



A DIALECTIC OF MORALS

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PART 2 OF 2

We must take a more complicated case than any we have so far considered. Let A and C stand for a sum of pleasures greater than the single pleasure B. But let the conditions be such that whereas A and B are pleasures capable of immediate enjoyment, C is a pleasure that cannot be enjoyed until some time in the future, though it can be imagined now. Furthermore, let the future enjoyment of C depend upon the present choice of A rather than B; in fact, let the present enjoyment of B exclude the possibility of a future enjoyment of C. Finally, let us state the facts about quantity: B is a greater pleasure than either A or C taken singly, though the sum of A and C is greater than B. According to quantity as a criterion of preference, the student must admit that the rule of anyone's con-

duct in this case must be that he *should* prefer A and C to B. But, as a matter of fact, will everyone behave accordingly?

To obtain the student's answer to this question, we take a concrete case in which the choice is between the pleasure of going to sleep as against the pleasure of further conviviality. Now the latter pleasure may be regarded as greater than the former taken by itself; but the former entails a future pleasure—the pleasure of feeling rested on the morrow, here set against the displeasure of weariness when there is work to be done. Let it even be supposed that the pleasure of feeling rested on the morrow, as now imagined, is less than the presently enjoyable pleasure of further carousing. It is only when the two pleasures—of sleep now and feeling rested tomorrow—are taken together, that they exceed the alternative which is involved.

Will the student deny that a person who made such calculations as these might sometimes violate the universal rule, and choose the lesser pleasure? The student will undoubtedly admit that he has made such a foolish choice himself; he will remember moments of repentance for having made the wrong choice, moments of resolution not to be so foolish again. But wherein lies the folly, unless it is wisdom to follow a true rule of conduct? And how could one ever repent, in cases of this sort, if the rule we have stated is strictly inviolable?

Shall we not, therefore, now ask the student to admit that by his own criterion of preference we have formulated a universally true rule of conduct, true for any person and yet also frequently violated? The student may still demur, saying that at the time of the choice, the lesser pleasure actually seemed the greater; and that repentance, with its recognition of folly, occurred at a later time when a more accurate calculation of the opposed pleasures was made. Thus, he may continue, it remains true as a matter of fact that people always prefer what at the time appears to them to be the greater pleasure, although the apparently greater may not be really so.

Undoubtedly, we must admit, such mistakes in calculation are sometimes made, but that is not always the case. We can regret two sorts of mistakes: on the one hand, mistakes of calculation; on the other, mistakes of acting contrary to our calculations. It does not require much effort of thought to add to the pleasure of going to sleep now the consequent pleasure of feeling refreshed in the morning; but it does require strength of will, as is popularly said, to give sufficient weight to a future pleasure against a present one.

That is why many people have violated the sound rule which prescribes the choice of greater pleasure (the sum of A and C, against B). At the moment of the choice, they like B more than A, and even though they fully realize that the alternatives do not consist of A against B, but of A, along with C, against B, they foolishly put the morrow out of mind. They set up as the maxim of their conduct, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." But if that maxim be a moral truth, then the rule about always preferring the greater good must be false—on the condition, of course, that we do not die on the morrow. Since, as a matter of fact, most of us make choices in the expectation of a normal span of life, the maxim which permits us to take the greater pleasure at the moment is false precisely because it is not the greater pleasure in that larger framework of moments which constitutes a whole life.

We must ask the student at this point whether he is willing to agree that a person, who has both memory of the past and imagination of the future, exercises preferences not only for the present moment, but for the future, and in view of his or her life as a whole. If he says No, we need only remind him that he is neglecting obvious facts with which he is acquainted, for example, the many cases in which he and other people have preferred a momentary displeasure for the sake of a future pleasure. As between going to the dentist now to have a cavity filled, when the tooth is not yet decayed enough to hurt, and waiting for toothache to set in, most of us make the choice of what is at the moment unpleasant for the sake of avoiding a greater unpleasantness later. If, in the light of cases of this sort, the student now admits that the criteria of preference require us to consider future moments as well as present ones, then we can formulate a principle of preference, which subsumes the other two. This rule of conduct is: In any case in which a choice can be made, people *should* prefer the alternative, which, in the long run or viewing life as a whole, maximizes pleasure and minimizes displeasure.

We must remind the student here that, so far, we have adopted his own criteria of preference—pleasure against displeasure, or the greater quantity of pleasure—and that we have succeeded in showing him, in terms of his own criteria, that he himself must acknowledge the truth of a moral rule, which is of universal application; and we have also now shown him that such a rule, especially in its most general formulation, is *normative*, saying how people *should* behave, not *descriptive*, saying how they *do*, the evidence for this being the obvious violations of the rule, and the experience of repentance for folly in so doing, whether it results from bad thinking or weak willing. In other words, the operations

of people in exercising preferences cannot be simply instinctive, even though it be instinctive to humankind's animal nature to seek pleasure and avoid displeasure. We cannot ask *why* human beings *should* prefer pleasure to displeasure, for the student is right in replying that there is no reason for this except the fact of instinctive determination itself. But if in a complicated situation, involving sums of pleasure and displeasure, some present and some future, we ask *why* a human being *should* prefer one set to another, instinct by itself will not suffice as an answer.

Here it is necessary to say that, in view of humankind's instinctive preference for pleasure over displeasure, and in the light of memory and imagination, human beings have developed a rule of calculation which goes beyond the momentary promptings of instinct. Since this rule is not itself instinctive, it can be misapplied by bad thinking in particular cases, and even when the calculations are well performed, it can be violated by contrary choices. A violable rule of this kind, developed as the result of thinking about the problems of preference, can be called a rule of reason. It satisfies all the requirements of a universally true moral judgment, providing as it does both a prescription for conduct and a standard whereby to judge people's choices as wise or foolish, right or wrong. Hence we can say to the student that, accepting his own explanations of the fact of preference, we have removed one of the unqualified negatives in his moral skepticism, namely, that no universally valid moral judgment, no rule which directs all people everywhere, *is possible*. The possibility is more than proved by the existence of at least one such rule.

It is now the student's turn to remind us that we have another question to answer before we have really won our point. Granted that there is such a rule, it does not determine actual preferences in particular situations, for they are determined by the feelings of pleasure and displeasure, remembered, imagined, or presently experienced, which vary among individuals according to their temperaments, their biographical conditioning, and their social environment. Hence, the rule that A should be preferred to B whenever A represents a greater pleasure, is an empty formula, which does not oblige two people to agree in their actual judgments. One can say that he likes A better, and the other can say that he likes B better and so, without violating this so-called universal moral rule, the two people can make quite opposite choices in the same situation. Each person's preference expresses his or her own private opinion, and nothing more, for according to the rule itself, he or she has no grounds for saying that the other person has made a wrong choice.

Certainly we must admit, the student tells us, that if moral judgments are worth anything at all, they must be practical: they must decide our conduct. Now the kind of judgments which decide our conduct are the actual judgments we make in particular cases, the judgment that *this* A is better than *this* B, here and now, and for me. The universal moral judgment that any A, which is a greater pleasure than any B, should be preferred, decides no one's conduct, for in particular situations, wherein we act, we do not find any A and any B, but *this* A and *this* B, and the whole question is whether we like *this* A better than *this* B. And although the universal judgment, that the greater pleasure should always be preferred to the less, is true for anyone, the particular judgment that this pleasure is greater than that may be true only for me, and certainly need not be true for everyone. Hence, the particular judgment, which must always carry the qualifying words "for me," is strictly an opinion, guiding only my own conduct, and if true in any sense at all, true only for me in this situation. But such particular judgments are the only ones which operate practically, and so, the student concludes, for all practical purposes moral questions are decided only by opinion. The moral skeptic is right, and the moralist wrong.

Much that the student has said is right, and yet his conclusion is wrong. Let us concede at once that, so far as our discussion has gone, all particular moral judgments, which express an individual's preference for A over B because more pleasing to him or her in the light of all calculable circumstances, are subjective, are opinions true for that individual only at the time they are made. Let us, furthermore, admit that such particular judgments are the most practical in the sense that they directly determine a choice and ensuing conduct. But instead of saying that they are the only really practical judgments, and that universal judgments are not practical at all, let us see if we can show the student that the universal judgments are also practical, though in a sense not so obviously or directly.

Here are two people, facing the same alternatives under the same circumstances. The two people differ as individuals in many ways, and so whereas one likes this A better than this B, the other likes this B better than this A. Now suppose the situation to be complicated by the fact that both A and B involve future as well as present pleasures. What, then, does it mean to say that A is liked better than B, or B better than A? It must mean that each person, according to his or her individual nature, has made a different calculation here of which is the greater-good-for-him-or-her. But, as we have already seen, a person can act contrary to such a calcula-

tion, and in so doing violate the universal moral rule that the greater good should be chosen. Hence, there are the following possibilities: (1) if both people violate the universal moral rule, it can be truly said that each *should* have made the opposite choice; (2) if the first person obeys the universal rule, and the second transgresses it, then it can be said that the second person's judgment is wrong, even though it now will agree with the first person's. The first person's judgment is not right because this A in fact gives a greater pleasure than this B *to anyone*; on the contrary, this B gives a greater pleasure to the second person; so that if the second person had acted wisely in his or her own behalf he or she *should* have chosen B rather than A.

What this all comes to can be summarized simply enough by pointing out that the act of preference follows from two judgments, not from one, a universal judgment and a particular judgment. With respect to the universal judgment, a person can be objectively right or wrong; thus, a person who says that a greater pleasure ought not to be preferred—pleasure and the quantity of pleasure being the only criteria of preference—speaks as falsely as a person who says two plus two does not equal four. With respect to the particular judgment, a person can only be subjectively right or wrong, according as they correctly or incorrectly calculates what, for them in this situation, is the greater pleasure. Their being right in the particular judgment has no relevance to the choices of other people; whereas their being right in the universal judgment indicates what is right for every other person.

But, the student persists, how does the universal judgment have any practical bearing? The question can be answered in two ways. The first is difficult to imagine, though possible: the case of a person who actually was in error about the universal principle, who somehow thought that the greater pleasure ought not to be preferred. Such a person, however accurately they calculated their present and future pleasures in any particular situation, would, if they put their universal and their particular judgment together into practice, make a choice which could be called wrong—and objectively so, in the sense that it was not only wrong for them, but wrong for any person, because their error lay in an erroneous general principle.

The second case is one we have already discussed: the case of the person who violates the true universal rule as a result either of wrong calculations in this particular situation, or as a result of not following the calculations according to the prescription of the universal rule. Whichever of these two things they do, their preference

can also be objectively criticized. It was wrong not only for them, but for any person in the same situation. These facts indicate conclusively that having the right universal rule and, more than that, applying it accurately to the circumstances, and, even more than that, putting the combination of the universal and the particular judgments into practice, are indispensable conditions of reaching a sound conclusion in the particular case. And *any* person who fails to satisfy all of these conditions can be criticized objectively, as he or she could not be if the only factors which determined actual preferences were entirely subjective.

If that is so, the student then asks, why did you admit earlier in this discussion that one person can prefer this A to this B, and another prefer this B to this A, and both be quite right? Was not that admission tantamount to conceding the subjectivity of actual preferences? Again, we must repeat that actual preferences, expressed in the particular judgments which immediately precede action, are subjective in the sense indicated, namely, that two people can make opposite judgments in the same situation and still both be right. The only point the student failed to see, when he asked the question, was that these opposite judgments are not *entirely* subjective, for both can be wrong if both were reached in the wrong way, i.e., in reliance upon a false universal rule, or in violation of a true one, through miscalculation or willful transgression.

We have now arrived at a point favorable for summarizing our discussion so far. Let us submit this summary to the student for his approval before we go on.

There are two extreme errors which are equally wrong. (1) The error of the moral skeptic who says that actual preferences are *entirely* subjective, that there is absolutely no way of pointing out to a person that he or she is wrong in a particular moral judgment in a manner which would make any other person wrong in the same situation. (2) The error of the moralist who says that actual preferences are *entirely* objective, that there is absolutely no way in which a person can regard their particular judgments as right for them and for themselves alone, since if they are right at all, they must be right for any other person in the same situation.

The truth, which corrects these errors, can be succinctly summarized in the following propositions: (1) two people can make opposite preferences in the same situation, and both be wrong; (2) two people can make opposite preferences in the same situation, and both be right. And if there is any moralist who makes the error just described, the moral skeptic is thoroughly right in attacking them.

It may even be that the student has been led to espouse moral skepticism because of the error he has attributed to the moralist. Once the student is told that this error is no part of the moralist's position, a stumbling block may be removed. So far as we have gone, the moralist's attack upon skepticism can be justified only with respect to the error that is a blemish on the skeptical position, just as much as the opposite extreme error is a blemish on the position of the moralist. With both errors removed, the moralist and the moral skeptic are drawn a little closer.

With both errors removed, what can teacher and student (or moralist and moral skeptic) now positively agree upon? If they will examine together the two truths, stated above as corrections of the two extreme errors, they will find an explanation for these truths.

On the one hand, the reason why two people can make opposite preferences in the same situation, and both be wrong, is that each can violate in his or her own way a rule that is equally obligatory on both. That there can be any universal moral truths at all, such as the rule for always preferring the greater pleasure, arises from the fact that, in so far as they are human, all people are the same, at any time or place.

On the other hand, the reason why two people can make opposite preferences in the same situation, and both be right, is that both are not simply human beings, for each is a uniquely differing individual person, whose individual nature, constituted by the accidents of birth, biography, and environment, belongs to him or her alone. That two people, both adhering to the same universal moral rules and following them equally well, should be able to reach different conclusions arises from the fact that they differ as individuals; and the rightness of their opposite conclusions is a rightness relative to their individual natures.

In short, whatever is universally true or objectively right in the making of a particular moral judgment is something relative to the human nature common to all people; whereas whatever is only individually true or only subjectively right in the making of such a judgment is something relative to the individual nature uniquely possessed by each person .

Now the moralist can claim to have moral knowledge, in the strict sense of objectively true moral principles or rules, only on the level of universal judgments. If he claims more than this, the moral skeptic is right in opposing him. The moral skeptic, on his side, can claim that moral judgments are subjectively true, or mere opin-

ions, only on the level of particular judgments. If he claims more than this, the moralist is right in opposing him. The fact that the particular judgment is the one which is directly proximate to action does not mean that the universal judgment is not practical, for it is indirectly practical in so far as it is operative in the formation of the particular judgment. And although the particular judgment, taken as a whole, is subjective and has the status only of opinion, it contains implicitly the universal judgment which has been operative in its formation. It is necessary, of course, to extricate this universal judgment and to make it explicit, in order to discover a moral principle which has objective truth, obliging all people, and applicable to every situation.

There should be no difficulty about getting the student to approve this summary, for it says no more than what the student himself had admitted in the course of the preceding discussion. Making it, however, enables us to make two further points. The first looks backward. If the student, as a moral skeptic, still holds that although all moral standards are not individual, they are at least all conventional (relative to a social group at a given time and place), we can now begin to suggest to him that just as what is individual in moral judgments, because they are made by individual people, does not exclude the possibility of a universal element, because individual people are also all human beings, so what is conventional in moral judgments, because they are made by human beings living under certain social conditions, does not exclude the possibility of a universal element for the same reason, namely, that despite every difference of social origin, the people of different societies are still all human beings. We can promise the student to return to this point later, and show him, after a larger number of moral truths have been discovered, that these moral truths not only hold for every individual, but for every society as well; and that there is no inconsistency whatsoever between the unity and absoluteness of moral principles, on the one hand, and the plurality and relativity of *mores*, on the other.

The second point looks forward. It will be made by the student himself, after he has reviewed the ground we have so far covered. We have claimed, he will say, to have established the existence of moral theory, as a body of knowledge rather than a set of opinions, by getting him to admit the truth of one, or at most two, universal judgments, such as “men *ought* to prefer the greater pleasure.” But if that is all that moral theory comes to, morality is not a very impressive body of knowledge. What other moral truths can we show him, and induce him to accept as such? If there are none other than this one, or its like, he does not regret his indifference to the study

of moral philosophy, for at best it consists of the most obvious common sense, which all people already possess, and even at that its offering of acceptable truths is hardly elaborate enough to be worth more than a page, or the back of a card.

The challenge is utterly fair. We are now prepared to meet it. But, first, we must remind the student that we did not spend all this time on the principle, that people should prefer the greater pleasure, for its own sake, but rather for the sake of getting him to recognize a universal principle, a true but violable precept. And we had to do that in the student's own terms, by accepting at the outset his own answer to the question, Why is anything preferable to any other? He told us that the only criterion was pleasure as against displeasure; and then added a second criterion, the quantity of pleasure. At the time, we did not question these criteria. But now we can tell him that the paucity and obviousness of the principles we have so far reached are due to the two criteria of preference which he claimed were the only ones.

Now that the first stage of the argument is completed, and he admits the existence of some universal truths, we can go further only if he will permit us to re-examine the original premises of the argument. They were not entirely wrong: pleasure and quantity of pleasure are criteria of preference. But, though not wrong, these criteria are inadequate. There are other and more fundamental criteria which, when seen, will not only bring us to the induction of much more significant moral generalizations, but also will significantly alter our understanding of the two criteria already discussed. In order to correct the error of supposing that the *only* criteria of preference are pleasure and quantity of pleasure, we must make a fresh start. The best way to do this is to re-examine some of the statements already made about pleasure, for in them much truth is contained that we have not yet seen.

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