

CHAPTER 2

THE MEANING OF 'OUGHT' – A FORMAL SCHEME

The challenge before us now is to provide an account of the meaning of moral expressions which is generally acceptable. If this cannot be done, then my contention that the meaning and truth of value judgments is to be found by discovering the moral beliefs that people in general hold most deeply will fail to be substantiated. The task consists of two parts. The first and easier is to spell out a schematic account of what the term 'ought' means; this schema is, I think, applicable to most moral theories. The second task is much more difficult, for it will require fleshing out the meaning of 'ought' in ways that assert the truth of ethical principles, which — though general — have definite content capable of allowing solutions to moral questions.

I shall contend in the first component that — in general — 'oughts' refer to the meeting of some standards or other; in the second component I argue that moral oughts tell us what is necessary to attain a particular end or purpose of morality which is the greatest happiness for all consistent with a like happiness for everyone. It is not hard to see that many will accept the first who will find the second problematic.

In this chapter and throughout the remainder of the book, I will frequently appeal to those widespread moral beliefs which I called well-established, as well as to those very general principles which are typically cited as justifications for the well-established beliefs and for their application in specific circumstances. These principles, which are statements asserting that fundamental criteria apply, need not be universally held, but they are held by the vast majority of *reflective* persons — i.e., the sort of people who attempt to justify their moral beliefs to themselves and to others. They are the considerations to which people disputing ethical questions appeal and use to resolve their conflicts. In many cases where it appears that such

thoughtful people hold some view contrary to those I claim are fundamental, I try to show that their views rest upon misunderstandings and that properly clarified they fit with views which I do consider well-established. As indicated in the previous chapter, a theory of meaning (for any type of discourse) like the one I shall present need not be shown to be the only correct theory, for which truth conditions of several alternatives we accept is a pragmatic matter. On the other hand, a correct theory must be consistent with and explain, by giving a coherent account of, the discourse in question. It must be consistent with those well-established beliefs which people using the discourse hold in common to be true.

1. OUGHTS AND STANDARDS

A core feature of the meaning of oughts, which applies to all kinds of ought expressions and which is probably acceptable to all theorists about the nature of deontic language, is that the item in question (event, state of affairs, or action) meets some standard. A standard sets forth a criterion for ascribing value. If X ought to do A, then A is in accordance with a standard of behavior moral, prudential, or some other. If it ought to be that p, p's being true is appropriate to some ideal; it fits with a standard, or criterion, for goodness of the world. A third type of ought is the epistemic ought. In expressions like 'Ralph ought to be dead by now,' we are not saying that Ralph's being dead would meet a standard, but rather that — given what we know — one who concluded that Ralph would be dead by now would have used proper standards of reasoning.

Standards are sentences which set forth properties as criteria of value; they are *norms*. For the purposes of this chapter the nature of norms may be kept open, as there is considerable disagreement about their nature, but not about the role they play in evaluative discourse. What I have to say in this chapter about standards is consistent with norms' being either propositions with truth value or prescriptions grammatically different from propositions. The truth of descriptivism and moral realism are thus not implied by the view that what ought to be or what someone ought to do is first and foremost what meets standards. The remarks about standards which follow are compatible with both nondescriptivism and anti-realism. Wherever there are standards or criteria of appropriateness, these reflect value attributed. Those who ascribe to the standards believe that what meets them has some value, whether or not having value entails the truth of a statement. Where there are standards of behavior, behavior meeting those standards is more valued by those who subscribe to the standards than behavior which does not. A speaker who says that someone ought to do something or that something ought to be asserts that the something in question meets standards to which she subscribes, i.e., considers to be sound criteria of value. Furthermore, standards and criteria of appropriateness are set up in order to protect and enhance what people consider valuable. They reflect their ideas about what is and what is not of value. Thus if a person states that something ought to be or an act ought to be done, she implies that it is either valuable in its own right¹ or that it contributes to something else of value. What we value dictates what we say we ought to do or what ought to be. These statements about what people mean when they use

oughts do not, however, entail that there are objective standards of value and behavior, or that — of competing standards — some are better than others. They are consistent with some forms of nondescriptivism — e.g. Hare's, according to whom an acceptable standard must meet the requirement of universalizability.

A further feature of oughts which is common to them all is that ought expressions imply that the action or state referred to is a strong requirement for meeting the standard. While other acts or states might be acceptable, or even good, according to the standard, the standard might be met without them, but if what ought to be, or to be done, is not, the standard will be met only with difficulty or not at all. For example, if you ought to drive to Chicago, then even though walking or flying might get you there, driving is the one way which will meet the relevant standards (which would no doubt include time and financial constraints). If driving and flying were equally appropriate, then neither is *the* means of travel you ought to take. Rather, you ought to either drive or fly (as opposed to walking or taking a cab). As another example, if both *p* and *q* are incompatible statements equally supported by the evidence, then 'It ought (epistemically) to be that *p*' is not true. Rather, it ought to be that *either p* or *q*, assuming that no alternative conclusion *r* is at least equally justifiable.

A third feature which I believe is common to all forms of ought is that, if an act ought to be performed or a state of affairs ought to be, then not only is it required for meeting *some* standard, but that standard is correct. If I were to maintain that a criminal ought to be hanged, drawn and quartered on the grounds that this meets a standard of justice held in medieval Europe, this would not suffice to justify my contention.² I would need to justify the standard itself. If I could not adequately defend the standard, I would not be able to defend the judgment, even though the action I said ought to be done met the standard. Such a defense could, but need not, entail showing that it is true that what meets the standard has value. If one is a non-descriptivist, one might have other criteria of correctness, such as that the speaker would prescribe the act for everyone in the given circumstances or that it was an accepted standard of behavior for the speaker's society. Obviously, what standards are considered correct depends upon one's moral theory, and whether they are actually correct depends upon whether the theory itself is correct.

Three things valued almost universally are reflected in the three major sorts of oughts mentioned here. People value what would — in their opinion — constitute an ideal, or at least a better, world. Anything which would be necessary to its realization is something which ought to be. Secondly, we value truth and knowledge, and good reasoning is necessary for attaining these. Standards of reasoning are dictated by what procedures are needed to reach knowledge and truth. This gives rise to epistemic oughts: the conclusions we ought to draw from given evidence. Finally, the objects of goals and purposes are valued, and we consequently value actions which are required for their realization. This is the source of the ought - to - do.³ Whether these three valued things — ideals, truth, and realization of our purposes — are in fact valuable is another matter; nevertheless, a sentence of the form 'X ought to do A' or 'It ought to be that *p*' implies that A or *p* has value, be it intrinsic or instrumental.

The connection with appropriateness or meeting standards had by all forms of

oughts does not entail any logical relationships between ought - to- be's and ought - to- do's. In fact, there are probably at most pragmatic relations between them.⁴ If this is correct, then the fact that it ought to be that *p* does not imply that anyone ought to perform any action, and that *X* ought to do *A* does not imply that any state of affairs ought to be. Since this is a book about ethics, my major concern will be with ought-to-do's, although there will be occasional need to bring in ought-to-be's as well. Unless otherwise indicated, then, the remarks which follow will apply to the ought-to-do. I will not discuss epistemic oughts any further in this book.

2. OUGHTS AND GOALS

Thus far, I do not believe that anything I have said is likely to be disputed. From here on, however, the path becomes more difficult, for I must spell out the, or at least a, correct standard for ought-to-do's. Most — but not all — would agree that — with the exceptions to be discussed below — people ought to do what is needed to achieve their own goals and ought not to do what will frustrate their achieving those goals. We also suppose, however, that it is permissible to use a certain means to an end only when one's so doing does not frustrate the equally important — or more important — ends of oneself or of others. What one ought to do and what is an effective solution to one's practical problem may not be the same.

The relationship between them is, however, a close one, and in order to unravel it, we need to consider the meaning of deontic sentences in some detail. In determining what a statement like '*X* ought to do *A*' means, we must pay careful attention to its actual use, because, as I argued in Chapter 1, what people not only agree to be true, but appeal to in order to settle disputes, is central to meaning. The analysis which follows does, I believe, represent a formalization of what people mean when they make such statements.

I shall propose below a formal scheme of analysis of the statement '*X* ought to do *A*,' and then defend it against some actual and possible criticisms. That a person ought to do *A* means that doing *A* is either logically or causally necessary (or at least strongly required) for attaining one of a certain range of goals, in that his failing to do *A* will place significant obstacles in the way of achieving that goal. The standard which actions must meet if '*X* ought to do *A*' is true is that *X*'s doing *A* would attain a goal within that range. '*X* ought to do *A*,' is sometimes used in a weak sense, to mean merely that *A* is not something *X* ought not to do. It is primarily used in a stronger way, however, to mean that *A* is in some sense required; I shall try to show that what it is required for is the realization of certain sorts of ends.

The statement form '*X* ought to do *A*' is used in a variety of contexts, which may be classified into three groups. We use oughts in the *specific goal* context when we say that *X* ought to do *A* because *A* is necessary for *X* to in order to attain some goal *X* has. *X* ought to do *A* in the *prudential* context when doing *A* is required for *X* to in order to attain what is in his own best interest, or his own good. Finally, '*X* ought to do *A*' is used in the *moral* context when the speaker maintains that *X*'s doing *A* is morally required.

The context in which an ought statement is being used is generally clear from the overall context, although it may not be. Alice might say to in order to Bob, "I ought to go to Charlotte's party," and Bob might reply, "Why? You didn't promise, did you?" (taking the ought to be in the moral context). Alice might then say, "No, but Dave will be there and I need to in order to talk with him about my investments." Here Alice is using the ought in a specific goal or prudential context, but even with this clarification, it is not apparent which of these two is being employed. What we do know is that Alice considers her going to the party a necessary step for attaining some purpose, which might be a specific desire on her part, or her overall best interests, or possibly even moral, if she thinks of caring for her investments as a duty which affects others besides herself. And certainly there are times when what one ought to do fits more than one context. This could be the case with Alice, if she wants her investments to in order to succeed regardless of their effects on her best interests or those of others, but also knows that their success is important to her good and that of her dependents.

Although there are often overlaps among them, and a given ought statement may be used simultaneously in more than one context, we may discuss each of these contexts for practical oughts separately. The specific goal use of ought statements is employed when we say that in order to achieve some end — either stated or not — had by X, X ought to do A. A necessary condition of the truth of "X ought to do A," used in the specific goal context is that A is needed to in order to attain X's goal. Thus if Ellen desires to lose weight, then she ought to consume fewer calories than she expends, because in no other way can this goal be achieved.

There may be more than one means of attaining a given end, and we can never show that there is *not* more than one means.⁵ When there is more than one equally effective means, the agent needs to consider the effects of each of these means on his other ends. If there is no effect, none of the means is *the* one the agent ought to pursue; he ought, however, to adopt *one* of them: i.e., if the various means are $A_1, A_2, \dots, A_n$, then he ought to do A_1 or A_2 or...or A_n .

On the other hand, if the alternative means have differing effects on the agent's other ends, he ought (subject to in order to the restrictions which I will discuss below) to adopt the means that will enable him to realize the greatest number of his ends, or those most important to him, and avoid, if possible, those which would frustrate his other ends. People generally believe that an agent ought not to pursue one end at the cost of frustrating those he values more. Thanks to the miracles of liposuction and other forms of surgery it might not be necessary to establish a negative calorie balance in order to lose weight (although if Ellen continues to eat as she used to, she will gain it back). Even if liposuction were successful, however, she would have to consider possible adverse effects upon her health resulting from surgery, as well as the financial costs of such a procedure. What she ought to do in the specific goal context would be what she must do to maximize what is valuable to her (i.e., maximize the realization of all her specific goals).

If no action is needed on the part of the agent in order to attain something she desires, then there is nothing she ought to do with respect to that end. But if the end cannot be achieved without her doing something, then she ought to perform some one



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