that a study of one of these subjects has shown him that a given moral view is false, we can reply to him that the statement that a moral view is false is as much a moral judgment as the statement that it is true, and so that, to show that it *is* false, a study of psychology or sociology or physiology is not enough. It must be shown to be false by means of the

use of the proper methods appropriate to moral argument, whatever these may be. It may *seem* that the sociologist or psychologist or physiologist escapes this difficulty if he stops short of saying that a given moral view is false, and simply says that, though it may be true, a study of its causal factors has shown that there are no reasons for thinking that it is. Though it may not be obvious, however, the statement that a moral judgment is *unfounded* is as much a moral judgment as the statement that it is *false*, and one is passing over from sociology or psychology or physiology to moralizing when one says that a moral judgment is irrational just as much as when one says that it is mistaken or erroneous. When one says that a given moral judgment is irrational, what one means is that the reasons the people who hold it have for thinking it is true are not good reasons for thinking it is true, or not reasons for thinking it to be true at all. Now it may be a matter of empirical fact that someone's reasons for thinking so-and-so are such-and-such, and it may also be an empirical fact that these reasons would not have weighed with him but for certain causal factors such as that he wished very much to believe the conclusion, or that he had been brought up in an environment where such reasons weighed with everybody else, or that he was at the time in a certain physiological or psychological state. But if the psychologist goes on to say that these reasons do not at all support the belief in question, then he is doing something over and above what this empirical investigation of the causes of this belief entitle him to do. If the belief in question is a belief about the past, what he is doing, over and above sociology, psychology or physiology is history; if the belief in question is a mathematical one, then what he is doing, over and above these things, is mathematics; if it is a political belief then, in pronouncing upon the adequacy of the reasons given in support of it, he is trespassing into politics; finally, if the belief is a moral one, then he is stepping over the borders of sociology, psychology or physiology, and moralizing. To add the *coup de grâce* to this position, it is only necessary to point out that if all moral beliefs are without foundation, then, since the belief that certain moral beliefs are inadequately supported is *itself* a moral belief, it, too, must be without foundation. So this anti-ethical theory, like the last, ends by digging its own grave.

The matter, however, does not rest here. In discussing the third of three possible anti-moralist positions (the fourth posi-

tion, if you count the view that only 'innocuous' moral judgments are true as an anti-moralist position) we took it that it was not being disputed that there were good reasons for or against moral beliefs to be found, if only man was not blinded by his desires and his upbringing and his physiological endowment from ever seeing them. A more sophisticated version of the same position would hold, not that there were such reasons, though man can never see them (much as, presumably, there is a proof of the four-colour theorem, but no mathematician has yet discovered it) but that there are not even any good or bad reasons for or against moral beliefs to be discovered. According to this more sophisticated view, the notions of good and bad reason, of satisfactory argument, or conclusive proof do not go together with the notion of moral judgment. Moral judgments are not the sort of thing for which one can have reasons, good or bad. It simply does not make sense to talk of moral judgments being formed rationally or irrationally. Whereas on the more unsophisticated view, moral judgments escape being formed rationally in the sense in which a boy may escape being clean, viz. by being dirty, on the more sophisticated view moral judgments escape being formed rationally only in the sense in which a neutron or a rainbow or an equation or God escapes being clean; just as these things are neither clean nor dirty, so neither the notions of rationality nor irrationality apply to moral judgments.

Of course, anyone who holds that moral judgments are neither rational nor irrational, in that it does not make sense to speak of there being good or bad reasons for holding them, is also very likely, though not necessarily, to hold that they are neither true nor false, that is, to hold that it does not make sense to say that they are true, and does not make sense to say that they are false. Obviously, there is no point in trying to arrive at true answers to moral questions if the notion of truth is inapplicable to moral judgments, and no chance of success in our efforts to think rationally about moral questions if it does not make sense to say that our methods of answering them are either rational or irrational. However, the view that the notion of truth is inapplicable to moral judgments themselves, and the notion of rationality inapplicable to the manner in which we form them, need not lead to this distressing conclusion. After all, clothes or figures or faces are neither true nor false, rational nor irrational, and yet some are preferable to others. Perhaps moral judgments are like

this in that, though there are appropriate criteria for preferring some to others, these have nothing to do with truth or falsehood, and the means of arriving at truth. These questions will have to be discussed in a later chapter.¹ For the time being, it is perhaps worth pointing out that the view that falsehood and irrationality are not applicable to moral judgments can no more be established by an empirical scientist pursuing his vocation than can the view that they are all false or all irrational. You cannot show that a moral judgment is false or irrational without departing from the sphere of empirical science and entering the sphere of moral epistemology. Similarly, you cannot show that the notions of truth and rationality are inapplicable to moral judgments and the methods by which these are arrived at without departing from the sphere of empirical science and crossing the bounds of that area where philosophy and the study of language intermingle, the area containing discussions about what things can properly be said of what, or the question of what it makes sense to say.

¹ Chapter XII.

CHAPTER III

SOME PRELIMINARY DISTINCTIONS

The refutation of moral scepticism given in the preceding chapter – we shall see later that it must be regarded as merely provisional – can scarcely satisfy unless it is backed up by some positive account of the rationale of the process by which we arrive at our moral beliefs, or by some explanation of the manner in which we arrive at them which makes manifest their justification. It is the investigation of this problem with which this work is concerned. But in order to carry out this investigation, it is first necessary to elucidate some distinctions common among epistemologists. This I shall attempt to do in this chapter. We shall be concerned with the distinction of propositions into those which are analytic and those which are synthetic, into those which are *a priori* and those which are empirical, into those which are necessary and those which are contingent, into those which are inferred from other propositions and those which can be known without inference, and with some reflections upon the manner in which we acquire *concepts*.

ANALYTIC/SYNTHETIC

The first philosopher to divide judgments into those which were analytic and those which were synthetic was Immanuel Kant.¹ According to him, a judgment was analytic if its predicate could be obtained by analysis from its subject. Otherwise it was synthetic. For example, the judgment that every effect has a cause is analytic, for the predicate, having a cause, can be obtained by analysis from the subject, and to deny such a proposition is self-contradictory. On the other hand, since the predicate, having a cause, cannot be obtained by analysis from the subject of the proposition 'Every *event* has a cause', this latter proposition is synthetic.

Kant's distinction has had to be widened by later philosophers. Kant supposed, wrongly, that every proposition ascribed a predicate to a subject, and hence supposed that an account of the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions which

¹ See the Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Norman Kemp Smith (Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1933.)

would apply to subject/predicate propositions like 'Every effect has a cause' would apply to all propositions. Since it is impossible to describe with plausibility judgments such as 'If you drop it, it will break', or 'Either he is telling the truth or is a very good liar', as ascribing a predicate to a subject, Kant's account must be modified to fit these and other judgments which are not of subject/predicate form.

An account of analytic judgments which is wider than Kant's and would, if it were correct, apply to analytic propositions of all sorts, is this. A judgment is said to be analytic if it is true simply by virtue of the meanings of the words in the sentence which expresses it; otherwise it is synthetic. To know that an analytic proposition is true, all one needs to know is what the words used to formulate it mean; no knowledge of anything over and above this is necessary. Hence it is sometimes said that a proposition is analytic if its truth can be deduced from the definitions of the words which express it, and that it is synthetic if it cannot be deduced from these definitions. Hence 'Bachelors are unmarried' is analytic, for that they are unmarried follows simply from the definition of 'bachelor' as a man who is not yet married. For this reason it is sometimes said that analytic propositions, such as 'All bachelors are unmarried', unlike synthetic propositions, such as 'All bachelors are unhappy', are true by convention – true by convention because it is simply a matter of convention that words like 'bachelor' and 'unmarried' are used in the way English people in fact do use them.¹

This account of the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions must certainly be wrong.² It is just a matter of brute fact that the words 'bachelor' and 'unmarried man' mean what they do; indeed, this is even part of what is meant by saying that their meaning is a matter of convention. The word 'man' might have meant what the word 'mother' means now, in which case the sentence 'Bachelors are unmarried men' would simply not express a proposition which is analytic; it would express a proposition which is actually false, the one now expressed by the words 'Bachelors are unmarried mothers'.

However, an analytic proposition is supposed to be incapable of being false. A bachelor cannot possibly be married. But

¹ See A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, (Gollancz, 1946), Chapter IV.

² See W. Kneale, 'Are Necessary Truths True by Convention?' in *Clarity is not Enough*, ed. by H. D. Lewis (Allen & Unwin, 1963).

circumstances might arise, and would arise if the words 'bachelor' and 'unmarried man' meant something different from what they do, when the definition 'The word "bachelor" means "unmarried man"', was incorrect; hence, if analytic propositions were true simply because they followed from definitions, circumstances could arise in which analytic propositions would be false. No circumstances, however, can conceivably arise in which a bachelor can be unmarried.

The view that analytic propositions are true by convention, then, is a product of confusion, and the confusion which has produced it is this. Propositions are not the same thing as sentences, though they can be formulated by means of sentences. The proposition that the sea is wet is not true by convention, but the sentence which English people use to formulate this proposition has the meaning it does, and so expresses the proposition it does because of the meaning, which certainly is conventional, that English people attach to the words in it. If they were to change these conventions, so that the word 'sea' came to mean 'earth' then the sentence 'The sea is wet' would express a false proposition, the proposition which we now express by the sentence 'The earth is wet'. This does not make any difference to the proposition which we may describe as the proposition expressed by the sentence 'The sea is wet', given the conventions which at the moment govern the use of the words in that sentence. The truth of that proposition cannot be altered by a change in mere verbal conventions. What happens when we do alter verbal conventions which apply to the words in the sentence 'The sea is wet' is that these words, since their meaning is now altered, do not express the proposition which is now expressed by this sentence, but express some other proposition instead, a proposition which may be a false one.

'The sea is wet' is a synthetic proposition, but the same is true of an analytic proposition such as 'Every effect has a cause'. To alter the conventions which determine the meaning of the word 'effect' or the word 'cause' would not alter the truth of the proposition which we now express by means of these words. What it would do would be to make the sentence which now expresses this proposition express some other proposition, a proposition which might not be an analytic one, and which might even be a false one. The truth of the proposition 'Every effect has a cause', however, is independent of verbal conventions: this must be so, because the truth of analytic propositions which are necessarily

true, cannot be altered, but verbal conventions quite easily can be.

From this it follows that, contrary to what is often said, the truth of an analytic proposition cannot be deduced from definitions, if these are propositions about the meanings of words. This is because propositions about the meanings which words have are always capable of being false, whereas an analytic proposition is not capable of being false, and a proposition which is not capable of being false cannot be deduced from a proposition which is capable of being false.

The best definition of analyticity is in terms of entailment.¹ Thus the rather complicated hypothetical proposition 'If all men are mortal, and Socrates is a man, then Socrates is mortal' is analytic if and only if the antecedent 'All men are mortal and Socrates is a man' *entails* the consequent 'Socrates is mortal'. 'All bachelors are unmarried' is analytic if and only if that someone is a bachelor *entails* that he is unmarried. 'A thing cannot both be and not be', or the more modern version of this ancient principle, 'Not both p and not- p ' (where the symbol p means 'any proposition', much as the symbols x and y in mathematics mean 'any number') is analytic if and only if that a thing is *entails* that it is not the case that it is not, or if p entails not not- p). Again, 'A thing must either be or not be' or its more modern version, 'Either p or not- p ', is analytic if and only if that it is not the case that it is, *entails* that it is not.

One must learn to recognise cases of entailment by being presented with examples of them, and some people are not very good at doing this, but this does not mean that entailment cannot be defined. One proposition entails another if the state of affairs which would make the first proposition true would also make the second proposition true, or, what amounts to the same thing, if any state of affairs which would make the second proposition false would also make the first proposition false. Hence that someone is a bachelor entails that he is unmarried because the state of affairs which would make it true to say that he was a bachelor would automatically also make it true to say that he was unmarried. The proposition 'All men are mortal, and Socrates is a man', entails the proposition 'Socrates is mortal' because any state of affairs which would make the first proposition true would *ipso facto* make the second proposition true.

Whether the relation of entailment holds between two proposi-

¹ The view which follows is not as unlike as might appear the view which Hume puts forward in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part III, Section I.

tions or not does not depend on human convention. The meanings of the words in the sentences 'All men are mortal and Socrates is a man' and 'Socrates is mortal', are of course, a matter of human – or rather English – convention, which could be changed if there were any point in doing so, and if we could persuade enough people to go along with us. But given the conventions which determine the meanings of the words in the first and second of these two sentences, then there is no need for a further set of rules to determine whether the proposition expressed by the first sentence entails the proposition expressed by the second sentence, nor is it possible to have such rules. Given that the words in these two sentences mean what they do mean, the first sentence could not express a proposition which did not entail the proposition expressed by the second sentence. Hence there is not any need to have rules determining what propositions entail one another, over and above having rules which determine what the words in the sentences expressing those propositions mean; indeed, it would be impossible to have such rules, for one could not have a rule which, in spite of the meanings allocated to words like 'bachelor' and 'unmarried man', determined that a man's being a bachelor does not entail that he is unmarried.

PROPOSITIONS WHICH ARE NEITHER ANALYTIC NOR SYNTHETIC

It is sometimes maintained that there is a class of propositions which are neither analytic nor synthetic.¹ This view seems to me to be correct, though not necessarily for the reasons that have been given for it. Words come to have the meaning they do by a series of decisions. We use a word to describe a certain kind of thing, and then we come across something which is like, but not quite like, the things which we have in the past described by that word. When this happens, we have to *decide* whether to describe these things by this word, or not. If we do decide to describe them by this word, it is not that we have altered the meaning of the word in question, in the sense that the word was previously used in such a way that these things were not to be described by this word, but now they may be. Rather we have specified whether these

¹ See Willard Van Orman Quine, 'Two dogmas of Empiricism', in *From a Logical Point of View*, (Harvard University Press, 1953) and F. Waismann, 'Verifiability', in *Essays on Logic and Language*, First Series, ed. by Antony Flew (Blackwell, 1951).