

The Nature of Ethics

§ I. A PROVISIONAL DEFINITION

In ordinary conversation we often hear such statements as: 'He ought not to have done this', 'It is a good thing to help one's neighbours', 'He is a thoroughly good man', 'His character is bad', 'He was only doing his duty', or 'It is always right to speak the truth.' When such statements are made they are frequently contradicted by someone hearing them, and this by itself suggests that they are not as simple as at first sight they appear to be. If a friend disagrees with my statement that Smith is a thoroughly good man, he may do so for one of two reasons. (a) He may know facts about Smith's behaviour which are unknown to me; and if he tells me these facts and convinces me that they are true, I shall then be ready to admit that Smith is in some respects not a good man. (b) It may be the case, however, that my friend and I both know the same facts about Smith, and yet I continue to hold that Smith is thoroughly good, while my friend considers him to be bad. Now we are using the words 'good' and 'bad' with different meanings, and, until we come to some agreement as to their meanings, we are not likely to agree in our opinion of Smith. This is just the kind of question with which ethics deals – what is the true meaning of such words as 'good' and 'right' and 'ought' which are used so commonly in everyday conversation. When we come to an agreement as to the meaning of such words, other questions will arise. We may ask whether it is possible for us to know whether Smith is good or bad; we may ask on what grounds Smith should give up those activities which we have agreed to call bad, and should engage in those which we have agreed to call good. All these and many other similar questions are within the scope of ethics.

We may define ethics as the normative science of the conduct of

human beings living in societies – a science which judges this conduct to be right or wrong, to be good or bad, or in some similar way. This definition says, first of all, that ethics is a science, and a science may be defined as a systematic and more or less complete body of knowledge about a particular set of related events or objects. In this account of science, the important word is *systematic*; scientific knowledge differs from the ordinary, haphazard knowledge of uneducated people in being arranged in a definite coherent system. A science also aims at providing as complete a knowledge of its subject-matter as it can, although, in the present state of knowledge, no science is perfect in this respect. At the same time, the scientist may leave out details that he knows, in order to give a simpler and clearer presentation of the important connexions of the facts which he studies. It is generally agreed that a piece of knowledge cannot be regarded as 'scientific' until it is accepted by those who are learned in the particular science concerned: in medicine, for example, the new cures which are so convincingly advertised cannot be regarded as scientific until they have been recognized as effective by capable doctors. Finally, the sphere of a science is limited to one set of facts or objects; no science deals with all the facts known about the universe; to deal with the universe as a whole is the work of metaphysics or philosophy, which is not a science. Each science has its own particular sphere; botany deals with plants, psychology with minds, and ethics with certain judgements that we make about human conduct.

The sciences which are studied in the laboratories of our universities are descriptive or positive sciences. Positive sciences describe objects or phenomena as we observe them with our eyes and other sense-organs, or in the case of mental processes like desiring and willing as we observe them by introspection or looking inside our minds. ('Phenomenon' is just the technical term for anything that can be observed in this way.) There is in a positive science no question of judging its objects in any way. If the botanist judges a certain plant to be good or bad, or even to be beautiful or ugly, he is no longer doing the work of a botanist, whose business it is to describe what he observes without judging either its reality or its value. The psychologist describes the mental processes like intention and willing which lead to human conduct, but, as psychologist, he has no concern with the goodness or badness of that conduct. There is a group of sciences, however, which do not deal directly with ob-

served facts but which deal, as systematically and completely as is possible, with the standards or rules or norms or criteria by which we judge certain objects, and these sciences are called normative sciences. Aesthetics, for example, deals systematically with the standards by which we judge objects of perception, commonly sights and sounds, to be beautiful or ugly. Logic deals with the standards by which we judge statements to be true or false, and ethics deals with the standards by which we judge human actions to be right or wrong. The normative sciences differ from the positive sciences in one more way; they do not merely describe the standards by which we judge; they are also concerned with the validity or truth of these standards. In ethics for example it is not enough to describe the rules by which men have tested their conduct, such as the Ten Commandments of the Hebrews; we also ask in ethics why these rules are valid or on what grounds we ought to observe them.

Ethics has been defined as the normative science of conduct, and conduct is a collective name for voluntary actions. In common speech we judge many things other than human actions to be good or bad; we speak for example of good wine and bad luck. The words 'good' and 'bad' are used ambiguously in ordinary speech. A single science may be required to deal with them in all their various meanings and to distinguish these meanings from one another, and such a science is sometimes called axiology or the science of values. We shall see later that one ethical theory holds that what we mean by

calling an action right or good is that it leads to a result which is good in one of the various senses of good, and, if this theory be accepted, a study of ethics would require to be completed by a study of axiology. At the outset, however, it will keep things more clear if we confine ethics to the study of human conduct and leave to axiology the study of other things that can be called good or bad. Conduct does not include those human activities like the circulation of the blood over which most normal people have no control, but

to do so. A habitual action like a child's sucking of his thumb, or even a reflex action like blinking in a strong light, may be voluntary although the doer of these actions may not be thinking about them at all. The doer, by attending to them and choosing, could have done these actions differently or refrained from doing them at all, and so they must be regarded as voluntary. Sometimes people try to excuse their wrong actions by saying that these actions were not deliberately willed or chosen, as when a man continues a dishonest business practice of his predecessors without thinking about it. The question for ethics is not whether such an action was deliberately willed, but whether the doer could have prevented it by taking thought about it. If he could have prevented it, the action can certainly be judged to be a right or a wrong action, although we may admit that its degree of rightness or wrongness may be affected by its deliberateness. Conduct may include inward activities like motives and desires as well as outward activities like speech and movements of the doer's limbs, and so these also will fall within the sphere of ethics. We so commonly think of these as causing outward bodily movements that we forget that they too are activities and liable to be judged good or bad even apart from the outward movements they produce.

Our provisional definition has limited the conduct with which we deal in ethics in two ways. We deal with human actions and not with the actions of the lower animals. It may be admitted that there is something like human goodness about a dog's loyalty to its master, but psychologists are so far from agreeing as to whether any of the actions of the lower animals are voluntary in the sense given to this word in the last paragraph, that it would be unwise to add to our complications by including animal activities within the limits of our subject. A more arbitrary limitation is that of confining ethics to the study of the conduct of human beings living in societies. Some moralists would indeed go further and hold that the standards of ethics only apply to the relations of men with one another; the conduct studied in ethics is not only conduct done in a society, but conduct that affects some other member or members of that society. It is worth while including a reference to society in our definition to remind ourselves that, if it were not for his social background, a human being would not be a real human being capable of right and wrong actions. Aristotle expressed this by saying, 'He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for

himself, must be either a beast or a god.'¹ Robinson Crusoe's conduct in the solitude of his desert island may be still judged good or bad, but, according to this view, these terms would obtain their meaning from the social environment in which Crusoe had lived before he found himself in an uninhabited island, and to which there was always a hope that he might return. It may be for some purposes convenient to include in a single normative science the standards by which we judge all human activities including those that appear to have no effects on other people or relations with them, and it is difficult to think of another name than ethics for such a science. Yet common usage would certainly make a social activity like speaking the truth more directly the concern of ethics than a purely private activity with no marked social effects like stamp-collecting or a religious activity like fasting. Of course such activities do have indirect social effects; the man who is fasting cannot share his food with a visitor, and so far his action would be judged by the standards of ethics. This limitation is one that may have to be given up on a fuller study of ethics, but, in the beginning, we shall find it an advantage to emphasize the social background of the moral life, and to confine the activities judged in ethics to those done with the normal human background of social institutions and social relationships.

There are several terms commonly used in judging human actions by ethical standards. We say that an action is 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong', 'moral' or 'immoral'. We say that we 'ought' to do an action, that we 'should' do it, or that it is our 'duty' to do it; and of another kind of action we say that we 'ought not' to do it, we 'should not' do it, or it is our 'duty' not to do it. Of these terms 'good' and 'bad' are probably the most common, but they are also the most troublesome. In the first place, they are used ambiguously in common speech; not only are 'good' works done by the pious but the trouble-maker enjoys a 'good' fight, and the successful burglar makes a 'good' haul from the safe which he has robbed. In fact, the word 'good' as commonly used merely indicates an attitude of mind in favour of the object or event to which the term good is applied, and nothing more, so that almost anything may be termed good if anyone finds himself in favour of its existence even to a very limited degree. The ordinary man seems to distinguish such a loose sense of good from a more definitely moral sense, but even about the moral sense there is a great deal of ambiguity. We certainly think of

¹ Aristotle: *Politics*, Bk. I, Ch. 2 (1280 b. 10).

morally good conduct not merely as that towards which men feel a favourable attitude; it is in some sense conduct *worthy* of arousing such a favourable attitude or conduct that *ought* to arouse such an attitude. This is sometimes expressed by saying that when we call conduct 'good' we are approaching it from the standpoint of value, but surely 'value' has just the same meaning as 'goodness' in the widest axiological use of that term. It is convenient in ethics to use the words 'good' or 'bad' of an action, when we are thinking of the action as leading to consequences, which are 'good' or 'bad' in some sense of these very ambiguous terms, for example, consequences which satisfy our desires, but this limitation is hardly in accord with common use. The whole range of the meanings of 'good' will have to be considered when we come to those ethical theories which regard the 'goodness' or 'rightness' of an action as depending upon its power of producing 'good' results.

The words 'right' and 'wrong' have no such reference to consequences. They are used of actions that are in some way 'fitting' to their circumstances, as when we say that a person said or did the right thing in an interview. The fittingness of a right action often appears to consist in its conformity to some rule, and the view that the moral life is a matter of obeying rules is a very common one. We think of an action as before a judge, and when he has passed his judgement, it is called right. There are however other uses of 'right' than the moral one; we use it commonly in aesthetic judgements, such as 'This is the right kind of hat to go with this dress', or 'This word is just right in this line of the poem'. In this aesthetic use, 'right' also suggests fittingness to circumstances, but here this fittingness is an aesthetic one.

The word 'right' sometimes suggests that the action referred to is in some way obligatory; the doer or other people feel that he ought to do it. This is not always the case; it is right for a man to feel regret when his mother-in-law leaves his house, but no one could say that he ought to do so, if his feelings are not under his control. This sense of obligatoriness is, however, definitely implied in the phrases 'He ought to do this', or 'It is his duty to do this', and it is one factor which influences the doer in doing or not doing the action. Such a judgement of ought-ness or duty is very different from the judgement of goodness. We might all agree to say that it is good to eat ice-cream on a very hot day, but no one would seriously say that we ought to eat ice-cream, or that it is our duty to eat ice-cream on a hot

day, because we do not feel any obligation to do so, unless we wish. It may be suggested that what distinguishes an action which we ought to do from one that is merely right, is that, when we ought to do an action, the action is not only right but there are motives and inclinations in the mind of the doer which would hinder his doing it. We can say that the malaria patient ought to take his daily dose of quinine, because the unpleasant taste of the medicine makes him strongly disinclined to do so.

It is possible for more than one action to be right at the same time. It may be equally right for me to drink coffee or to drink tea at breakfast; it may be equally right for me to study economics or to study history in a university course. In such cases we cannot say that I ought to drink coffee or that it is my duty to drink tea or that I ought to study economics, or that it is my duty to study history. These phrases imply that there is one and only one action which is right for me ~~at the moment~~. If it is my duty *now* to study history, then no other action would be right at this moment, so that to study economics would be wrong for me. Of course, in a rather more elaborate way of speaking, I may be able to say that it is my duty to study either history or economics, but this would again imply that to study mathematics, at least on this particular occasion, would be wrong. The words 'ought' and 'duty' certainly apply only to right actions, but they suggest, if not imply, certain other things about these right actions: (a) that they are obligatory on a particular individual, (b) that there are tendencies in the mind of the doer making him disinclined to do them, and (c) that one, and only one, action is right at a particular moment.

While these appear to be the distinctions in common speech in the use of ethical terms, it is to be remembered that there may be a difference of emphasis or even meaning in the use of such terms by different persons. Some, like Kant, may feel a sense of awe in the presence of the statement that a certain action is a man's duty, or that he ought to do it, but the moral judgement may arouse no such feeling in another man. The business of the student of ethics is to try to reach meanings which will be generally accepted by educated people, and also to limit these meanings so that the terms will be free from ambiguity and our use of them free from inconsistency. Yet we are not likely to attain this in ethics, for ethical terms, unlike the technical terms of the sciences, are words in common use on men's lips, and are liable to constant change in emphasis and meaning.

§ 2. MORAL SCIENCES

An attempt has been made in the last section to give a definition of ethics, and to explain the various words used in that definition. In the case of a subject like ethics, about the subject-matter of which most people have some ideas, it is even more helpful to distinguish ethics from the other sciences dealing with human conduct with which it may be confused. There are certain sciences in which we describe human conduct without expressing any opinion about its value or making any judgement about it. At present, the most scientific description of human conduct is probably that given by psychology, and one school of modern psychology, the behaviourist school, holds that the sole subject-matter of a really scientific psychology is conduct or behaviour. Most psychologists, however, hold the principal part of their field to be not so much the resulting conduct as the inward processes, like intention and decision, which lead to outward conduct. One branch of psychology, now called social psychology, describes among other things conduct in its social relations, and this is the kind of conduct with which ethics is chiefly concerned. Human conduct is also described in sociology, which may be defined as the science of human society, and while the study of individual conduct has now become the sphere of social psychology rather than sociology, sociology still has for its subject-matter the social institutions and customs which form the background of all human conduct and especially the conduct directed towards other human beings which is the special concern of ethics. Anthropology in its widest sense as the science of man includes human conduct in its sphere, and a great deal of the work of anthropologists has been the description of the conduct and customs of primitive peoples. Indeed, the anthropologist has given so much attention to primitive peoples that we are apt to forget that anthropology deals properly with all mankind and not merely with savage peoples. And anthropology deals with more than conduct; it deals with the physical and mental characteristics of people which only affect their conduct indirectly. These three sciences, psychology, sociology and anthropology, all provide us with facts about human conduct; and a general knowledge of such facts is a necessary preliminary to making true judgements about human conduct. Even in such a brief survey of ethics as that contained in this book, it will be necessary to make a restatement of certain psychological and sociological facts in the

second, third, and fourth chapters. Yet just because these sciences are positive sciences which avoid judgements of value of any kind, we are not very likely to confuse them with ethics.

There is, however, one branch of positive science which is nearer to ethics than the rest. The sociologist or the anthropologist may not only describe human conduct and its conditions; he may go on to describe the opinions that men have held in different ages and in different places about their own conduct and that of others, what kind of actions they have commonly regarded as good and right, and what kind of actions they have regarded as bad and wrong. This is what the sociologist Westermarck has done in his book *The History of Human Marriage*; he has not only described marriage customs and rites, but has told what people in different countries and different periods of history have thought right or have thought wrong in connexion with marriage. Now, here the sociologist is still *describing* facts; he is not *judging* or *evaluating* them in any way. In this science a sociologist may state that polygamy under certain conditions is considered right by Mohammadans but is considered wrong by Christians, but he has no right to go on to say that, in this matter, the judgement of Christians is true while that of Mohammadans is false or vice versa. To do so would be to leave the work of a positive science and to take up the work of ethics. We shall see in a later section on the methods of ethics that ethics must take into account the opinions of ordinary men on ethical matters, and, to this extent, ethics is dependent on this descriptive science, which we may label the 'positive science of morals'. At the present day the word 'morals' is used with a variety of meanings, for the science of ethics itself, for actions regarded as good and right, and for the rules according to which such actions are done. It was originally derived from the Latin word 'mores', meaning customs, and so may be appropriately used for men's customary ways of judging human conduct, and that is what we are describing in this positive science.

The word 'ethics', although it is indirectly derived from a Greek word also meaning 'custom', has, by long technical usage, been limited to the normative science, the science which tells not what men actually do and actually think it right to do, but what men ought to do and what they ought to think it right to do. In the normative science of ethics, we study the standards by which we judge actions to be right and wrong, good and bad, or in the other ways mentioned in the first section of this chapter. From another

point of view we ask what is the real meaning of these terms, right and wrong, good and bad, and the rest; once again we are not asking what people think they mean when they use them; we are asking their true meaning or the only meaning in which they can be used correctly. Such an investigation will necessarily result in the discovery of standards or norms or criteria by which right actions can be distinguished from wrong actions or even better actions from good actions. The discovery and the establishment of such standards are the primary tasks of the normative science of ethics.

The word 'establishment' suggests that we cannot stop in ethics with merely stating the meaning or logical connotation of such terms as 'good' and 'right' and 'ought'. Even if a person knew fully the characteristics of action implied by these terms, he might still go on to ask: 'Why ought I to do what is right?' or 'Why ought I to avoid what is bad?' It may be the case that an adequate definition of the terms 'right' and 'ought' and 'bad' would supply the answers, but if that be the case, the definition itself often implies a certain view of the universe as a whole and of man's place in it. It is because of man's place in the universe that we can say that certain actions are right, or that he ought to do them. Even a philosopher who maintains that the meaning of ethical terms is not affected by the relations of our actions to anything else is still holding a certain metaphysical view of the universe, a view that he will need to defend in order to demonstrate that his ethical statement about goodness not being affected by relations is valid. Such a passage from science to philosophy has already been suggested when it was said that the normative sciences 'do not merely describe the standards by which we judge; they are also concerned with the validity or truth of these standards'. This surely means the place of these standards in the whole scheme of things. It is, for example, a question for philosophy or metaphysics to decide whether our judgements of right and wrong are merely customary opinions that are created by our human minds with no fixed objective basis, or whether they state truths about the ultimate constitution of the universe. We may somewhat arbitrarily limit the word 'ethics' to the science describing the standards, but the student of ethics will soon find that the description will develop into an investigation of the validity of the standards, and we may call this investigation 'moral philosophy', the name by which ethics was most commonly denoted until recently in the older British universities. There can be no sharp division be-

tween ethics and moral philosophy; a more profound study of the normative science inevitably raises philosophical questions.

How far the standards of ethics can be used in ordinary practice to distinguish a right action from a wrong action will depend largely on the nature of these standards, but it has been a matter of common experience that there are cases where it is very difficult even for the man experienced in making moral judgements to tell which course of action is right. One of the most familiar examples is whether a doctor is right in answering a patient's question with a false answer, when he knows or thinks it extremely likely that a true answer will aggravate the patient's illness or even cause his death. The science of applying the standards of ethics to particular kinds of cases is properly called 'casuistry', and, however this science may have been misused in the past, the application of ethical standards to particular kinds of cases is in itself a perfectly legitimate and reasonable sphere for a science. The difficulties and dangers of this science of casuistry will concern us later. In the meanwhile we must note that we are still dealing with knowledge and not practice, with a science and not with an art. The fact that the truth as to what action is right in a particular situation does give valuable guidance to a person in that situation as to what he ought to do is not the direct concern of the casuist. His business is to reach true knowledge, not to alter practice. In this sense it is possible to admit with Dr G. E. Moore¹ that casuistry is one of the goals of ethical investigation and yet to deny that the aim of ethics is to affect or improve our practice. It might be better to call casuistry applied ethics than to call it practical ethics, for knowledge applied in particular circumstances is still the primary aim.

There is, however, a body of knowledge collected with the special aim of guiding people in the practice of right conduct or the art of living the good life. We call such guidance 'moralizing', and moralizing is by no means confined to the student of ethics, or even to the moral philosopher. The moralizer has more often drawn his material from long practical experience of life than from text-books of ethics or moral philosophy; he is the sage or 'wise man', typically elderly in years, often without book-learning but rich in human experience. Such was the author of the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament, or of the Analects of Confucius. Sometimes it is claimed that his moral maxims are due to direct supernatural inspiration;

¹ G. E. Moore: *Principia Ethica*, Ch. 1, § iv.

sometimes the man himself is thought to have a 'gift', an unusual inborn insight into such matters. The knowledge of ethics does have some value for the moralizer; it gives him knowledge of the nature of moral principles which can be applied in the particular cases in which he gives counsel, and a width of outlook which may help him to avoid bias and prejudice. It may indeed be the duty of the student of ethics to use his knowledge of ethical principles to engage in the 'time-honoured task of moralists at present very largely neglected, to preach and to edify, to inculcate new duties and devotions, or to make men profoundly conscious of old ones'.¹ Yet the student of ethics may admit that he lacks the more necessary qualifications for the task of moralizer such as the necessary gift of insight or the long experience of the ways of men with one another. The preacher and the educationist have certainly much to learn from ethics, but theirs is a different subject; we may call it practical ethics or moralizing, and it is a subject the aim of which is to affect and improve practical conduct.

There still remains to be considered the practice of doing right actions or what we may call the art of living the good life. Mackenzie thought that it was not correct to speak of conduct as an art,² but there are actually resemblances between good conduct and such fine arts as painting or music to which the phrase 'the art of conduct' draws attention.

(a) We learn to do what is right, as the artist learns to paint, not so much by a study of theory, as by long and painstaking practice. We may admit that the understanding of ethical principles is a help in the practice of goodness just as an understanding of the nature of beauty may be a help to the painter in his art. At the same time the study of the great masters and the deliberate copying of their methods are of greater use than theoretic study in both good living and painting. And in both the chief secret of success appears to be practice.

(b) Good conduct and the arts both directly cause changes in the world outside of us. We make things around us different by doing good deeds just as the artist makes his canvas different by painting a picture on it. The knowledge of science and philosophy, of which ethics is one example, has no such direct effect on the world outside. Such knowledge does affect the mind of the knower and in so doing

¹ J. N. Findlay: *Morality by Convention* (Mind. N.S., Vol. LIII, p. 169).

² J. S. Mackenzie: *Manual of Ethics*, Ch. 1, iv.

indirectly affects his outside activities, but conduct and the fine arts are themselves activities directly changing the objective material world. Their aim is action and not knowledge.

(c) Good conduct resembles the fine arts in either being or producing something which has in itself beauty or 'worthwhileness' comparable to the beauty of a work of art. A noble deed arouses in us something of the same type of admiration as that caused by a beautiful picture or a 'noble poem'. Sir Philip Sidney's gift of water to a dying comrade is a commonly cited example of this type of action.

There are, however, certain marked differences between good conduct and the fine arts, and Mackenzie was drawing attention to these when he denied that good conduct can be properly called an art.

(a) An art is concerned with one particular type of activity of a person, whereas good conduct is concerned with all a person's activities. The activity of the painter may be judged not only by the standards of art but by ethical standards; his picture though admittedly beautiful may be evil in its influence. The clever burglary may satisfy the standards of the burglar's craft but is none the less morally wrong.

(b) The artist may practise his art at some times and completely neglect it at other times, but the good man must practise goodness at all times. There can be no holidays in the moral life. Other arts share to some extent in this need of practice; a musician's neglect of practice will be a great hindrance in his art, but even then he does not need to keep at his practising all his waking life. The really good man, however, must be good waking, sleeping, or eating without any interlude.

(c) Good intentions are generally thought to have no relevance in the arts. We judge an artist not by what he intends to produce, but by what he actually produces, but in the sphere of morality we judge a man to be good if we believe that his intentions would have normally resulted in good actions, even although in actual cases circumstances have made the result different from the normal. We still give the credit of goodness to a man who has tried to save a child from drowning, although he has actually failed to rescue the child. We must not however exaggerate this difference between good conduct and the arts. A man and his intentions will stop being regarded as good if they repeatedly produce bad results or no results at all,

and the supposedly good man whose actions always turn out badly will be treated with the same contempt as the artist who regards himself as great but never produces any pictures. At the same time there is no doubt that in judging in ethics we do take more account of the motives and intentions of the doer of the action than we do in judging works of art.

(d) An artist is a man who can produce a work of art; a good man is a man who not only can but does do good actions. At the same time, as we have already suggested, the artist who does not practise his art will soon lose the skill that makes him worthy to be called an artist. On the other hand many of the good man's capacities for goodness must remain undisplayed until a suitable opportunity for displaying them arises. The winner of the Victoria Cross may have been as brave a man in the days of peace, but only the dangers of a particular situation in war may give him the opportunity of displaying in action his own particular type of goodness. Here again the difference is one of degree rather than of kind. In both artist and good man capacities must be ready to show themselves in action when the opportunity arises.

Our conclusion is that, whether we decide to call the living of a good life an art or not, it is certain that to live rightly has some resemblances to the arts and some differences from them. As long as we remember the differences there seems no reason why we should not refer to the art of good living.

There are then six moral disciplines (to use a term which may include science, philosophy, and art): (1) *a positive science of morals*, describing men's moral standards in different countries and ages; (2) the normative science of *ethics*, stating valid moral standards; (3) *moral philosophy* examining the validity of these standards by determining their place in the universe as a whole; (4) *casuistry* or applied ethics applying valid standards to particular concrete cases; (5) *moralizing*, or practical ethics, a discipline having as its definite aim the improvement of conduct; and (6) the *art* or practice of living a good life. In this book we are concerned primarily with the normative science of ethics, but we shall almost certainly in our study raise questions which need to be answered by moral philosophy and we shall illustrate our ethical principles by concrete applications of the kind described in casuistry. We shall refer to the student of ethics as a moralist, although this word is often used for the moralizer as well.

§ 2. THE LEVEL OF INSTINCT

Two apparently contradictory pictures have been given of man in his most primitive condition. The French philosopher Rousseau held that man was naturally both free and good, and that the primitive life of man, free from the artificial restrictions placed on him by the customs and institutions of society, was a life of idyllic peace, harmony, goodwill, and happiness. On the other hand, the English philosopher Hobbes held that natural man seeks only 'that which pleaseth him and is delightful to himself'. Every man feels by nature that he has a right to all things, and, as all are naturally acquisitive and ferocious, they are bound to be in a state of war with one another. The state of nature is intolerable – 'no place for industry because the fruit thereof is uncertain . . . no arts, no letters, no society, and, which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'.¹

In these pictures of primitive human nature, Rousseau is leaving out certain of the instinctive tendencies which modern psychologists have found in human nature, such as the instincts of pugnacity, self-assertion and acquisitiveness, while Hobbes is leaving out others of these tendencies, such as the gregarious instinct, the parental instinct, which soon becomes attached to other objects than the actual offspring of its owner, and the general innate tendencies to feel sympathy with others, to imitate them and to accept suggestions from them. It is in the life of the lower animals that we find a life nearest to the purely instinctive level, and we may admit that, in comparison with the life of a cultured human society, the life of even the most developed animal group is nasty, brutish, and poor. Yet the life of the lower animals is not altogether an unceasing conflict among competing instincts within an individual, or a struggle for existence among different individuals of the same animal species. The gregarious instinct, and the various general tendencies connected with it, are found in many animal species, and there appears to be a kind of unconscious tendency to harmony among the various instincts within a single animal organism. Indeed, it is only when man's innate tendencies become conscious in the form of desires that we find those painful conflicts which appear to be at the basis of our judgements of right and wrong. Rousseau seems to have thought that there was an unconscious harmonizing of the instincts to be

¹ Hobbes: *Leviathan*, Pt. I, Ch. 13.

found in primitive man, who may have had a mystical sense of unity with nature that has been lost both by savages and civilized men in modern times; this is what Levy Bruhl calls the law of participation. There is little evidence of such a harmonizing power in primitive society, although we are probably right in thinking that the savages known to us are the result of degradation and differ in many ways from really primitive peoples. The control of the instincts in the tribes we regard as primitive is often maintained by an elaborate customary morality, reinforced by threatened punishments from a supernatural sphere, or *tabus*, as they are often called.

It is commonly thought that the conduct of animals at the level of instinct cannot be regarded as right or wrong. It is said to be neither moral nor immoral but amoral or non-moral, conduct to which moral predicates are not really applicable at all. There is no motivation by the judgement of what is right or by the sense of duty as we find them in human beings. Yet it is reasonable to suppose that in some dim way the animal regards the carrying out of the instinctive impulse as the right thing to do. It is in this way at any rate that instinctive impulses appear to human beings. 'The impulse of an instinct reveals itself as an axiomatically obvious proposition, as something which is so clearly "sense" that any idea of discussing its basis is wicked or foolish.'¹ It is in this way that it seems obvious to the angry man that he should take vengeance on his opponent. From another point of view, at the level of instinct, the influence of outside circumstances seems to predominate over the inner nature of the animal, and there is nothing that we can call free choice; with sufficient knowledge of the animal's inner nature, and of the outside causes affecting it, complete prediction of its conduct would be possible. We may at a later stage look back on such conduct and label it good or bad; we may commend as good the hen's self-sacrifice in defending her chickens from a hawk, and we may condemn as bad the tiger's massacre of weaker animals, but these are figures of speech, borrowed from a later morality. The conduct of both fowl and tiger is simply natural; to slaughter other animals may appear to the tiger as much the right thing to do (if there be any such consciousness in animals at all), as to sacrifice herself for her chickens appears to the mother hen.

Even at the level of instinct there must be kinds of conduct which

¹ Trotter: *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War*, p. 15 (cf. James: *Principles of Psychology*, Vol. II, p. 386).

are liked by members of the same species as the agent, for example those actions which are satisfying to the self-assertive instinct of the members of the species, and there must be other kinds of conduct which are disliked by the members of the species, and which arouse in them the instincts of repulsion and pugnacity. Westermarck found the origin of moral disapproval in the violation of our self-feeling which is a common incentive to resentment.¹ It is certainly reasonable to hold that primitive man regards as bad what he dislikes. The fact that our moral judgements had their origin in our emotions of resentment would not, however, prove that they are now simply statements that we feel resentment to the conduct we label bad; such a view would be as absurd as holding that modern science deals with magic, because it had its origin in the alchemy of the Middle Ages. The fact that our moral judgements had as their antecedents likes and dislikes which varied from person to person does not prove that they are now lacking in objective validity. Westermarck himself made impartiality or disinterestedness an essential characteristic of moral emotion,² and this characteristic seems to play a larger part in moral judgements as we now find them than the primitive likings or resentments in which these judgements may have originated.

The development of conduct in a primitive society must at some period or other have taken place in two directions. (i) It became more social and co-operative. A single man can do very little either in producing things so satisfy his needs or to protect himself against his enemies. And some of his innate tendencies like the gregarious instinct, the sex instinct, imitateness, suggestibility, and sympathy already imply the existence of other people and his having relations with them. It is both because of his own naturally social nature as well as for the better satisfying of his needs that a man forms both temporary and permanent associations with his fellow-men. This leads very soon to some form of division of labour with different people performing the different functions for which they are best suited. In one very simple form of division of labour we may find the man defending the home from its enemies, while the woman provides the food. In different circumstances the man does the work of hunting while the women gathers the vegetable foods, or, at a later stage, the man does the outdoor work, while the woman, more confined in her range by the need of tending her children, does the work

¹ Westermarck: *Ethical Relativity*, pp. 62-70

² Westermarck: ...

inside the home. Later developments in the division of labour demand the different kinds of craftsmen, such as the potter and the weaver in Indian village life, and such specialization of function is a mark of a developing society. (ii) Conduct becomes more rational, as man tends to use his intelligence more and more in satisfying his needs. This is seen in the making of tools which are simply intelligent contrivances to assist in production. It is seen also in the use of stratagem in primitive wars; the weaker man by using his brain may defend himself successfully against the stronger. At this stage, reason is chiefly used in the choice of means, but means are proximate ends, for our mind may be so occupied in seeking the means, that for the time being it becomes for us an end, and there can be no hard and fast distinction between the choice of proximate ends and of ultimate ends. Even for civilized man the distinction is often a vague one, and the ends which we set before us as definite goals, like passing examinations and making money, are really only proximate ends or means, although we are often vague as to the ends to which these means lead.

It has already been suggested that a society entirely at the level of instinct may never have really existed in the human or in the animal world. What we have been describing are tendencies which must have been at work at some time or other during the early stages of the development of human conduct. There must have been the raw material of instinctive tendencies, including from the very start certain socializing tendencies. There must have been at some stage or other feelings of pleasure in certain types of conduct and of displeasure in others, feelings which may have spread rapidly in a group, because of its members' natural tendencies to suggestibility and sympathy. And at times developments must have occurred, not equally in all directions but spasmodically and unevenly, towards more rational and more social conduct. It appears too that, in spite of much emphasis on the continuity of evolution made by scientists at different times, at one point nature made a leap. While there are resemblances between animal conduct and savage conduct, the difference between the two is immense, and there is no evidence of intermediate links. The most highly cultured chimpanzee falls far short of the most primitive of normal savages in the ability to use his reason and to engage in social activity, and in the power to communicate with his fellows that these imply. It is likely that he also falls short in his power to direct his conduct consciously. And at his

very lowest level man shows a capacity of judging his own behaviour that does not seem to occur at all in the animal world.

§ 3. THE LEVEL OF CUSTOM

At this stage man considers to be right those forms of conduct which are approved by the standards or customary modes of behaviour of the social group to which he belongs. At this level the bad action is the action that is 'not done', and the good action is the action that has been 'always done'. The importance of this level is suggested by the effect that it has had on our ethical terminology. The word 'morals' is derived from the Latin word *mores*, meaning habits or customs, and the name 'ethics' itself comes as a secondary derivative of the Greek word *ēthos* which also meant custom or habit. We now distinguish between customs that are actually practised by the majority of a society and customs that are approved by the majority (whether they live up to their convictions or not), for we realize that the majority may see the better and follow the worse. At the level of custom, however, this distinction is not consciously made; what is done is what ought to be done, and the ways in which their ancestors actually lived are the ways approved by the living generation.

There can be little doubt that the basis of customary morality is the instinct known as the herd or gregarious instinct, and the innate tendencies of sympathy, imitativeness, and suggestibility which are closely bound up with this instinct. Perhaps they should be regarded rather as expressions or developments of this instinct than as general innate tendencies in the way they are described by McDougall. As Trotter has pointed out in his book on *The Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War*, impulses that are derived from the herd, because of this herd instinct, come to consciousness with the sense of being the obvious thing to do, which we have seen already to be characteristic of human impulses dependent on instinct.¹ There is however a noteworthy difference between impulses arising from the herd instinct and those arising from other instincts. Each other instinct has its own special impulse; the sex instinct impels men to mate and the flight instinct impels men to run away. The herd instinct, however, may give to any tendency to action, to which we are impelled by the group, the feeling that it is the obvious and necessary thing to do,

¹ Trotter: op. cit., pp. 44-48.

and to any opinion the characteristic of appearing self-evident to the person holding it. In this way the moral opinions of the group come to the individual as self-evident principles which no reasonable person can doubt. It is because of their common instinctive basis that it is impossible to distinguish sharply the level of custom from the level of instinct. It is just as much a part of human nature to feel pleasure in what gives our neighbour pleasure as it is to feel resentment against a person interfering with our actions or to feel tender affection towards our offspring.

We are here dealing with a level of conduct of which we can find adequate examples both in history and in primitive communities as they exist today. Such communities differ from more civilized societies in a larger place being given to the observing of customs and a smaller place being given to individual reflection on moral matters. It must be admitted, however, that even the most advanced of human societies is still largely at the level of custom, for few people in them reflect much on moral matters and these generally only in one or two special directions. A striking characteristic of the customary level is the large place given in it to the tribe or com-

The place given to the single group or tribe in a primitive society at the customary level may be contrasted with the many groups with which an individual has relations in a modern society. The modern man has attachments to various groups – to his family (which is a far smaller group than the joint-family or tribe of the customary level), to his business, to his club, to his school or college, to his church, and to his state. One of the results of having so many attachments is that no single one of them can have the authority or scope in the life of the individual that the primitive tribe had for the primitive man. The fact, too, that the different groups to which he belongs make different and sometimes conflicting demands on the individual makes the modern man realize that he himself has to decide what action he shall take when such a conflict arises. It is difficult for us to put ourselves in the position of a man at the level of custom, when there was one group only, a kind of enlarged family before which the individual seemed utterly powerless and without the support of which the individual would have no sort of life to enjoy at all.

How did customs or approved ways of acting arise? They were ways of acting that were satisfying to the whole group, partly because they satisfied the instinctive cravings of a great many individuals at the same time, and partly because they made a harmonious compromise among those instinctive tendencies which were in danger of conflicting with one another either within an individual or between different individuals in the community. Primitive man, of course, did not always reason clearly about such customs. Sometimes there was a fallacious piece of reasoning that a certain line of action had been harmful in one particular case and so must be harmful in every case. Such fallacies in inductive reasoning are still at the base of most of our superstitions; for example, people will refuse to travel in green clothes because of the fate at Flodden of the Scottish armies who are alleged to have been so dressed when they marched to defeat.¹ Modern men often detect such superstitions and sharply distinguish them from customs the value of which has been established by experience, but it is unlikely that primitive peoples ever made such a distinction. For them, unlucky conduct was the same as bad conduct, and lucky conduct was the same as good conduct. Another fact which weakens the value of custom is that a custom

¹ There are many other traditions about the origin of this superstition, but the same fallacy is involved in them.

always tends to outlive its usefulness. The custom of fighting duels came from a time when the duel was the only practicable way in which a wronged individual could secure justice, but it survived into times when there were other less arbitrary and more impartial institutions for securing justice, and then just because it was an old institution it had a special appeal to men of honour. Old age not only keeps alive customs which are no longer useful; it often gives them an air of venerability.

The group has various ways of maintaining the observance of its customs. (a) There is first of all the force of public opinion. Our natural tendencies of sympathy, imitativeness, and suggestibility make us wish to do what our neighbours approve, and nothing is more unpleasant to the ordinary man than the feeling that he is regarded as a strange being with whom his neighbours will have nothing to do. If Trotter was right, the herd instinct gives to the opinions of our neighbours an obviousness and self-evidence that belong to opinions motivated by instinct and not by logical reasoning. (b) A familiar support of the customs of a primitive society is the *tabu*. If an individual does something that is forbidden by custom, supernatural powers will inflict a punishment of illness, accident, or even death upon him. This punishment is often attributed to the activity of the dead ancestors or even the animal ancestor of the tribe so that it invests the authority of the group with that feeling of religious awe which Otto has called the 'numinous' state of mind.¹ (c) This authority is often supported by an elaborate religious ritual, and ritual is a most powerful ally of customary morality. Religious ritual often serves to work up the tribe to a state of great emotion, and this emotion is often enlisted on the side of what is customary. This is especially true of the rites of initiation to manhood where impressive ritual is used to bring home to the youth both the authority of the tribe and the importance of observing its customs. A modern example is that of the solemn oath administered often with the ritual embellishment of a foreign language to doctors on their being admitted to their profession. Ritual is also used in the condemnation and punishment of offenders against the customs of the group, and we find this still in the dignified ritual of our law-courts which manifests the majesty of the law. There are other uses of ritual where its connexion with the maintenance of custom is more indirect but still effective. We find ritual used on the great occasions of life, birth,

¹ Otto: *The Idea of the Holy*, Ch. 2.

marriage, and death, and at other times of special importance such as the sowing and harvesting of crops, the declaration of war or the building of a new house. In these things the ritual often indicates that the group as a whole has an interest and stake in the life of the individual, and its part on such occasions adds to its authority in the eyes of the individual. (d) The group is generally prepared to use physical force to compel the recalcitrant individual to observe its customs. It is characteristic of customary morality that it has no hesitation in compelling people to be good; this hesitation and the view that people should be free to choose the right for themselves belong to the level of conscience.

At the level of custom the great step has been taken of having established moral standards, so that the individual no longer always does simply what is right in his own eyes or what appeals to his natural instincts. There are defects in these standards, as we shall see in the next paragraph, but to have standards with a certain amount of universality is 'the one thing needful' for morality. At this level too the standards are supported both by the public opinion of the group and by strong penalties for their violation. Nor, as is sometimes suggested, are these standards altogether arbitrary; they have been proved to a large extent to be useful by the collective experience of the group. And these standards have themselves a secondary usefulness in furthering those bonds that bind the group together in a unified social life. The observing of customs tends to bring out in the individual those tendencies which lead to sociability and benevolence rather than those which are self-assertive and individualistic, and the former are certainly the tendencies which contribute most to moral progress. The individual is also likely to form regular habits – in itself a real moral gain – under the influence of the established standards of the group in which he lives.

It is true that at this level the standards themselves have very great defects. There is generally little distinction made between customs based on reasoning and experience and those based on mere superstitions. Again rules dealing with most trivial matters are often given more importance than rules dealing with what we now regard as the most important affairs of morality. A slight error, like the using of a wrong word in a piece of religious ritual, may be regarded as more serious than a crime of violence. We find in all early codes of law, even in the Jewish law attributed to Moses, a curious mixture of petty regulation and ultimate moral principle. On the whole, the

standards of customary morality are too rigid, making no allowance of individual circumstances, and they take little or no account of the motives of the doer of an action. They leave little room for individual freedom with its possibilities of new and creative forms of goodness, and the fact that the standards are to be rigidly enforced means that they cannot be set very high. This lack of freedom and the rigid subordination to a limited number of fixed rules are not the best conditions for the development of the highest type of character, and there seems to be little at this stage to encourage the unification of the various desires of the individual, which is characteristic of developed morality.

§ 4. THE LEVEL OF CONSCIENCE

At the level of custom the authority in the moral life is outside the individual; he must do what is approved by his group. At the level of conscience the moral authority is inside the individual; it is an inner voice that directs him, and now it is what conscience commands that appears the obvious and proper thing to do. This is so much the case that Trotter was inclined to maintain that conscience is merely a developed form of the moral dictates of the herd operating through the herd instinct,¹ but surely the most characteristic expressions of conscience are those where it contradicts the commands of the group. It is true that conscience often bids a man follow the customs of his group, but sometimes it does not, and at this level the deciding factor is always what the man himself regards as right.

The advance from the level of custom takes place in three directions. (a) The standards of morality are now actively chosen by the individual after a greater or less amount of deliberation; they are no longer accepted passively as an inevitable part of his life in a group. Even when the individual does not himself make an active examination of the standards of his group, and does not deliberately choose to accept or reject them (and few individuals have the ability and the energy to engage in such a deliberate examination), the individual still feels that he can when he chooses decide for himself in moral matters. (b) There is a new personal interest in morality. At the group level the moral standards are more or less unconsciously accepted as part of the moral atmosphere of the society to which the

¹ Trotter: *op. cit.*, p. 40, 41.

individual belongs, but at the level of conscience to be good is an individual matter, and is sometimes actually thought of as being for the advantage merely of the individual himself. We may indeed define individualism as 'the assertion by the individual of his own opinions and beliefs, his own independence and interests as over against group standards, authority, and interest'. Historically, the tendency for morality to become a more personal matter has been helped by the coming of the higher religions and especially of Christianity with its emphasis on the value of the individual soul, which, in contrast to the transitory nature of all social groups, is destined for a personal immortality. (c) While other aspects of human welfare become matters for the various institutions and groups in a developed society, pure morality tends to become the sphere of the individual alone. There is a tendency, for example, to separate the spheres of ethics and of politics, holding that politics deals with the affairs of the state, and that the moral standards which apply to individuals are hardly relevant in the political sphere; this is surely an unfortunate effect of the tendency to individualism. We can see the change of outlook in the difference between Greek ethics with its view that the good man is primarily the good citizen and that ethics is a subordinate if fundamental part of politics, and modern ethics, which holds that political or civic life is at the most one sphere among the many in which a man can express his goodness.

The development from the level of custom to the level of conscience may appear to be largely due to historical accidents. We have seen how the spread of Christianity aided that individualistic outlook which is fundamental to the level of conscience. Other historical events, like the breaking up of the Greek city states in the fourth century before Christ, and the Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries with its rich unfolding of individual human capacities were powerful aids to such an advance. The movement from customary morality to individual reflective morality is one, however, which depends on fundamental tendencies of human nature which only receive a new impetus from such historical events as have been mentioned. In all men there are two opposing tendencies which we may label 'hormic' and 'mnemic' tendencies, the tendency to be always seeking something new and the tendency to cling firmly to the old. W. S. Gilbert indicated these two tendencies when he wrote:

*'That every boy and every gal
That's born into the world alive
Is either a little Liberal
Or else a little Conservative.'*¹

He might have said equally truly that each new child is both Liberal and Conservative at the same time; each has the tendency both to go forward to the unknown and to remain in the ways of the past. The mnemonic tendency by itself favours the continuance of the level of custom, and the hormic tendency may lead to new ways of conduct that refuse to be subordinated to moral standards at all; this is the reason why moralists so often distrust those with new ideas. It is the struggle between the two tendencies within the individual which

sell for his own personal gain in a more advantageous market. For our purpose the relevant result is that he begins to think of his own interest as something different from the interests of his group. Circumstances may hasten the conflict between group and individual interests. A time of famine, for example, may drive the energetic individuals away from the area of their tribe to seek their living elsewhere, and when this happens, the interests of the exiled individuals are no longer likely to be identical with those of the group. War, industrial development, and indeed outside change of any kind are likely to offer opportunities for new leaders, and the new leader is likely to find his own interests to be different from those of the tribe with its established chief. Yet it would be wrong to suggest that the assertion of individual interests is a late development, for, from the very beginning, there is in each individual an instinct of self-assertion. At the level of custom the expressions of this instinct may be kept in strict control by the customs of the tribe, but it is there all the time and is ready to find expression whenever opportunity offers. One of the first ways in which any individual is likely to assert himself is by using his own judgement in moral matters and, whenever he does so, he has for the moment at least moved from the level of custom to the level of conscience.

§ 5. A COMPARISON OF THE LEVEL OF CUSTOM AND THE LEVEL OF CONSCIENCE

Morality today in most parts of the world is largely a matter of custom with, here and there, individuals reflecting on moral matters, and, under the guidance of conscience, refusing to accept the customs of their country or class or 'set'. It is a social gain that most men should accept the standards of their group without question; if everybody were constantly asking questions about the rightness and wrongness of the ways of their society, there would be a lack of stability in the morals of a community, and the young would have very little chance of learning almost unconsciously the moral traditions of their race. In most matters even those who reflect on morality accept these traditions without question; it is only when the reflective person finds some inconsistency in the standards of his group or finds that they are not in accord with the highest moral aspirations of his own nature that he asks questions and ultimately adopts new moral standards. Many of the moral standards that pre-

vail at the level of custom must have originated in the reflection of some individual in the past. It is true that the founders of the great religious moral codes attributed their codes to a Divine inspiration, but, even if we admit this, the Divine inspiration came through the individual conscience and must have been coloured by the moral reflections of the human instrument before it was expressed in a moral code. The codes so provided by the pioneers of morality probably suffered weakening and modification before they gained general acceptance; we need only compare the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount and the conventional moral code of the majority of Christians to see how individual ideals become weakened before they become part of the accepted code of customary morality. In this way the level of conscience may have been often found at the beginning of customary morality, as well as occurring as a revolt against customary morality, the way in which we most commonly find it at the present day.

Reflective morality as it is found at the level of conscience and conventional morality as it is found at the level of custom differ in the following respects:

(1) At the level of custom 'what is done' and 'what is not done' may not be what we would call moral matters at all. Religious ritual, for example, is given an equal importance to moral conduct, and, to judge from the way that the two are mixed together in such a code as the law of Moses, both are regarded in the same way. To be wrong in the one is the same kind of wrongness as to be wrong in the other. Again, no difference seems to have been made between what we would now regard as a moral law and what we would regard as a political by-law, like the rule of the road; both must equally be done by the members of the tribe. In modern times the confusion between morality and other spheres is most clearly seen in the case of etiquette. The conventional person, and the word conventional implies that in some respects he is at the level of custom, feels a breach in the code of the manners of his class, like wearing a lounge suit at dinner while all the other guests are in dinner jackets, with the same kind of remorse as he would feel if his fellow-guests caught him telling a lie. Reflective morality on the other hand makes the distinction very clear between what is morally wrong, and what is merely disapproved of on other grounds, although it may admit that these other breaches of custom may have indirect moral effects. A heretical way of performing a religious rite may, for example, cause social

disorder, as when Laud's liturgy was used in Edinburgh in 1637; disobedience of the rule of the road may cause an accident endangering life; and even a man's appearing at dinner in a lounge suit may hurt the feelings of his hostess; all these are more effects. At the level of conscience, however, we see just what is moral about them, and distinguish it from what is merely customary, and this is our first great gain.

(2) At the level of custom the business of the individual is to observe and to follow the habits of others. At this level it may even be a disadvantage to morality for him to observe too closely and attentively, for the individual is more likely to enter into the moral outlook of his group if the natural tendencies of sympathy, imitativeness, and suggestibility are allowed a free and half-conscious play without the interference of deliberate attention which may lead to critical reflection. On the other hand the task of the individual at the level of conscience is to reflect on the customs of his group; these are the data on which his conscience works, for even the most original moralist does not begin a new moral system from the start; he begins by criticism of what is there already. In his reflection, he is likely to make discoveries of different kinds. (a) He will discover that certain customs which were formerly useful are now no longer so, but may even be detrimental to the welfare of his society. The custom may no longer fulfil the purpose that it originally fulfilled. For example, the prohibition of the taking of interest in Mohamman countries was certainly a useful rule when all the money that was borrowed was borrowed for consumption by the borrower, but the extension of that custom into industrial communities, where money is chiefly borrowed for purposes of production and so performs a useful function in society, seems to be socially harmful and quite outside the original purpose of the rule. (b) He will discover that customs vary greatly from one another in their importance. The paying of tithes on spices like mint and anise and cummin according to Jewish custom was recognized by Christ as something that ought to be done, but he saw that it was a duty of little importance compared with others, such as works of judgement, mercy, and faith.¹ (c) He will discover that certain customs are not justified by his own moral intelligence. The institution of slavery had in the early nineteenth century a long tradition of custom behind it, and its supporters could point out that there was not a single word against the institution as

¹ Luke xi. 42.

such in the Christian Bible which was considered to express man's highest moral aspirations, and yet to reflective men at that period the institution was recognized as a bad one and one that had to be got rid of. At the present day the pacifist opposes the custom of fighting for the defence of one's country, which has certainly a long tradition of moral approval behind it; the pacifist of course may be wrong, for the fallible individual may be led to wrong conclusions by his reflections, but whether right or wrong he has taken the matter of fighting from the level of custom to the level of conscience, as the name 'conscientious objector' given to the pacifist in time of war suggests. All such reflection is stimulated and aided by the comparison of the moral code of one's own group with those of other groups. Indeed, travel and wars, which have taken men to see the ways of other civilizations, are powerful influences in arousing men's minds from the level of custom to that of conscience.

(3) At the level of custom there is no room for progress or development. The reformer and the delinquent are both apt to be put in the same class; at the present day, for example, both are likely to be labelled 'Bolsheviks' or 'revolutionaries' by the supporters of conventional morality. The rising to the level of conscience opens the door for change; this change need not always be for the better, but at least progress is now possible. In our next section we shall see certain directions in which progress has been made in the period known to history.

(4) At the level of custom the group is satisfied if the individual outwardly observes its customs. It is to be remembered, indeed, that there are customs of speaking as well as of doing, and it is necessary to 'say the right thing' as well as to 'do the right thing'. It is at the customary level that heretics, who say the thing that must not be said, receive the severest treatment. The customary level might go so far as to demand a uniformity of motive, but there is no way of testing such a uniformity and so custom can demand only uniformity in outward expression. The level of conscience on the other hand is one where it is maintained that the inner springs of action, the motive and the intention, are of more importance than the outward bodily movements or their effects. In this direction morality has received much aid from the development of more personal and spiritual religion with its belief that 'man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart'.

(5) The level of custom tends to maintain morality at rather a

dead level throughout the community. Painful punishments prevent any individual from sinking much below that level, but there is little encouragement and at times even some danger for the individual who aspires to rise much above the average level of his fellows. For the politician who has little concern with anything but the smooth running of the state there is much advantage in the maintenance of the level of custom. It avoids disturbance, it prevents serious degradation, and it does not require on the part of the statesman the effort of creative thought. The level of conscience on the other hand is one in which great individual saints are likely to appear, but it is also unfortunately one in which the individual who chooses the downward path has little to keep him from utter ruin. This is one reason why many who themselves have risen to the level of conscience urge the necessity of maintaining a customary morality in most matters; they say that their conscience approves the customary standards of their group. They realize that a customary morality is more likely to keep the evil-doer from wrong than the leadings of his own undeveloped or perverted conscience.

(6) In a similar way customary morality cannot adapt itself to the special needs of each individual. In some respects this is a gain for it ensures that the established rules of morality cannot be upset by the self-interest or prejudice of a particular individual. Yet it does prevent what we may call the finer adaptations of the moral life, such as the doing of the right thing in particular circumstances which are unique. It has been a characteristic of the morally best men that they have had the insight to do such unique acts. It is said that at the end of the first World War in 1918, the suggestion was made to the British Prime Minister that his first move should be the sending of some shiploads of food to Hamburg in vanquished Germany. We may well believe that the maker of this suggestion had a unique insight and that the action would have been morally right, but the Prime Minister probably realized that such a thing was 'not done' and was contrary to the standards of the group in such circumstances. Such an action belongs to the level of conscience which can always be on the outlook for new ways of being good.

Such a comparison may seem altogether in favour of reflective morality at the conscience level, but it is doubtful whether such morality can exist except with a background of customary morality. If the individual is to have a free choice in moral matters, he must have some stability of moral background, and some assurance that

his fellow-citizens will not interfere unduly with his freedom. It is likely that it is only a well-established moral tradition that can provide such a background. Anarchy does not provide the best environment for the exercise of the individual conscience.

The level of conscience itself is not without its defects and dangers. The possibility of an individual choosing the way of evil with none of the restraints imposed by customary morality has already been mentioned. Yet even for the man who takes the good life seriously there are certain dangers. The conscientious man may, for example, fall into a kind of morbidity or unhealthy self-centredness in which his attention is taken away from the obvious duties demanded of him by his community to the questionings of his own conscience. In extreme cases there may even be a deliberate cult of his own perfection with a corresponding neglect of his social duties. The monk who has chosen to leave the world for the cultivation of his own soul is in danger of forgetting that he has duties to the world he has abandoned. It may be that some men give their best service to the world in living the monastic life, but in such there must be no morbid self-centredness. Again, the fact that at this level there are so many different spheres of human activity makes it easy for the individual to limit his morality to certain of these spheres, for example to his leisure and family life, while his business is run for the purpose of making money with no moral considerations except the very limited honesty that business prudence requires. In an extreme case a man may find other spheres of activity so interesting that he ignores morality altogether. The artist may claim that he is so absorbed in his art that for him morality simply does not matter at all. Another danger of the level of conscience is that of an individual giving up the observance of a moral rule when he no longer understands its meaning and usefulness. Around the institution of marriage there have gathered in the course of history a great number of customs. Many of these have seemed to the reflective of our own generation to have no significance, and the result has been a tendency to abandon all the restraints imposed by tradition, although a fuller reflection would show that the doing so has always had disastrous effects on society. It appears as if the right attitude to traditional custom is to abandon it not when we fail to see its usefulness but only when we see that it is definitely harmful. There is a safety and stability about customary morality, even although it does not admit of the attainment of such heights of goodness as a morality

directed by individual conscience, and there appears to be a place for both custom and reflection in an ideal community.

§ 6. THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF MORALITY

A survey of social history as it is known to us does show that on the whole, in spite of periods of sinking into merely customary ways, there has actually been a development from the level of custom in the direction of the level of conscience. Of course this development has not been continuous; after the appearance of a moral leader who, by his insight or reflection, rejects one of the accepted rules of morality, there is a long period in which, after struggle and much apparent failure, the new rule becomes accepted as a part of customary morality. Indeed, the reflective moralist has not achieved his purpose until what was for him a matter of conscience has become for others a matter of custom. He himself, of course, has reached the level of conscience when he chooses something different from what is customary, but his moral gain is only consolidated by its becoming a matter of custom. The story of the changed attitude to slavery in Britain or America during the nineteenth century provides a good example of this. In an ideal society it appears that conscience would always direct the individual to follow the customs of the group in matters where there is a custom, for an ideal society would have only the best possible customs. In an ideal society there would, however, certainly be matters in which there is no custom, so that there would be an opportunity for originality and creativeness in the moral life.

Historically there have been certain moral gains as part of this development from customary to reflective morality.

(a) The moral judgement has tended to deal with the inner causes of action rather than the outward conduct. This, as we have seen, is an essential element in the development from the level of custom to the level of conscience. We find it historically in the new attitude to the criminal and particularly to the young delinquent, where an attempt is now made to discover the mental history behind the crime, or in the use of confession in the practice of religion.

(b) The area of the moral life has been enlarged. In the tribal life, moral duties were almost all within the tribe, and such obligations as there were to the stranger were religious and magical rather than moral; it was prudent to be careful in dealing with the unknown. The most nationalistically minded today would admit that we have

some duties to all humanity. Even those who tell us most emphatically not to interfere with the customs of primitive peoples declare that we have one moral duty to such people, namely the duty of leaving them alone. A great many people now feel that they have some duties to the animal world, at least the obligation not to cause animals useless and unnecessary pain, and this seems a moral advance in the last few centuries about which there can be no doubt. The wilful torturing of animals which until a century ago was among the most common of English sports has, except for the barbarous relics of fox-hunting and cock-fighting, almost disappeared. Certain movements indeed like that against vivisection go very far in giving equal consideration to animals and men in the matter of causing pain. The more humane treatment of animals, even if in some cases it has been perverted to preferring domestic animals to one's fellow-men, is undoubtedly a great moral achievement.

(c) The development to reflective morality has given us the knowledge that morality is something that we can try to understand, and the study of ethics belongs to the level of conscience. In India and China, where customary codes of morality have long prevailed, there has been little ethical reflection. Modern ethics began in those Greek thinkers who themselves passed from the level of custom to the level of conscience, particularly Socrates and the Sophists. At the reflective level, we realize that morality is not a law imposed on us by an arbitrary creator or his ministering priests; it is not even a law imposed upon us by our fellow-men. It is a law that we ourselves can understand, and choose for our guidance because we see that it is good sense to do so. The great Greek moralists realized this, but the long moral domination of the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages made men feel again that the moral law was outside them and beyond their understanding. In totalitarian states in our own day there has been a renewal of this imposition of the moral law from outside, although this has often been disguised by the supposition that the moral law in some way expresses the 'real will' of the people concerned. It is true that it is better in most cases to observe moral customs that we do not understand if there be no reason for transgressing them, but the very effort to understand is itself a moral enterprise of considerable value, and the means of making the moral law something that we accept open-eyed for ourselves by our own free choice.

1944-1945

1. The first part of the report deals with the general situation in the country during the year. It mentions the fact that the country has been at peace for the first time in many years and that the economy is beginning to recover. It also mentions the fact that the government has taken steps to improve the living conditions of the people.

2. The second part of the report deals with the specific measures taken by the government to improve the living conditions of the people. It mentions the fact that the government has established a number of social welfare agencies and that it has provided financial assistance to the poor. It also mentions the fact that the government has taken steps to improve the education system and that it has provided training for the unemployed.