

# The Language of Morals

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## PART I

### 1 PRESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE

1.1. If we were to ask of a person 'What are his moral principles?' the way in which we could be most sure of a true answer would be by studying what he did. He might, to be sure, profess in his conversation all sorts of principles, which in his actions he completely disregarded; but it would be when, knowing all the relevant facts of a situation, he was faced with choices or decisions between alternative courses of action, between alternative answers to the question 'What shall I do?', that he would reveal in what principles of conduct he really believed. The reason why actions are in a peculiar way revelatory of moral principles is that the function of moral principles is to guide conduct. The language of morals is one sort of prescriptive language. And this is what makes ethics worth studying: for the question 'What shall I do?' is one that we cannot for long evade; the problems of conduct, though sometimes less diverting than crossword puzzles, have to be solved in a way that crossword puzzles do not. We cannot wait to see the solution in the next issue, because on the solution of the problems depends what happens in the next issue. Thus, in a world in which the problems of conduct become every day more complex and tormenting, there is a great need for an understanding of the language in which these problems are posed and answered. For confusion about our moral language leads, not merely to theoretical muddles, but to needless practical perplexities.

An old-fashioned, but still useful, way of studying anything is per genus et differentiam; if moral language belongs to the genus 'prescriptive language', we shall most easily understand its nature if we compare and contrast first of all prescriptive language with other sorts of language, and then moral language with other sorts of prescriptive language. That, in brief, is the plan of this book. I shall proceed from the simple to the more complex. I shall deal first with the simplest form of prescriptive language, the ordinary imperative sentence. The logical behaviour of this type of sentence is of great interest to the student of moral language because, in spite of its comparative simplicity, it raises in an easily discernible form many of the problems which have beset ethical theory.

Therefore, although it is no part of my purpose to reduce moral language to imperatives, the study of imperatives is by far the best introduction to the study of ethics; and if the reader does not at once see the relevance to ethics of the earlier part of the discussion, I must ask him to be patient. Neglect of the principles enunciated in the first part of this book is the source of many of the most insidious confusions in ethics.

From singular imperatives I shall proceed to universal imperatives or principles. The discussion of these, and of how we come to adopt or reject them, will give me an opportunity of describing the processes of teaching and learning, and the logic of the language that we use for these purposes. Since one of the most important uses of moral language is in moral teaching, the relevance of this discussion to ethics will be obvious.

I shall then go on to discuss a kind of prescriptive language which is more nearly related to the language of morals than is the simple imperative. This is the language of non-moral value-judgements – all those sentences containing words like 'ought', 'right', and 'good' which are not moral judgements. I shall seek to establish that many of the features which have caused trouble to students of ethics are also displayed by these sorts of sentence – so much so that a proper understanding of them does much to elucidate the problems of ethics itself. I shall take the two most typical moral words 'good' and 'ought' in turn, and shall discuss first their non-moral uses, and then their moral ones; in each case I hope to show that these uses have many features in common. In conclusion I shall relate the logic of 'ought' and 'good', in both moral and non-moral contexts, to the logic of imperatives by constructing a logical model in which artificial concepts, which could to some extent do duty for the value-words of ordinary language, are defined in terms of a modified imperative mood. This model is not to be taken too seriously; it is intended only as a very rough schematization of the preceding discussion, which itself contains the substance of what I have to say.

Thus the classification of prescriptive language which I propose may be represented as follows:

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This classification is rough only; it will be made more precise in the course of the book; for example, it will be seen that the so-called 'universal imperatives' of ordinary language are not proper universals. Nor do I wish to suggest that the classification is exhaustive; there are, for example, many different kinds of singular imperatives, and of non-moral value-judgements; and there are other kinds of imperatives besides singular and universal. But the classification is good enough to begin with, and explains the plan of this book.

1.2. The writers of elementary grammar books sometimes classify sentences according as they express statements, commands, or questions. This classification is not exhaustive or rigorous enough for the logician. For example, logicians have devoted much labour to showing that sentences in the indicative mood may be of very various logical characters, and that the classification of them all under the one name 'statements' may lead to serious error if it makes us ignore the important differences between them. We shall in the later part of this book

see how one kind of indicative sentence, that which expresses value-judgements, behaves logically in a quite different way from the ordinary indicative sentence.

Imperatives, likewise, are a mixed bunch. Even if we exclude sentences like 'Would I were in Granchester!' which are dealt with by some grammarians in the same division of their books as imperatives, we still have, among sentences that are in the imperative mood proper, many different kinds of utterance. We have military orders (parade-ground and otherwise), architects' specifications, instructions for cooking omelets or operating vacuum cleaners, pieces of advice, requests, entreaties, and countless other sorts of sentence, many of whose functions shade into one another. The distinction between these various kinds of sentence would provide a nice logician with material for many articles in the philosophical periodicals; but in a work of this character it is necessary to be bold. I shall therefore follow the grammarians and use the single term 'command' to cover all these sorts of thing that sentences in the imperative mood express, and within the class of commands make only some very broad distinctions. The justification for this procedure is that I hope to interest the reader in features that are common to all, or nearly all, these types of sentence; with their differences he is no doubt familiar enough. For the same reason I shall use the word 'statement' to cover whatever is expressed by typical indicative sentences, if there be such. I shall be drawing a contrast, that is to say, between sentences like 'Shut the door' and sentences like 'You are going to shut the door'.

It is difficult to deny that there is a difference between statements and commands; but it is far harder to say just what the difference is. It is not merely one of grammatical form; for if we had to study a newly discovered language we should be able to identify those grammatical forms which were used for expressing statements and commands respectively, and should call these forms 'indicative' and 'imperative' (if the language were constructed in such a way as to make this distinction useful). The distinction lies between the meanings which the different grammatical forms convey. Both are used for talking about a subject-matter, but they are used for talking about it in different ways. The two sentences 'You are going to shut the door' and 'Shut the door' are both about your shutting the door in the immediate future; but what they say about it is quite different. An indicative sentence is used for telling someone that something is the case; an imperative is not – it is used for telling someone to make something the case.

1.3. It is well worth the moral philosopher's while examining some of the theories which have been, or which might be, held about the way in which imperatives have meaning. They offer a most arresting parallel to similar theories about moral judgements, and this parallel indicates that there may be some important logical similarity between the two. Let us first consider two theories, similar to the type of ethical theory to which I shall later give the name 'naturalist' (5.3). Both are attempts to 'reduce' imperatives to indicatives. The first does this by representing them as expressing statements about the mind of the speaker. Just as it has been held that 'A is right' means 'I approve of A', so it might be held that 'Shut the door' means 'I want you to shut the door'. There is on the colloquial plane no harm in saying this; but it may be very misleading

philosophically. It has the consequence that if I say 'Shut the door' and you say (to the same person) 'Do not shut the door', we are not contradicting one another; and this is odd. The upholder of the theory may reply that although there is no contradiction, there is a disagreement in wishes, and that this is sufficient to account for the feeling we have that the two sentences are somehow incompatible with one another (that 'not' has the same function as in the sentence 'You are not going to shut the door'). But there remains the difficulty that the sentence 'Shut the door' seems to be about shutting the door, and not about the speaker's frame of mind, just as instructions for cooking omelets ('Take four eggs, &c.') are instructions about eggs, not introspective analyses of the psyche of Mrs. Beeton. To say that 'Shut the door' means the same as 'I want you to shut the door' is like saying that 'You are going to shut the door' means the same as 'I believe that you are going to shut the door'. In both cases it seems strange to represent a remark about shutting the door as a remark about what is going on in my mind. But in fact neither the word 'believe' nor the word 'want' will bear this interpretation. 'I believe that you are going to shut the door' is not (except in a highly figurative way) a statement about my mind; it is a tentative statement about your shutting the door, a more hesitant version of 'You are going to shut the door'; and similarly, 'I want you to shut the door' is not a statement about my mind but a polite way of saying the imperative 'Shut the door'. Unless we understand the logic of 'You are going to shut the door', we cannot understand the logic of 'I believe that you are going to shut the door'; and similarly unless we understand 'Shut the door' we are unlikely to understand 'I want you to shut the door'. The theory, therefore, explains nothing; and the parallel ethical theory is in the same case; for 'I approve of A' is merely a more complicated and circumlocutory way of saying 'A is right'. It is not a statement, verifiable by observation, that I have a recognizable feeling or recurrent frame of mind; it is a value-judgement; if I ask 'Do I approve of A?' my answer is a moral decision, not an observation of introspectible fact. 'I approve of A' would be unintelligible to someone who did not understand 'A is right', and the explanation is a case of *obscurum per obscurius*.

1.4. The second attempt to reduce imperatives to indicatives which I wish to consider is that of Dr. H. G. Bohnert.<sup>1</sup> This interesting suggestion may be summarized (I hope without injustice) by the statement that 'Shut the door' means the same as 'Either you are going to shut the door, or X will happen', where X is understood to be something bad for the person addressed. A similar theory would be that it meant the same as 'If you do not shut the door, X will happen'. This theory is parallel to ethical theories of the sort which equate 'A is right' with 'A is conducive to Y' where Y is something regarded by the generality as good, for example pleasure or the avoidance of pain. We shall see later that value-expressions sometimes acquire – by reason of the constancy of the standards by which they are applied – a certain descriptive force; thus if, in a society whose standards are markedly utilitarian, we say 'The Health Service has done a lot of good', everyone knows that we are implying that the Health Service has averted a lot of pain, anxiety, etc. Similarly, in the case of imperatives which are to a high degree 'hypothetical' (3.2) because we quickly realize, to

the attainment of what end, or the prevention of what untoward result, they are directed, Bohnert's analysis is plausible. To take his own example, 'Run', said in a burning house, is somewhat similar in intention to 'Either you run or you burn'. But in cases where the end aimed at is not so easily recognized (the imperative being only to a small degree, or not at all, 'hypothetical') the hearer may be quite at a loss to understand, on this analysis, what he is to supply after the word 'or'. It is very difficult to see how a sentence like 'Please tell your father that I called' would be analysed on Bohnert's theory. It is, of course, always possible to terminate the analysis 'or something bad will happen'; but this expedient succeeds only by reintroducing into the analysis a prescriptive word; for 'bad' is a value-word, and therefore prescriptive. And similarly, teleological theories of ethics which interpret 'right' as 'conducive to Z', where 'Z' is a value-word such as 'satisfaction' or 'happiness' only store up for themselves the difficulty of analysing such words.

The temptation to reduce imperatives to indicatives is very strong, and has the same source as the temptation to analyse value-words in the way called 'naturalistic'. This is the feeling that the proper indicative sentence, of which there is thought to be only one kind, is somehow above suspicion in a way that other sorts of sentence are not; and that therefore, in order to put these other sorts of sentence above suspicion, it is necessary to show that they are really indicatives. This feeling was intensified when the so-called 'verificationist' theory of meaning became popular. This theory, which is in many ways a very fruitful one in its proper sphere, holds, to put it roughly, that a sentence does not have meaning unless there is something that would be the case if it were true. Now this is a very promising account of one of the ways in which a certain class of sentences (the typical indicatives) have meaning. Obviously, if a sentence is claimed to express a statement of fact, and yet we have no idea what would be the case if it were true, then that sentence is (to us) meaningless. But if this criterion of meaningfulness, which is useful in the case of statements of fact, is applied indiscriminately to types of utterance which are not intended to express statements of fact, trouble will result. Imperative sentences do not satisfy this criterion, and it may be that sentences expressing moral judgements do not either; but this only shows that they do not express statements in the sense defined by the criterion; and this sense may be a narrower one than that of normal usage. It does not mean that they are meaningless, or even that their meaning is of such a character that no logical rules can be given for their employment.<sup>2</sup>

1.5. The feeling, that only 'proper indicatives' are above suspicion, can survive (surprisingly) the discovery that there are perfectly good significant sentences of our ordinary speech which are not reducible to indicatives. It survives in the assumption that any meaning which is discovered for these sentences must necessarily be of some logically inferior status to that of indicatives. This assumption has led philosophers such as Professor A. J. Ayer, in the course of expounding their most valuable researches into the logical nature of moral judgements, to make incidental remarks which have raised needless storms of protest.<sup>3</sup> The substance of Ayer's theory is that moral judgements do not or-

dinarily function in the same way as the class of indicative sentences marked out by his verification-criterion. But by his way of stating his view, and his assimilation of moral judgements to other (quite distinct) types of sentence which are also marked off from typical indicatives by this criterion, he stirred up dust which has not yet subsided. All this might be closely paralleled by a similar treatment of imperatives – and it seems that writers of the same general line of thought as Ayer would have said the same sort of thing about imperatives as they did about moral judgements. Suppose we recognize the obvious fact that imperatives are not like typical indicatives. Suppose, further, that we regard only typical indicatives as above suspicion. It will be natural then to say 'Imperatives do not state anything, they only express wishes'. Now to say that imperatives express wishes is, like the first theory which we considered, unexceptionable on the colloquial plane; we would indeed say, if someone said 'Keep my name out of this', that he had expressed a wish to have his name kept out of it. But nevertheless the extreme ambiguity of the word 'express' may generate philosophical confusion. We speak of expressing statements, opinions, beliefs, mathematical relations, and so on; and if it is in one of these senses that the word is used, the theory though it tells us little, is harmless. But unfortunately it is also used in ways which are unlike these; and Ayer's use (in speaking of moral judgements) of the word 'evince' as its rough synonym was dangerous. Artists and composer and poets are said to express their own and our feelings; oaths are said to express anger; and dancing upon the table may express joy. Thus to say that imperatives express wishes may lead the unwary to suppose that what happens when we use one, is this: we have welling up inside us a kind of longing, to which, when the pressure gets too great for us to bear, we give vent by saying an imperative sentence. Such an interpretation, when applied to such sentences as 'Supply and fit to door mortise dead latch and plastic knob furniture', is implausible. And it would seem that value-judgements also may fail to satisfy the verification-criterion, and indeed be in some sense, like imperatives, prescriptive, without having this sort of thing said about them. It is perfectly unexceptionable, on the colloquial plane, to say that the sentence 'A is good' is used to express approval of A (The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary says: 'Approve: . . . to pronounce to be good') but it is philosophically misleading if we think that the approval which is expressed is a peculiar warm feeling inside us. If the Minister of Local Government expresses approval of my town plan by getting his underlings to write to me saying 'The Minister approves of your plan' or 'The Minister thinks your plan is the best one', I shall in no circumstances confirm the letter by getting a private detective to observe the Minister for signs of emotion. In this case, to have such a letter sent is to approve.

1.6. There could be no analogue, in the case of singular imperatives, of the 'attitude' variety of the approval theory of value-judgements;<sup>4</sup> but it is possible to construct such a theory about universal imperative sentences. If someone said 'Never hit a man when he is down', it would be natural to say that he had expressed a certain attitude towards such conduct. It is extremely hard to define exactly this attitude or give criteria for recognizing it, just as it is difficult to

say exactly what moral approval is as opposed to other sorts of approval. The only safe way of characterizing the attitude which is expressed by a universal imperative is to say 'The attitude that one should not (or should) do so and so'; and the only safe way of characterizing the attitude which is expressed by a moral judgement is to say 'The attitude that it is wrong (or right) to do so and so'. To maintain an attitude of 'moral approval' towards a certain practice is to have a disposition to think, on the appropriate occasions, that it is right; or, if 'think' itself is a dispositional word, it is simply to think that it is right; and our thinking that it is right may be betrayed or exhibited –behaviourists would say constituted – by our acting in certain ways (above all, doing acts of the sort in question when the occasion arises; next, saying that they are right; applauding them in other ways, and so on). But there is in all this nothing to explain just what one thinks when one thinks that a certain sort of act is right. And similarly, if we said that 'Never hit a man when he is down' expressed an attitude that one should not hit, &c. (or an attitude of aversion from hitting, or a 'contra-attitude' towards hitting), we should not have said anything that would be intelligible to someone who did not understand the sentence which we were trying to explain.

I wish to emphasize that I am not seeking to refute any of these theories. They have all of them the characteristic that, if put in everyday terms, they say nothing exceptionable so far as their main contentions go; but when we seek to understand how they explain the philosophical perplexities which generated them, we are either forced to interpret them in such a way as to render them unpalatable, or else find that they merely set the same problems in a more complicated way. Sentences containing the word 'approve' are so difficult of analysis that it seems perverse to use this notion to explain the meaning of moral judgements which we learn to make years before we learn the word 'approve'; and similarly, it would be perverse to explain the meaning of the imperative mood in terms of wishing or any other feeling or attitude; for we learn how to respond to and use commands long before we learn the comparatively complex notions of 'wish', 'desire', 'aversion', &c.

1.7. We must now consider another group of theories which have often been held concurrently with the group just considered. These hold that the function in language of either moral judgements or imperatives (which the theories often equate) is to affect causally the behaviour or emotions of the hearer. Professor R. Carnap writes:

But actually a value-statement is nothing else than a command in a misleading grammatical form. It may have effects upon the actions of men, and these effects may either be in accordance with our wishes or not; but it is neither true nor false.<sup>5</sup>

and Professor Ayer writes:

Ethical terms do not serve only to express feeling. They are calculated also to arouse feeling, and so to stimulate action. Indeed some of them are used in such a way as to give the sentences in which they occur the effect of commands.<sup>6</sup>

More recently this sort of view has been elaborated by Professor Stevenson.<sup>7</sup> Here again we have a type of theory which may be on the colloquial plane

harmless, but which suggests philosophical errors by seeming to assimilate the processes of using a command or a moral judgement to other processes which are in fact markedly dissimilar.

It is indeed true of imperative sentences that if anyone, in using them, is being sincere or honest, he intends that the person referred to should do something (namely, what is commanded). This is indeed a test of sincerity in the case of commands, just as a statement is held to be sincere only if the speaker believes it. And there are similar criteria, as we shall later see, for sincerely assenting to commands and statements that have been given or made by someone else. But this is not quite what the theories suggest. They suggest, rather, that the function of a command is to affect the hearer causally, or get him to do something; and to say this may be misleading. In ordinary parlance there is no harm in saying that in using a command our intention is to get someone to do something; but for philosophical purposes an important distinction has to be made. The processes of telling someone to do something, and getting him to do it, are quite distinct, logically from each other.<sup>8</sup> The distinction may be elucidated by considering a parallel one in the case of statements. To tell someone that something is the case is logically distinct from getting (or trying to get) him to believe it. Having told someone that something is the case we may, if he is not disposed to believe what we say, start on a quite different process of trying to get him to believe it (trying to persuade or convince him that what we have said is true). No one, in seeking to explain the function of indicative sentences, would say that they were attempts to persuade someone that something is the case. And there is no more reason for saying that commands are attempts to persuade or get someone to do something; here, too, we first tell someone what he is to do, and then, if he is not disposed to do what we say, we may start on the wholly different process of trying to get him to do it. Thus the instruction already quoted 'Supply and fit to door mortise dead latch and plastic knob furniture' is not intended to galvanize joiners into activity; for such a purpose other means are employed.

This distinction is important for moral philosophy; for in fact the suggestion, that the function of moral judgements was to persuade, led to a difficulty in distinguishing their function from that of propaganda.<sup>9</sup> Since I am going to draw attention to some similarities between commands and moral judgements, and to classify them both as prescriptions, I require most emphatically to dissociate myself from the confusion of either of these things with propaganda. We have here, as often in philosophy, a mixture of two distinctions. The first is that between the language of statements and prescriptive language. The second is that between telling someone something and getting him to believe or do what one has told him. That these two distinctions are quite different, and overlap each other, should be clear after a moment's consideration. For we may tell someone, either that something is the case, or to do something; here there is no attempt at persuasion (or influencing or inducing or getting to). If the person is not disposed to assent to what we tell him, we may then resort to rhetoric, propaganda, marshalling of additional facts, psychological tricks, threats, bribes, torture, mockery, promises of protection, and a variety of other



expedients. All of these are ways of inducing him or getting him to do something; the first four are also ways of getting him to believe something; none of them are ways of telling him something, though those of them which involve the employment of language may include telling him all sorts of things. Regarded as inducements or expedients for persuasion, their success is judged solely by their effects – by whether the person believes or does what we are trying to get him to believe or do. It does not matter whether the means used to persuade him are fair or foul, so long as they do persuade him. And therefore the natural reaction to the realization that someone is trying to persuade us is 'He's trying to get at me; I must be on my guard; I mustn't let him bias my decision unfairly; I must be careful to make up my own mind in the matter and remain a free responsible agent'. Such a reaction to moral judgements should not be encouraged by philosophers. On the other hand, these are not natural reactions either to someone's telling us that something is the case, or to his telling us to do something (for example, to fit a latch to the door). Telling someone to do something, or that something is the case, is answering the question 'What shall I do?' or 'What are the facts?' When we have answered these questions the hearer knows what to do or what the facts are – if what we have told him is right. He is not necessarily thereby influenced one way or the other, nor have we failed if he is not; for he may decide to disbelieve or disobey us, and the mere telling him does nothing – and seeks to do nothing – to prevent him doing this. But persuasion is not directed to a person as a rational agent, who is asking himself (or us) 'What shall I do?'; it is not an answer to this or to any other question; it is an attempt to make him answer it in a particular way.

It is easy to see, therefore, why the so-called 'imperative theory' of moral judgements raised the protests that it did. Because based on a misconception of the function, not only of moral judgements but also of the commands to which they were being assimilated, it seemed to impugn the rationality of moral discourse. But if we realize that commands, however much they may differ from statements, are like them in this, that they consist in telling someone something, not in seeking to influence him, it does no harm to draw attention to the similarities between commands and moral judgements. For, as I shall show, commands, because they, like statements, are essentially intended for answering questions asked by rational agents, are governed by logical rules just as statements are. And this means that moral judgements may also be so governed. We remember that the greatest of all rationalists, Kant, referred to moral judgements as imperatives; though we must remember also that he was using the latter term in an extended sense, and that moral judgements, though they are like imperatives in some respects, are unlike them in others (11.5).

## 9 'Good' in Moral Contexts

It is time now to ask whether 'good', as used in moral contexts, has any of the features to which I have drawn attention in non-moral ones. It will no doubt be thought by some readers that all that I have said hitherto is entirely irrelevant

to ethics. To think this is to miss the enlightenment of some very interesting parallels; but I have no right on my part to assume that ‘good’ behaves in at all the fashion that I have described when it is used in morals. To this problem we must now address ourselves; but first something more must be said about another distinction of which I may seem to have made light, that between the so-called ‘intrinsic’ and ‘instrumental’ uses of ‘good’.

There has been a disposition among philosophers to do one of two opposite things. The first is to suppose that all value-judgements whatever relate to the performance by an object of a function distinct from the object itself. The second is to suppose that, because there are some objects which are commended for their own sakes, and do not have an obvious function beyond their mere existence, to commend such an object is to do something quite different from commending an object which does have a function. It will help us to avoid doing either of these things if we avail ourselves of the general notions of ‘virtue’ and ‘standard’ which I have been using in the preceding chapters.

When we are dealing with objects which are evaluated solely in virtue of their performance of a function, the virtues of such objects will consist in those characteristics which either promote, or themselves constitute, the good performance of the function. The matter can be made clear by supposing that what we are judging is the performance of the object, not the object itself. Imagine that we are judging a fire-extinguisher. To do so we watch it being used to put out a fire, and then judge its performance. Certain characteristics of the performance count as virtues (e.g. putting out the fire quickly, causing little damage to property, emitting no dangerous fumes, small consumption of expensive chemicals, &c.). Note that certain of the expressions used in specifying the standard (e.g. ‘damage’ and ‘dangerous’) are themselves value-expressions; these indicate that the specification of the standard is not in itself complete, but includes ‘cross-references’ to standards for evaluating, respectively, the state of repair of property, and the effect of gases on the human body. It would be impossible to specify the standard completely without having for purposes of reference a specification of all the other standards to which it is necessary to refer. Aristotle<sup>57</sup> gives examples of such crossreferences in which the standards are arranged hierarchically, the cross-references being all in the same direction. It does not seem obvious that they need be so arranged, though it would be tidy if they were.

Now what we must notice, for our present purposes, about the above list of virtues of the fire-extinguisher’s performance, is that it is just a list of virtues, not differing logically from the list of virtues of a class of objects not having a function. Compare it, for example, with the list of virtues of a good bath. A good bath is good both instrumentally (in that it is conducive to cleanliness) and intrinsically (for we should not have nearly so many baths if our only purpose in having them were to become clean). Let us for the moment ignore the instrumental goodness of the bath, and concentrate on its intrinsic goodness. To be good intrinsically, a bath must be within a certain range of temperature, which must be maintained throughout its duration; the vessel must be above a certain minimum size, which varies with that of the bather; it must be of a

certain shape; and it must be full of soft clean water; there must be soap above a certain degree of fineness (e.g. not containing abrasives or free caustics)—and the reader may add to the list according to his taste. In this specification I have tried to avoid cross-references to other standards, but I have not been entirely successful; e.g., ‘clean water’ means ‘water in which there is no dirt’, and what is to count as dirt is a matter for evaluation. Thus even where we are dealing with intrinsic goodness we cannot avoid cross-references, and therefore it is not the necessity for cross-references which makes goodness instrumental.

We notice that in both cases—the fire-extinguisher and the bath—we have a standard or list of virtues, and commend objects which possess these virtues. In the case of the fire-extinguisher we commend directly its performance, and the object only indirectly; in the case of the bath we might be said to commend the object directly. But this is really a distinction without a difference; are we to say that ‘inducing heat in my skin’ is a performance of the bath, or are we to say that ‘being hot’ is a quality of the bath? Similarly, one of the virtues required in a good pineapple is that it should be sweet; is its sweetness an intrinsic quality of the pineapple, or is it the disposition to produce certain desirable sensations in me? When we can answer such questions, we shall be able to draw a precise distinction between intrinsic and instrumental goodness.

It would, however, be a mistake to say that there is no difference between what we do when we commend a fireextinguisher and what we do when we commend a sunset. We commend them for entirely different reasons, and in the case of the fire-extinguisher these reasons all refer to what it is intended to do. We saw above that if ‘good’ is followed by a functional word (e.g. the name of an instrument), this word itself gives us a partial specification of the virtues required; whereas in other cases this specification is absent. All that I am maintaining is that the logical apparatus of virtues and standards which I have been elaborating is sufficiently general to cover both instrumental and intrinsic goodness. And to see this is to make the first step towards seeing that it may be general enough to cover moral goodness too. To this question we must now turn.

Let us review some of the reasons that have led people to hold that the use of the word ‘good’ in moral contexts is totally different from its use in non-moral ones. The first reason is connected with the difference between intrinsic and instrumental good, and we have already dealt with it. The second reason is that the properties which make a man morally good are obviously different from those which make a chronometer good. It is therefore easy to think that the meaning of the word ‘good’ is different in the two cases. But this can now be seen to be a mistaken conclusion. The descriptive meaning is certainly different, as the descriptive meaning of ‘good’ in ‘good apple’ is different from its meaning in ‘good cactus’; but the evaluative meaning is the same—in both cases we are commending. We are commending as a man, not as a chronometer. If we insisted on calling the meaning of ‘good’ different, because the virtues required in objects of different classes are different, we should end up with what Mr. Urmson calls ‘a homonym with as many punning meanings as the situations it applied to’.

The third reason is this: it is felt that somehow ‘moral goodness’ is more august, more important, and therefore deserves to have a logic all its own. This plea seldom comes out into the open; but it lies behind much of the argument, and in itself has something to recommend it. We do attach more importance to a man’s being a good man than to a chronometer’s being a good chronometer. We do not blame chronometers for being bad (though we do blame their makers). We get stirred up about moral goodness in a way that few people get stirred up about technical or other sorts of goodness. This is why many readers will have been irritated by my supposing that the behaviour of ‘good’ in ‘good sewage effluent’ can have any interest for the moral philosopher. We have to ask, therefore, why it is that we feel this way, and whether the fact that we do makes it necessary for us to give an entirely different account of the logic of ‘good’ in the two cases.

We get stirred up about the goodness of men because we are men. This means that the acceptance of a judgement, that such and such a man’s act is good in circumstances of a certain sort, involves the acceptance of the judgement that it would be good, were we ourselves placed in similar circumstances, to do likewise. And since we might be placed in similar circumstances, we feel deeply about the question. We feel less deeply, it must be admitted, about the question, whether it was a bad act of Agamemnon to sacrifice Iphigenia, than about the question, whether it was a bad act of Mrs. Smith to travel on the railway without paying her fare; for we are not likely to be in Agamemnon’s position, but most of us travel on railways. Acceptance of a moral judgement about Mrs. Smith’s act is likely to have a closer bearing upon our future conduct than acceptance of one about Agamemnon’s. But we never envisage ourselves turning into chronometers.

These observations are to a certain extent confirmed by the behaviour of technicians and artists. As Hesiod pointed out, these people do get stirred up about their respective non-moral goodnesses, in the way that ordinary people get stirred up about moral questions: ‘Potters get angry with potters, and carpenters with carpenters, and beggars with beggars, and poets with poets’.<sup>59</sup> Commercial competition is not the only reason—for it is possible to compete without malice. When an architect, for example, says of another architect’s house, with feeling, ‘That is a thoroughly badly designed house’, the reason for the feeling is that if he were to admit that the house was well designed, he would be admitting that in avoiding in his own work features like those of the design in question, he had been wrong; and this might mean altering his whole way of designing houses, which would be painful.

Further, we cannot get out of being men, as we can get out of being architects or out of making or using chronometers. Since this is so, there is no avoiding the (often painful) consequences of abiding by the moral judgements that we make. The architect who was forced to admit that a rival’s house was better than anything he had ever produced or could produce, might be upset; but in the last resort he could become a barman instead. But if I admit that the life of St. Francis was morally better than mine, and really mean this as an evaluation, there is nothing for it but to try to be more like St. Francis, which

is arduous. That is why most of our ‘moral judgements about the saints are merely conventional—we never intend them to be a guide in determining our own conduct.

Moreover, in the case of differences about morals it is very difficult, and, in cases where the effect on our own life is profound, impossible, to say ‘It’s all a matter of taste; let’s agree to differ’; for to agree to differ is only possible when we can be sure that we shall not be forced to make choices which will radically affect the choices of other people. This is especially true where choices have to be made co-operatively; it must be pointed out, however, that though most moral choices are of this kind, this sort of situation is not peculiar to morals. The members of the Kon-tiki expedition could not have agreed to differ about how to build their raft, and families sharing a kitchen cannot agree to differ about its organization. But although we can usually get out of building rafts or sharing kitchens, we cannot easily get out of living in societies with other people. Perhaps men living in complete isolation could agree to differ about morals.

It would at any rate seem that communities not in close contact with one another could agree to differ about some moral questions without actual inconvenience. To say this, of course, is not necessarily to maintain any kind of moral relativism, for communities could agree to differ about whether the earth was round. To agree to differ is to say, in effect, ‘We will differ about this question, but let us not be angry or fight about it’; it is not to say ‘we will differ, but let us not differ’; for the latter would be a logical impossibility. And so if two communities agreed to differ about, say, the moral desirability of legalized gambling in their respective territories, what would happen would be this; they would say ‘We will continue to hold, one of us that it is wrong to legalize gambling, and the other that it is not wrong; but we will not get angry about each other’s laws, or seek to interfere in each other’s administration of them’. And the same thing might be done about other matters than gambling, provided that what each community did had slight effect outside its own borders. Such agreements will not work, however, if one community holds it to be a moral duty to prevent certain practices taking place wherever they occur.

Such a case is worth considering in order to contrast with it the more usual state of affairs; normally the moral judgements that we make, and hold to, deeply affect the lives of our neighbours; and this in itself is enough to explain the peculiar place that we assign to them. If we add to this the logical point, already mentioned, that moral judgements always have a possible bearing on our own conduct, in that we cannot in the fullest sense accept them without conforming to them (that this is a tautology will appear in 11. 2), then no further explanation is needed of the special status of morals. This special status does not require a special logic to back it up; it results from the fact that we are using the ordinary apparatus of value-language in order to commend or condemn the most intimate actions of ourselves and those like us. We may add that the ‘emotivity’ of much moral utterance, which some have thought to be of the essence of evaluative language, is only a symptom—and a most unreliable one—of an evaluative use of words. Moral language is frequently emotive, simply

because the situations in which it is typically used are situations about which we often feel deeply. One of the chief uses of the comparison which I have been drawing between moral and non-moral value-language is to make it clear that the essential logical features of value-words can be present where the emotions are not markedly involved.

It might be objected that my account of the matter gives no means of distinguishing prudential judgements like ‘It is never a good thing to volunteer for anything in the Army’ from properly moral judgements like ‘It is not good to break one’s promises’. But the considerations given earlier (8. 2) enable us to distinguish satisfactorily between these two classes of judgement. It is clear from the context that in the second case we are commending within a different class of comparison, and requiring a different set of virtues. Sometimes we commend an act within the class of acts having an effect upon the agent’s future happiness; sometimes we commend an act within the class of acts indicative of his moral character, that is to say, those acts which show whether or not he is a good man—and the class of comparison ‘man’ in this context is the class ‘man to try to become like’ (12. 3). Which of these we are doing is always clear from the context, and there is nearly always a further verbal difference too, as in the example quoted. It must be admitted, however, that a great deal of research has still to be done on the different classes of comparison within which we commend people and acts.

When we use the word ‘good’ in order to commend morally, we are always directly or indirectly commending people. Even when we use the expression ‘good act’ or others like it, the reference is indirectly to human characters. This, as has often been pointed out, constitutes a difference between the words ‘good’ and ‘right’. In speaking, therefore, of moral goodness, I shall speak only of the expression ‘good man’ and similar expressions. We have to consider whether in fact this expression has the same logical features as the non-moral uses of ‘good’ which we have been discussing, remembering that clearly ‘man’ in ‘good man’ is not normally a functional word, and never so when moral commendation is being given.

First, let us take that characteristic of ‘good’ which has been called its supervenience. Suppose that we say ‘St. Francis was a good man’. It is logically impossible to say this and to maintain at the same time that there might have been another man placed in precisely the same circumstances as St. Francis, and who behaved in them in exactly the same way, but who differed from St. Francis in this respect only, that he was not a good man. I am supposing, of course, that the judgement is made in both cases upon the whole life of the subject, ‘inner’ and overt. This example is similar in the relevant particulars to that in 5.2.

Next, the explanation of this logical impossibility does not lie in any form of naturalism; it is not the case that there is any conjunction C of descriptive characteristics such that to say that a man has C entails that he is morally good. For, if this were the case, we should be unable to commend any man for having those characteristics; we should only be able to say that he had them. Nevertheless, the judgement that a man is morally good is not logically

independent of the judgement that he has certain other characteristics which we may call virtues or good-making characteristics; there is a relation between them, although it is not one of entailment or of identity of meaning.

Our previous discussion of non-moral goodness helps us to understand what the relation is. It is that a statement of the characteristics of the man (the minor or factual premiss) together with a specification of a standard for judging men morally (the major premiss), entails a moral judgement upon him. And moral standards have many of the features that we have found in other value-standards. 'Good', as used in morals, has a descriptive and an evaluative meaning, and the latter is primary. To know the descriptive meaning is to know by what standards the speaker is judging. Let us take a case where the standard is well known. If a parson says of a girl that she is a good girl, we can form a shrewd idea, of what description she is; we may expect her to go to church, for example. It is therefore easy to fall into the error of supposing that by calling her a good girl the parson means simply that she has these descriptive characteristics.

It is quite true that part of what the parson means is that the girl has these characteristics; but it is to be hoped that this is not all he means. He also means to commend her for having them; and this part of his meaning is primary. The reason why we know, when a parson says a girl is good, what sort of girl she is, how she normally behaves, &c., is that parsons are usually consistent in the way they award commendation. It is through being used consistently by parsons for commending certain sorts of behaviour in girls that the word comes to have a descriptive force.

To this unkind parody may be added another. If two Indian Army majors of the old school had been talking about a new arrival in the Mess, and one of them had said 'He's an awfully good man', we could have guessed that the subaltern referred to played polo, stuck pigs with élan, and was not on familiar terms with educated Indians. The remark, therefore, would have conveyed information to one versed in the culture of British India. It would have been informative, because officers of the Indian Army were accustomed to award commendation or the reverse according to consistent standards. But it cannot have been informative in the beginning. The standard must have got established by some pioneer evaluators; when the Indian Army was young there was no established standard for the behaviour of subalterns. The standard became established by officers making commendatory judgements which were not statements of fact or informative in the least, to the effect that it was the mark of a good man, for example, to play polo. For these pioneers, the sentence 'Plunkett is a good man' did not in any way entail the sentence 'Plunkett plays polo' or vice versa. The former was an expression of commendation, the latter a statement of fact. But we may suppose that, after generations of officers had always commended people who played polo, it came to be assumed that, if an officer said that another officer was a good man, he must mean that, among other things, he played polo; and so the word 'good', as used by Indian Army officers, came to be, to this extent, descriptive, without in the least losing its primary evaluative meaning.

Of course, the evaluative meaning might get lost, or at least wear thin. It

is of the essence of a standard to be stable; but the perpetual danger is that stability may harden to over-rigidity and ossification. It is possible to lay too much stress on the descriptive force and too little on the evaluative; standards only remain current when those who make judgements in accordance with them are quite sure that, whatever else they may be doing, they are evaluating (i.e. really seeking to guide conduct). Suppose that the Indian Army comes to be unable to use the words ‘good man’ in any other way than descriptively, to mean ‘man who plays polo, etc.’; they will then have fallen into a kind of naive naturalism, and will be unable to commend subalterns for playing polo; and this means that they will not be able to hand on to new generations of officers their established standards. If a new subaltern has had, before his posting, the standards of a bank clerk with a timid interest in pink politics, those are the standards which he will continue to have; for his superior officers will have lost the linguistic means of teaching him any others. And even if the older officers are themselves using the word ‘good’ evaluatively, the extreme descriptive rigidity of their standards may lead the new subaltern to understand the word, as they use it, descriptively. This is how value-words get into inverted commas.

That the descriptive meaning of the word ‘good’ is in morals, as elsewhere, secondary to the evaluative, may be seen in the following example. Let us suppose that a missionary, armed with a grammar book, lands on a cannibal island. The vocabulary of his grammar book gives him the equivalent, in the cannibals’ language, of the English word ‘good’. Let us suppose that, by a queer coincidence, the word is ‘good’. And let us suppose, also, that it really is the equivalent—that it is, as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it, ‘the most general adjective of commendation’ in their language. If the missionary has mastered his vocabulary, he can, so long as he uses the word evaluatively and not descriptively, communicate with them about morals quite happily. They know that when he uses the word he is commending the person or object that he applies it to. The only thing they will find odd is that he applies it to such unexpected people, people who are meek and gentle and do not collect large quantities of scalps; whereas they themselves are accustomed to commend people who are bold and burly and collect more scalps than the average. But they and the missionary are under no misapprehension about the meaning, in the evaluative sense, of the word ‘good’; it is the word one uses for commending. If they were under such a misapprehension, moral communication between them would be impossible.

We thus have a situation which would appear paradoxical to someone who thought that ‘good’ (either in English or in the cannibals’ language) was a quality-word like ‘red’. Even if the qualities in people which the missionary commended had nothing in common with the qualities which the cannibals commended, yet they would both know what the word ‘good’ meant. If ‘good’ were like ‘red’, this would be impossible; for then the cannibals’ word and the English word would not be synonymous. If this were so, then when the missionary said that people who collected no scalps were good (English), and the cannibals said that people who collected a lot of scalps were good (cannibal), they would not be disagreeing, because in English (at any rate missionary En-



glish), ‘good’ would mean among other things ‘doing no murder’, whereas in the cannibals’ language ‘good’ would mean something quite different, among other things ‘productive of maximum scalps’. It is because in its primary evaluative meaning ‘good’ means neither of these things, but is in both languages the most general adjective of commendation, that the missionary can use it to teach the cannibals Christian morals.

Suppose, however, that the missionary’s mission is successful. Then, the former cannibals will come to commend the same qualities in people as the missionary, and the words ‘good man’ will come to have a more or less common descriptive meaning. The danger will then be that the cannibals may, after a generation or two, think that that is the only sort of meaning they have. ‘Good’ will in that case mean for them simply ‘doing what it says in the Sermon on the Mount’; and they may come to forget that it is a word of commendation; they will not realize that opinions about moral goodness have a bearing on what they themselves are to do. Their standards will then be in mortal danger. A Communist, landing on the island to convert the people to his way of life, may even take advantage of the ossification of their standards. He may say ‘All these “good” Christians—missionaries and colonial servants and the rest—are just deceiving you to their own profit’. This would be to use the word descriptively with a dash of irony; and he could not do this plausibly unless the standards of the Christians had become considerably ossified. Some of the ploys of Thrasymachus in the first book of Plato’s *Republic* are very similar to this.

If the reader will turn back to 4. 6he will see that such vicissitudes of the word ‘good’ reflect accurately the sort of moral development there described. Moral principles or standards are first established; then they get too rigid, and the words used in referring to them become too dominantly descriptive; their evaluative force has to be painfully revived before the standards are out of danger. In the course of revival, the standards get adapted to changed circumstances; moral reform takes place, and its instrument is the evaluative use of value-language. The remedy, in fact, for moral stagnation and decay is to learn to use our value-language for the purpose for which it is designed; and this involves not merely a lesson in talking, but a lesson in doing that which we commend; for unless we are prepared to do this we are doing no more than pay lip-service to a conventional standard.