

CHAPTER 1

METAETHICAL BACKGROUND

The task of justifying moral judgments consists of two parts. First, we need a method for determining which moral principles are sound, and secondly, we need to apply that method to determine what these principles are. In an earlier book, *Moral Language*, I argued that, contrary to what many philosophers and non-philosophers have maintained, it is possible to discover what moral judgments are true. I outlined a method that should enable us to find basic principles which constitute both the meaning of moral expressions and the most fundamental moral tenets. Here I will only summarize those conclusions, together with a brief discussion of some relevant arguments that have appeared in the literature since the publication of *Moral Language* in 1982.¹

In that book I tried to show (1) that moral judgments are statements treated by speakers as having truth value, as opposed to sentences like imperatives and certain performatives which are neither true nor false, (2) that discovery of truth in moral judgments is not fundamentally different from the discovery of truth in non-moral judgments, and (3) that we have good reason to believe that there are stable truth criteria — related to human desires — for moral judgments.

I will say little about (1) in this chapter. Imperativist and emotivist theories of value judgments were originally proposed as ways of preserving the meaningfulness of moral and aesthetic sentences, given the presumption that they could not be literally true. If these theories have not been definitively laid to rest, they have most certainly taken a back seat to the much more important issue of whether any value judgments are true or known to be true. The remainder of the book will be devoted to spelling out (3). Consequently, most of the discussion in this chapter will be of (2).

To begin with I shall present some general themes in philosophy of language based on proposals of Wittgenstein, Quine, and Davidson which, if true, will support my claims. Given this overview of philosophy of language, I will briefly indicate a defense of my position that there are no differences between ethics and other types of discourse which make it impossible to define moral expressions in terms of objective properties, or to determine whether moral judgements are true.

1. DO MORAL JUDGMENTS STATE FACTS?

In *Moral Language* I argued that we can have moral knowledge and that moral judgments have truth value. Opposition to these positions are primarily based on the fact that people disagree widely about ethical matters. Over the course of human history, we find societies in which human sacrifice, slavery, oppression of other races, treating women and children as possessions, catering to every whim of some despot, burning unpopular people as witches or heretics, and so on, were not only tolerated, but accepted and approved of.

Yet while there can be disagreements about an enormous number of subjects, there seem on the surface at least to be problems with resolving disagreements in ethics that are not present for disputes in other areas of discourse. One apparent difference is that while we can often settle our disagreements about perceptible objects by observation, we don't seem to be able to observe moral and other value qualities directly.

This has led many to the view that there are no observable properties which would allow us to determine the answers to questions of morals, and no moral facts to discover. To some this meant that if moral judgments had meaning, their meaning is not determined by states of affairs or facts they might describe. According to this view they have no truth value; however, they certainly serve some linguistic function. Since one of the major functions that moral judgments serve is to get people to do things, several philosophers maintained that they were really a form of imperative. Another form of nondescriptivist theory held that moral judgments were expressions of approval or disapproval, for such expressions describe nothing and are neither true nor false.²

The most sophisticated nondescriptivist theories were much more subtle. For example, R. M. Hare maintains that moral judgments are universalizable imperatives³ equivalent to 'Don't anybody (under the same relevant circumstances) do A!' According to Hare, actions and things have characteristics in virtue of which they are judged good or bad, but this is because we approve or disapprove of whatever has those characteristics and want everyone else to do the same. Thus even though these characteristics give some descriptive content to value terms, value judgments are fundamentally imperatives.

My case against nondescriptivism is based partly on the fact that moral judgments are far more like descriptive, fact-stating sentences than they are like imperatives and expressions of attitude, and that this resemblance presupposes that they are descriptions of states of affairs. For example, we can question or express doubt about moral judgments: for example, 'I wonder whether I did the right thing?' We don't,

however, ask questions like 'I wonder whether do it.' Such questions do not even make sense, and the reason is that we only express doubt about things which might or might not be *true*. An even more important type of example, raised by Ziff, Searle, Castañeda, and Geach is the use of evaluations as the antecedents of conditionals: e.g., 'If John did wrong, he will apologize.' As such, evaluations are also used in arguments: Given the conditional stated in the last sentence, together with 'John did wrong,' it follows that John will apologize.⁴ In a conditional, we state what will happen if some condition or state of affairs holds, or some other sentence is *true*. The antecedent thus describes a matter of fact. The most reasonable explanation of the appearance of evaluations as the antecedents of conditionals is that they too describe matters of fact.^{5, 6}

Blackburn articulates a basic argument for the view that moral judgements cannot describe states of affairs. He maintains that naturalism (and moral realism generally) fail to account for the fact that when two different people have different moral standards, they can mean the same thing by moral expressions.⁷ This is a version of the Open Question Argument, first put forth by Richard Price in the eighteenth century, later made famous by G. E. Moore, and further developed by R. M. Hare.⁸ This is that if moral expressions *meant* the same as some descriptive predicates: e.g., if 'good' meant 'what promotes the greatest happiness for the greatest number,' then anyone who disagreed would not understand the meaning of 'good.' Yet a sentence like 'What's good is what promotes happiness' not only does not sound like a tautology, but it is a sentence people who are competent speakers of the language can disagree with. Blackburn maintains⁹ that unless a realist can show that a moral term has a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for its application, such that whenever those conditions hold the term applies, then he would have nothing stable on which to pin moral discourse. Yet like Price, Moore, and Hare, Blackburn claims that there are no such necessary and sufficient conditions.

I believe that the Open Question Argument is fallacious, because the line between what is true and what is true by definition is not always easy to draw, and that people can understand the meanings of many words — both moral and nonmoral — about whose exact definitions they disagree.¹⁰ All philosophers can think of many examples of debates in the literature over the definitions of such expressions as 'knowledge,' 'mind,' and 'cause.' But the main defense of moral realism against the Open Question Argument is the development of a plausible theory of what moral expressions mean — a theory that will find wide acceptance among people who have diverse political, religious, and cultural points of view. I shall present a candidate a theory which satisfies these requirements in the remaining chapters.

2. HOW IS MEANING DETERMINED?

In order to develop such a theory, it is necessary to have a method for finding out

what moral views are true. I argued in *Moral Language* that this method is similar in ethics to what we do in other disciplines and in everyday life.¹¹ In all forms of discourse, including ethics, we find out the meaning and the truth conditions of words and expressions by paying attention to how people attempt to justify their beliefs. Thus if you and I disagree about whether Tom is a bachelor, what we will try to do (if we care enough) is find out whether or not he is married. If we do find out, this will settle our argument, for we agree that all and only unmarried men are bachelors. Not being married is a recognized *criterion*, a *truth condition*, and part of the *meaning* of the term 'bachelor.' Since it is, finding out whether or not a man is married is the way to find out if he is a bachelor. If someone learning English wanted to know what 'bachelor' meant, one way he could find out would be to observe how we settled our argument.

The sentence 'Bachelors are unmarried men' is not only true, but agreement on its truth is entrenched in the conventions of our language. To give it up — which we could if we wanted to — would require major adjustments in the meanings of other words. And if a person *denied* that bachelors were unmarried men, we would question whether he knew the meanings of at least some of the words he was using; we would find it hard, if not impossible, to understand him.

This is similar to certain views of Wittgenstein and Davidson. They maintained that in order for people to understand each other, and for their words to have meaning, they must agree on the truth of certain sentences.¹² For example, imagine discussing something like geometry when you couldn't agree with anyone on what characteristics a triangle had. You can only start getting somewhere if you and those with whom you are discussing triangles agree on the truth of some sentences such as, 'All triangles have three straight sides.' Not only must we agree on a few such sentences, but we must resist certain challenges to their truth. For example, if Greg says "I saw a triangle with five sides yesterday," you would undoubtedly say something like: "You couldn't have; either it wasn't a triangle, or it didn't have five sides." Compare this with "I saw a black tulip yesterday." Truly black tulips, I am told, do not exist (they are actually very dark purple),¹³ but if you showed me a black flower shaped like a tulip, I would believe you.

But there is nothing Greg could show us that would convince us that he had seen a five-sided triangle. And the reason is that we are so much in agreement that triangles have three sides that we will not accept as a triangle anything that doesn't. Three-sidedness is part of the meaning of 'triangle,' and 'Triangles have three sides' is therefore an analytic sentence. We don't have to prove it by finding evidence for it in experience, and we won't reject it even if we seem to have evidence against it.

A second premise which is important to my theory was developed by Quine: namely, that, while we must agree on the truth of some sentences if we are to talk about anything, which sentences we agree upon is not determined by the way things

are, but is a matter of choice.¹⁴ For the most part we aren't aware of making deliberate choices in what truths we are going to agree on. We normally use words the way other people in our society use them, without much thinking about their meaning, or what we would do if the facts seemed to go against what we have heretofore agreed on, or if someone challenged those beliefs. On other occasions we make conscious choices.

If, for example, we want to determine whether or not a certain animal is a mammal, we will point to characteristics of the creature which support one position or the other. I might, for example, say that the creature couldn't be a mammal because it lays eggs. You might then point out to me that it also nurses its young. We are both looking at further facts about the animal which are typically true of either mammals or non-mammals, facts which are used as *reasons* for classifying animals one way or another. If we come to agreement on which reasons are most relevant, and can agree which reasons hold in this case, then we can agree that the creature is one thing or the other. So if I insist that nothing that lays eggs is a mammal, and you agree with me, our argument will stop, and we will concur that the animal is not a mammal.

Now suppose we tell a biologist about this beast, and she tells us that it is a platypus and that it is a mammal because it nurses its young; you were right all along. Why should we accept what she says? The grounds for accepting her judgment lie in the way in which experts in her field determine criteria for classification. When biologists discovered platypuses and echidnas, they were faced with a dilemma, for these creatures did not fit into any known category. Mammals had never been known to lay eggs, but these things nursed their young, which was the criterion heretofore accepted for something's being a mammal. For the same reason what had once been thought of as great fishes, such as whales and dolphins, were now classified as mammals. To deny that the platypus was a mammal would upset this system and require a general overhaul of terminology. Biologists *might* have undertaken such an overhaul without being in any way *mistaken*. They chose not to, however; the smooth functioning of biological science was better served by keeping to the accepted criteria.

By retaining the current system, the position of nursing its young as a *criterion* of mammalhood was strengthened. As a criterion, it is a *truth condition* and a part of the meaning of the word 'mammal.' We use it to decide the truth or falsity of 'X is a mammal.' We can do so because there is general agreement among those who use this area of discourse (biology) to consider young-nursing as a criterion of mammalhood. The criterion could change, however, thereby changing the meaning of 'mammal.' Such a change would require major adjustments in biology; under some conditions, this might be warranted. It would only be warranted, however, if the progress of biology would be enhanced, if the *purposes* of that science — to advance



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