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## FUNDAMENTAL ERRORS IN MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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**1**

In writing this book, I have found it difficult not to anticipate what I would like to set forth systematically and explicitly in this chapter. In the Prologue and in the preceding chapters I have here and there made brief mention of errors in moral philosophy made in modern times by David Hume, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, and John Dewey. To the mistakes by modern thinkers must be added a mistake made in antiquity by Plato and by the Stoic philosopher Epictetus.

Acquaintance with errors and the correction of them is indispensable to a full understanding of the truth. Accepting and espousing the truth to be found in Aristotle's *Ethics* without being cognizant of the views that are contrary to it and without being able to refute them represents a slender and insufficient grasp of Aristotle's thought. That understanding needs enlargement and enrichment by

dealing dialectically with the philosophers whose thinking led them to contrary conclusions.

The error made by David Hume, I have adverted to. His account of what has come to be called the “naturalistic fallacy” can be summarized in two sentences. (1) Our descriptive knowledge of matters of fact, even if it were complete, gives us no basis for affirming the truth of prescriptive imperatives—statements of what ought or ought not to be desired and done. (2) That being the case, an ethics that is deontological rather than teleological, i.e., an ethics of moral obligation rather than one of expediency, is impossible.

The first proposition is true, but the second does not follow from the first. It is a non sequitur. There need be only one self-evident, categorical imperative which combined with true statements of fact validates true prescriptive conclusions. “You ought to desire everything that is really good for you, and nothing else ought to be desired” is the required self-evident, categorical imperative. It is derived from Aristotle’s conception of right desire and from his distinction between real and apparent goods.

With the “naturalistic fallacy” disposed of, we turn now to the idealist error first made by Plato and shared later by the Roman Stoics, Immanuel Kant, and other modern philosophers; the rationalist error that is peculiar to Kant, and the Kantians; the utilitarian error made by John Stuart Mill under the influence of Jeremy Bentham; and the realist error made by John Dewey.

## 2

That having moral virtue is an ideal to be aimed at cannot be called a mistake on Plato’s part. But to assert that moral virtue by itself is sufficient—the only good to be sought—is the serious mistake that I have called the idealist error.

Plato appears to make that mistake in a single sentence in the closing words of his *Apology*, his account of the trial of Socrates. There Socrates, having been condemned to death by a jury of his fellow citizens in Athens, says to them, “Know ye that no harm can come to a good man in this life or the next.”

Here is my understanding of that statement. A good man is a man of good moral character, one who has moral virtue. He cannot be harmed because there are no other goods of which he can be deprived. His being allowed to live is not a good, nor is his being put

to death, justly or unjustly, the deprivation of a good. There may be other interpretations of the statement I have quoted from Socrates' peroration, but I am here only contending that, if my interpretation is correct, Socrates made a mistake.

It is very much to the point that, earlier in Plato's *Apology*, Socrates made a statement that directly contradicts his closing statement, as I have interpreted it. There he says that "virtue does not come from wealth, but from virtue comes wealth and all the other goods." The virtue he is talking about is moral virtue, and so the statement must be interpreted as asserting that moral virtue is not the only good, but that there are many other goods, such as wealth and wisdom, of which a man can be deprived and, being deprived of them, be injured or harmed.

Certainly, in other Platonic dialogues, Plato gives support to the view that there are goods other than moral virtue. In the *Philebus*, Socrates argues against the error of those who claim that pleasure is the only good, by asking whether it is better to have both pleasure and wisdom than just to have pleasure alone.

Also in the first book of the *Republic*, Plato begins his exploration of the idea of justice by presenting an initial definition of doing injustice as injuring or harming another person whether that person is or is not a morally virtuous human being. If no harm can come to a morally virtuous person, it follows that he cannot be injured by unjust treatment.

However, Plato was a philosopher who was sensitive to contradictions. Hence it is reasonable to suppose that he did not himself make the idealist error I have attributed to him on the basis of the statement made by Socrates in his peroration at his trial. But that does not change the fact that other philosophers, notably Epictetus and Immanuel Kant, made the error I may have wrongly attributed to Plato.

In his *Enchiridion*, Epictetus repeatedly declares that nothing external to the will of an individual is intrinsically good or evil. With regard to all things external to our will, we are free to evaluate them as either good or evil. At the end of his little treatise, quoting Plato as his authority, Epictetus asserts that a good will—a righteous or morally virtuous will—is the only thing in the world that has intrinsic goodness and is indispensable to a person's happiness.

The contradiction that Epictetus does not seem to notice lies in the fact that he also thinks of a morally virtuous man as one who, out

of a righteous will, acts justly toward others. But how can injustice be done to others if they choose to think that assaulting them, deceiving them, even enslaving them, does not harm them because all these impinging externals can have no effect on their inviolate will.

Centuries later, Kant explicitly repeats the Stoic view of intrinsic good and evil. He declares that the only intrinsic good is a good or righteous will, one that discharges its moral obligations and leads a man to do his duty. This by itself suffices for a man to lead a morally good life and, thereby, to deserve happiness.

### 3

The mistake peculiar to Kant is what I have called the rationalist error. It consists in thinking that, without regard to the facts of human nature and without any consideration of the circumstances affecting one's choices or actions, reason and reason alone provides the foundations of moral philosophy.

Reason does so by formulating a categorical imperative that should govern all our conduct: *So act that the maxim of your conduct can become a universal law or rule.* Later philosophers have called this the "generalization principle" or the "universalability thesis." It means simply that you act rightly if the rule that governs your action is also a rule that should govern the action of everyone else. Even more simply stated, that is the Golden Rule: *Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.*

On the face of it, that would appear to be a reasonable prescription. But upon closer examination, it turns out to be an empty one. In the first place, it says nothing at all about what you ought to do for your own sake; and, above all, for your own ultimate good, which is happiness, not conceived psychologically as Kant conceived it, but ethically as Aristotle did. The Golden Rule is concerned only with your actions as affecting others, not with your desires as affecting yourself.

In the second place, how could you do unto others what you would have them do unto you, unless you knew what was really good for you and, being really good, was also really good for every other human being by reason of being an object of natural human desire?

Without reference to the desires that are inherent in human nature, the Golden Rule is devoid of ethical content. It is erroneously concerned with what is right in regard to others without any concern with what is good for everyone. We should be primarily but not

exclusively concerned with what is good for everyone; and only secondarily and derivatively with how this knowledge directs us in acting rightly toward others.

Not only is Kant's rationally formulated categorical imperative, like the Golden Rule, devoid of ethical content, but any attempt to give it ethical content must surreptitiously introduce notions about what is really good. In other words, the purity of its rationalism must be polluted by considering the facts of human nature and natural desires.

In addition, the purity of Kant's rationalism does not allow for any casuistry that justifies exceptions to rules by an empirical consideration of the circumstances in a particular case.

This makes Kant's moral philosophy thoroughly dogmatic. The specific rules of conduct he derives from his categorical imperative are rules without any justifiable exceptions, instead of being, as they should be, merely general rules that have justifiable exceptions. To think about moral problems in this way is sheer dogmatism.

One example of such dogmatism will suffice. Kant asserts that the maxim of conduct that forbids us to tell lies follows from his categorical imperative. It is an absolutely universal rule and allows for no exceptions arising from the circumstances of particular cases. It applies, he tells us, to the individual who, standing at his fence, sees a man running desperately from pursuers. The fugitive comes to a fork in the road and takes the path to the right. Shortly thereafter, the thugs pursuing him, brandishing clubs and knives with murderous intent, ask the farmer at the fence which fork in the road the man running away took.

According to Kantian ethics, the farmer at the fence has no alternative but to tell the thugs the truth. There is no justification for his telling them a lie, not even if he knows or thinks, without a doubt, that the pursuers are murderous thugs and the fugitive is innocent of any crime. For Kant there are no white lies. No intentional deception of another is ever justifiable.

#### 4

It is not the confused and erroneous hedonism of John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism* with which I am here concerned. That was criticized in Chapter 3, in which we encountered the wrong desire for pleasure as the only good and clarified the ambiguity of the word

“please” as used by Mill in Chapters 2 and 3 of his book. Here the errors to which I wish to call attention are in his fourth chapter entitled “Of What Sort of Proof the Principle of Utility Is Susceptible.”\*

\* Mill calls himself an Epicurean with regard to pleasure. This may be true of Bentham, whose felicific calculus is clearly hedonistic. But Mill treats pleasure more frequently as the satisfaction of desire rather than as an object of desire. This treatment of pleasure is more Aristotelian than Epicurean. However, for Mill, all desires are wants, with no distinction between wants and needs.

Before I do so, it should be noted that in Chapter 4, Mill adopts what appears to be the Aristotelian view of happiness as the final and ultimate end that all men desire. “Human nature,” Mill writes, “is so constituted as to desire nothing which is not either a part of happiness or a means of happiness. We can have no other proof, and we require no other that these are the only thing desirable.”

Apart from the fact that Mill thinks of happiness as the maximization of pleasures enjoyed, the agreement with Aristotle about happiness as the *totum bonum* and ultimate end is superficial. It is little more than an agreement about how the word “happiness” is used by everyone to signify that which is desired for its own sake, not as a means toward anything beyond itself. It signifies that which leaves nothing more to be desired.

That is as far as Mill’s agreement with Aristotle goes. Unlike Aristotle, he does not define happiness as activity in accordance with virtue in a complete life, accompanied by wealth and other external goods that are partly the goods of fortune. Nor does he recognize that human beings have a moral obligation to seek their happiness, properly conceived as a morally good life, a life well lived and enriched by the possession of all the real goods that are objects of right desire.

Aristotle as well as Kant would reject Mill’s moral philosophy on the grounds that it is purely teleological and pragmatic—an ethics of means and ends which, like Jeremy Bentham’s felicific calculus, contains no moral prescriptions using the words “ought” and “ought not.” We are not under the obligation to pursue that which is rightly desired; we are left to calculate what means to employ in order to achieve the end that pleases us most. Its principles are principles of expediency and of results, not of right desire and of obligations to be fulfilled.

Passing over all of Mill’s mistakes about pleasure and happiness and his recourse to subjective feelings as the ultimate source of

discrimination between what is more or less desirable, the central error in *Utilitarianism* is its proposal of two final ends that can come into conflict. One is the individual's own happiness. The other is what Mill calls "the general happiness"—the happiness of all other human beings who are one's fellows in a given society, usually miscalled "the greatest good of the greatest number."

On the one hand, Mill proposes as a self-evident truth that the individual's own happiness is the ultimate end at which the inborn tendencies of human nature do, in fact, aim. On the other hand, he proposes what he calls "the general happiness" (i.e., the happiness of others) as the ultimate goal.

Two ultimate goals, two final ends, on the face of it, are impossible. Recognizing the possibility of conflict between two such goals, Mill subordinates the individual's own happiness to the general happiness and allows himself to slip into a prescriptive judgment that we *should* aim at the general happiness even if that does not also serve the purpose of procuring for ourselves our own individual happiness.

The problem he has created for himself, Mill fails to solve. The only final end and ultimate goal that the individual should seek is that individual's own happiness. But when happiness is properly defined as the ultimate good that befits our common nature it is obviously a common good, the same for all members of the human species.

As I pointed out in Chapter 4, the phrase "common good" has another meaning: the good of the organized community in which the individual lives. The happiness that is *common* to all human individuals is the *bonum commune hominis*. The general, social welfare, the public good, the good of the community (*bonum commune communitatis*) is also a common good, but *common* in a different sense—not common because it is the same for all individuals, but common because all members of the community can participate in it.

The problem Mill failed to solve can be solved only by making all these distinctions. The happiness of others depends upon the good of the community in which they live. Their participation in that common good enables them to obtain real goods that are parts of or means to their own individual happiness.

For each individual, the good of the community in which he lives is a means to his or her own happiness. Conversely, each individu-

al in acting for his or her own individual happiness cannot help but work for the public common good that serves the happiness of others as well as his or her own individual happiness, since that happiness is common to or the same in all.

Thus, there are not two ultimate goals, but only one. The general happiness, the happiness of others, is not an ultimate goal for the individual. He acts for it indirectly when, in acting for his own individual happiness, he also acts for the public common good (that is not only a means to his own happiness, but also a means to the happiness of all others who participate in it).

## 5

Like Mill's *Utilitarianism*, John Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct* is thoroughly pragmatic—a teleological ethics of means and ends, devoid of any prescriptive judgments about what human beings ought to desire and do.

As for Mill, so for Dewey, facts about human nature provide a basis for his ethics. To that extent, it has an Aristotelian cast. In Dewey's case, not only does human nature play a central role, but he also gives the notion of habit a crucial position in his moral philosophy.

Thus, in its teleological aspect, in its reliance on an understanding of human nature, and in its giving prime importance to the habitual dispositions of human beings, not to their singular actions, Dewey's moral philosophy is Aristotelian in tenor.

What, then, is its chief defect—the realist error that makes Dewey's moral philosophy a purely descriptive ethics, devoid of prescriptions) It consists in Dewey's denial of any goal in human life that is a final and ultimate end that all human beings ought to seek, as well as all the means they ought to seek in order to attain it in a complete life.

For Dewey, while individuals are still alive, every end they in fact do seek is always a means to some further end. Nothing is ever sought except as a means to some further end that, in turn, is a means to some further end, and so on, until death is the end that terminates all further seeking.

Dewey's error lies in his failure to distinguish between terminal and normative ends. Death is a terminal end, not a normative end. It is a terminal end that few individuals do, in fact, seek. Dewey is



correct in thinking that, in this life, death is the only terminal end. But there are goals that momentarily serve as terminal ends; for example, when we travel and set a city as our destination, that city is for the time being a terminal end. When we reach it, the desire that motivated our travel is quieted. But we may then wish to travel further and set another city as our destination, using where we are as a means to getting there.

All terminal ends or goals must be attained before they are used as means to further ends or goals. In both respects, a normative goal differs from a terminal goal. An ultimate end that is normative rather than terminal is a goal that is never momentarily attained and later used as a means. Happiness, psychologically conceived as the state of contentment at any moment when one gets everything one wants, is a terminal goal. Happiness, ethically conceived as a whole life well lived and as the ultimate good that all human beings ought to desire, is the final end that is a normative goal.


We can understand the difference between terminal and normative goals by considering the difference between the performing arts and the arts that produce things that have enduring existence, such as the shoe the cobbler makes, the house the architect builds, or the ship the shipwright constructs.

A symphony performed by an orchestra may take an hour to play. From start to finish, it is continually coming into being and passing away. The whole of it does not exist at any moment in the course of its being played.

The conductor who aims to play the symphony as well as possible is, therefore, aiming at a goal that is normative, not terminal. It is a goal that controls and governs how the symphony should be conducted in every phase of its development. Only when the playing of the symphony has been completed, can anyone judge that it has been well played and that the conductor has succeeded in discharging his obligation to play it well.

Banal as the comparison may appear to be, achieving a well-lived life—achieving happiness as ethically conceived—is like playing a symphony well. It is a normative, not a terminal, goal. It is the goal of right desire for which all the means should be rightly chosen.

I have drawn on the main distinctions, principles, and conclusions in Aristotle's *Ethics* in order to point out these four fundamental errors in moral philosophy. But in doing so I have not given readers a documented exposition of Aristotle's *Ethics*, so that they can be-

come cognizant of how that book presents the truths I have borrowed from it, sometimes reformulating them in slightly different terms, sometimes embellishing them, and sometimes adding a point or a distinction that may be helpful to contemporary readers. 

*We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.*

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