FOUR TYPES OF ETHICAL RELATIVISM

I

A NUMBER of recent studies in ethics have investigated the possibility of giving *good reasons* for or against moral statements. These studies have thrown new light on the argument between ethical relativism and ethical absolutism. A reconstruction of that argument is in order, and this paper is an attempt to carry out such a reconstruction. The argument will be presented in four stages. The first stage deals with ethical relativism in its usual sense; each subsequent stage, involving the problem of giving good reasons in matters of ethics, presents a new type of ethical relativism for consideration.

Are moral values relative to a given society or historical period, or are they validly applicable to all men everywhere at all times? This is the central issue of the first stage of the argument. The ethical relativist maintains that nothing is "really" or "simply" good or bad but is only good or bad in relation to the moral code of a given culture or historical era. The widespread acceptance of this view among educated people in our century has perhaps been primarily the result of their increasing awareness of certain findings in sociology, anthropology, and psychology. These findings may be summed up in three broad statements of fact:

(1) The moral consciousness of man is environmentally conditioned. Each individual learns from his social environment to feel guilty about certain things, to approve of this way of acting and to disapprove of that, to hold himself and others responsible in certain circumstances and not in others, to judge that these aims are right and those are wrong, etc.

(2) The moral feelings and beliefs of individuals from different cultures, different eras in the history of a culture, and different groups within a culture may be extremely diverse and even contradictory.

(3) Most human beings have claimed that the moral beliefs

of their own culture, era, or group are the only true ones. That is, most human beings are ethnocentric.[1]

From these factual statements the ethical relativist draws the following conclusions: (a) It is narrow-minded dogmatism on the part of any individual to presume that the moral beliefs of his society are more "advanced," "enlightened," or "true" than those of another society. (b) There *is* no set of moral values which is more "advanced," "enlightened," or "true" than another set. (c) Therefore it is unjustifiable to apply one set of moral values to all men everywhere at all times. Ethical relativism thus appears to be "proved by science."

It should be noted that this type of relativism does not imply that value statements cannot in *any* sense be called true or false, nor does it imply that they are unverifiable, that there is no way of finding out whether they are (in *some* sense) true or false. The truth or falsity of a value statement is, from this point of view, relative to the value beliefs of a given society. If all the members of a society believe that slavery is right then the statement "Slavery is right" is valid or correct for that society. Slavery "really is" right *relatively to the society*. But the assertion that slavery is right makes no claim upon the assent of anyone outside the society. In this respect the terms "true" and "false" as applied to moral statements do not have the same meaning as applied to factual or mathematical statements. (One may, if one wishes, conclude that therefore moral statements for the relativist are neither true nor false, but it is disputable whether having a claim upon universal assent is a defining characteristic of truth. At least at this point no further theoretical difficulty is present, and the issue becomes verbal.)

In order to refute ethical relativism in this first sense it is sufficient to discover some acceptable procedure for rationally justifying moral statements, that is, a method whereby such statements will be found to be true or false independently of the moral beliefs of those who utter the statements. It must be a method which makes no appeal to what as a matter of fact

---

[1] Ethnocentrism has been defined as "the point of view that one's own way of life is to be preferred to all others" (Melville J. Herskovits, *Man and His Works* [New York, 1948], p. 68).

people do judge to be right or wrong, good or bad. (It need not, however, be a method which appeals to some kind of "objective" realm of values or to some kind of "nonnatural" properties of things.) As an example of such a procedure we need only cite that of the hedonistic utilitarian. An act is right, according to this view, if it is instrumental in bringing about a greater amount of pleasure in human life than could have been brought about by any alternative act in the situation. Suppose x is such a maximally pleasure-yielding act. Then the statement "x is right" is true. The assertion that "x is right" is true is not contradicted by any discovery to the effect that people in a certain society believe x to be wrong. When the utilitarian says that the statement "x is right" is true he does not imply that everyone believes it or even that anyone (except perhaps himself) believes it. But he does intend to claim that the person who does not believe it, whatever might be the social and historical sources of his disbelief, is making a mistake.

It may be the case, of course, that the ethical relativist will not accept the utilitarian's or anyone else's procedure for justifying moral statements. But as soon as the argument centers upon whether there is such a procedure, and if there is one, whether it is acceptable or valid, the dispute has entered a new phase. It has been placed on a new level of discourse, the metalanguage of the first-order language of morals. Instead of the question, Is slavery wrong only for us or is it wrong absolutely? we have the question, Is "Slavery is wrong" verifiable, and if so, how? The general problem of ethical relativism *vs.* ethical absolutism then becomes: Are moral statements verifiable,[2] and if they are, what method of verification is to be used and on what grounds is this method to be chosen? It is in terms of this problem that the three remaining types of relativism are formulated.

II

The second type of relativism is a corollary of what has come to be known as the "emotive" or "imperative" theory of ethics.[3]

---

[2] "Verifiable," of course, in a sense other than that which the relativist himself grants.

[3] See C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, 1944), *passim*;

According to this theory moral statements are not really state-
ments at all. They do not express propositions which are true
or false; they express emotions or commands which are neither
true nor false. Consequently they are unverifiable in the sense
that good reasons cannot be given for or against them. Many
sentences *appear* to express moral propositions which actually
express factual propositions. The sentence "Stealing is wrong"
might be used in certain common circumstances to mean that
stealing is one of the things forbidden by the Bible or by the
authorities of a specified religion, and this is a factual matter.
The sentence is verifiable, and the way to verify it is to consult
the Bible or the proper religious authorities. Or when the
utilitarian says, "Stealing is wrong," he might mean that
stealing is not the best means to personal happiness, and this
also is a question of fact, not of value. Genuine questions of value
are not matters of fact but matters of attitude and emotion.
When a person utters the sentence "Stealing is wrong" and he
does not mean (implicitly or explicitly) to describe anything by
it, he is then merely evincing his disapproval of stealing or is
commanding his hearers not to steal or is trying by persuasion
to make their attitudes about stealing agree with his. He is
making a genuine moral utterance, and it is in the nature of
such an utterance that good reasons cannot be given for or
against it. As soon as the utilitarian, for example, offers as a
good reason for the wrongness of stealing that stealing is not
the best means to personal happiness, the emotivist would reply
that the sentence "Stealing is wrong" is being used descriptively,
not normatively, or else that it is being used only normatively
in part, namely, in that part which involves the "emotive" or
"quasi-imperative" meaning of the term "wrong." It is per-
fectly possible for a sentence to have both a normative and a
descriptive function at the same time. But the normative function
is an emotive or imperative one, and purely normative utter-
ances cannot be deduced from factual statements and cannot

A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2d ed. (London, 1946), pp. 20-22,
102-114; S. Toulmin, *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics* (Cambridge,
1950), pp. 46-60; W. Sellars and J. Hospers, *Readings in Ethical Theory* (New
York, 1952), pp. 391-440.

be confirmed by inductive procedures. They can be *caused* (aroused, stimulated) by the reading or hearing of factual sentences, but they cannot be *justified* by them.

A normative sentence, then, is relative to the emotive situation from which it arises and in reference to which it is uttered. It may be uttered to give expression to inner feelings or it may be uttered to bring about changes in the feelings of others. As such it can be critically examined as to its appropriateness or its usefulness but it cannot be rationally justified. No *valid* argument can be formulated which would obligate a reasonable person to give intellectual assent to the utterance.

The relativistic aspect of the emotive theory becomes even clearer if we consider how moral conflicts are analyzed by those who hold it. Moral conflicts are conceived as essentially "disagreements in attitude," although "disagreements in belief" may comprise part of the total conflict situation.[4] Disagreement in belief can be settled in a rational manner, that is to say, by appeal to empirical knowledge and by use of the rules of logic. Disagreement in attitude, on the other hand, can only be settled by those means which are as a matter of fact instrumental in so altering attitudes that the conflict is brought to an end. The latter process, however, cannot be said to provide a rational justification of one moral position or a rational refutation of another.[5] Validity is not properly attributable to it, even when such procedures as the following are used in settling the conflict: citing facts, clarifying the meanings of the statements uttered in the dispute, setting up a competent judge to decide the issue or to decide relevant subordinate issues, appealing to the imagination of each party in the dispute to think how it would feel to be in the position of the opposite party or in the position of a third party affected by the situation in question, referring to principles or norms acceptable to both disputants, etc. These procedures have the same function in moral conflicts as the following: use of force, emotive use of language in propaganda, advertizing and exhortation, intimidation and threats, application of legal sanctions and prohibitions, etc. Both kinds of

---

[4] Stevenson, *op. cit.*, ch. i.   [5] *Ibid.*, chs. v, vii.

procedure are merely more or less effective instruments in terminating the conflict. Even if procedures of the first kind alone are used in the process, nothing in the process constitutes *good reasons* for one side or against the other. Such procedures are merely one sort of causal determinant tending to settle the dispute; they do not provide a rational ground for claiming that the moral values finally agreed upon are "true," "valid," or "justified." Moral values, then, are *relative to the causal determinants which produce them* (including the procedures used in arriving at them). If one set of procedures causally determines the disputants to agree that slavery is wrong, for example, all we can conclude is that the wrongness of slavery has been established by means of these procedures; we cannot conclude that therefore slavery is "really" wrong or even that it is "probably" wrong. If another set of procedures causally determine the disputants to agree that slavery is right, the same results apply to the rightness of slavery.

The difficulty with this kind of ethical relativism can now be stated: Are we willing to grant that this is all there is to be said about such an issue as whether slavery is right or wrong? Let us consider the matter in this way. Suppose a group of men were able to gain enough power to conquer the world and were able, by means of thought control, intimidation, torture, etc., to convert the entire population of the world to a way of life based on cruelty, suspicion, and cowardice. Certain means of settling moral conflicts having been used to maximum efficiency, a universal set of values has now been established. Wouldn't we say that, nevertheless, the values so established are in some very real sense *unjustifiable* or *mistaken*? Wouldn't we wish to assert that good reasons can be given for repudiating such values and that good reasons can be given to justify a different set of values, meaning by this not merely that a different procedure (giving good reasons) would psychologically yield a different set of value utterances, but that this procedure would provide a rational *argument* against the given values and a rational *argument* for other values?

The believer in the emotive theory might reply that perhaps *we* would wish to assert this, but "we" are presumably reasonable

505

people, people who want to have *enlightened* moral values. That is, we want to approve or disapprove of an object only after we know something about it, about the probable consequences of realizing it, about the means necessary to realize it, about a "wise" person's judgment of it, etc. And this simply means that we are people who will accept a moral utterance only as a result of rational procedures. A person who did not want to be reasonable, who did not want to use such procedures, would not feel this "difficulty."

Can any argument be given in answer to this? We could say that even if no one felt the difficulty, the difficulty would still be there. But it must be admitted that the difficulty itself (rather than the feeling of it) is a real difficulty only if one assumes that it is *justifiable* to attempt to find good reasons for or against moral statements. On what grounds can this assumption be made? Can one give good reasons for being reasonable, that is, is the attempt to justify rationally a set of moral values itself rationally justifiable? This question may be taken to signify the emergence of a new type of relativism.

III

The third type of ethical relativist asserts that a person who attempts to justify his moral statements by giving reasons for them can claim them to be true only by presupposing the value of reasonableness. But *this* value cannot be justified, since to try to justify it is to be reasonable and thus to assume the thing you are trying to prove. It would not be incumbent upon anyone who did not want to be reasonable to accept moral statements which, to a reasonable person, were rationally justified, for he could say: "You have shown your beliefs to be true only by using rational methods. Since I do not wish to use such methods but rather to impose my moral beliefs upon you by force, you can make no claim that your beliefs are superior to mine. You may claim reasonableness, but this is not to make a legitimate claim upon me. By forcing you to agree with me I can change your beliefs and still maintain my own. You cannot say I am 'really' wrong unless you use your reason, and since I do not respect reason I am not obligated to give assent to your

appeal to reason. An *argument* for a moral belief has a claim only upon those who want to be reasonable, it has no claim upon those who deny the value of reasonableness."

Is there any rational objection to this argument? Can the question, Why be reasonable? be answered without assuming the value of being reasonable and thereby begging the question? The issue is of great importance because it goes to the very heart of the attacks now so violently set in motion throughout the world upon the attempt to lead a rational life.

The question, Why be reasonable? may mean in this context any of three things.[6]

(1) It may be a demand for a *moral* justification of being reasonable. It is another way of asking, "Am I morally obligated to be reasonable in these circumstances?" This is a meaningful question and can be answered, without redundancy or circularity, by giving reasons for being reasonable. The phrase "giving reasons for being reasonable" involves *two* meanings of "reasonableness," which may be designated "second-order" and "first-order" reasonableness, respectively. First-order reasonableness occurs when a person goes through a reasoning process before arriving at a decision or before committing himself in action or when a person tries to persuade others by giving reasons for doing one thing rather than another. That is, first-order reasonableness is the use of rational procedures in making moral decisions and in resolving moral conflicts. Now in certain circumstances we may question the moral rightness of being reasonable in this first-order sense, and we may demand *reasons* for being reasonable in that sense. The satisfying of such a demand by giving reasons is being reasonable in the *second-order* sense. Thus if we give reasons to show that a person ought to be reasonable (in the first-order sense) when he is deciding how many more drinks he should take before driving his friends home from a party, we are being reasonable (in the second-order sense). And if we give reasons to show that a person ought *not* to be reasonable (in the first-order sense) with an escaped madman who is about to do harm to his family, we are also being

---

[6] The three meanings of the question were first suggested to me by my colleague, Martin Lean.

reasonable (in the second-order sense). To try to give good reasons against the use of reason in certain situations is not to contradict oneself, since one is being reasonable in the second-order sense in opposing being reasonable in the first-order sense. Any attempt to morally justify being reasonable or not being reasonable does imply some method of giving good reasons in support of moral judgments. But there is no circularity here because good reasons can be given which justify either (first-order) reasonableness or (first-order) unreasonableness. Indeed, the very same person may be trying to reason whether or not to be reasonable in the first-order sense. And if in a certain situation his reasoning leads him to decide not to be reasonable (that is, not to use rational procedures) because to do so would be morally wrong, he does not contradict himself, even though he uses rational procedures in opposing the use of rational procedures.

(2) The second possible interpretation of the question, Why be reasonable? is that it is a demand for a *pragmatic* justification of being reasonable. It is another way of asking, "Is it useful or prudent in these circumstances to be reasonable?" or, "If I am seeking such-and-such ends, is being reasonable a means to them?" This also is a meaningful question. It may be answered in the affirmative or in the negative. It is prudent for a person to be reasonable about what is good for his health but we should hardly say a soldier should try to be reasonable with his enemy on the battlefield.[7] Here again it is perfectly consistent to use reason to justify not using reason, that is, to be reasonable in the second-order sense in deciding not to be reasonable in the first-order sense.

(3) The third interpretation of the question is that it is a demand for a *theoretical* justification of being reasonable. It means: Give me reasons for using reason *at all*. It asks: Is it reasonable *ever* to be reasonable? Now this is a very peculiar

---

[7] It is true that ordinarily we would be likely to say, not that it was reasonable for the soldier to be unreasonable with his enemy, but that it was unreasonable for him to try to be reasonable with the enemy. But what would be intended by either statement is perfectly clear and not self-contradictory: that good reasons can be given to show that it is "unreasonable" (or that it is useless, imprudent, or unwise) to try to reason with the enemy.

question. In fact it is a question which would never be asked by anyone who thought about what he was saying, since the question, to speak loosely, answers itself. It is admitted that no amount of arguing in the world can make a person who does not want to be reasonable want to be. For to argue would be to give reasons, and to give reasons already assumes that the person to whom you give them is *seeking* reasons. That is, it assumes he is reasonable. A person who did not want to be reasonable in *any* sense would never ask the question, Why be reasonable? For in asking the question, Why? he is seeking reasons, that is, he is being reasonable in asking the question. The question calls for the use of reason to justify *any* use of reason, including the use of reason to answer the question. No distinction is made between a first-order and a second-order use of reason. It is quite true that as soon as one attempted to use reason to answer the question one would be committed to the assumption that such use of reason was justified. But no logical error would be involved beyond that which is made in asking the question in the first place. The question, Why be reasonable? under this third interpretation is the same as the question, What are good reasons for being reasonable? or, What are good reasons for seeking good reasons? The questioner is thus seeking good reasons for seeking good reasons. The peculiarity of this situation actually derives from the fact that in a strict sense the question is meaningless, since every answer which could possibly be accepted as a satisfactory answer would be a tautology to the effect that it is reasonable to be reasonable. A negative answer to the question, Is it reasonable to be reasonable? would express a self-contradiction.

Now it is this third interpretation which is intended by the ethical relativist who claims that we can never ultimately justify our moral beliefs because (1) to try to justify them is to commit ourselves to the position that reasonableness is superior to unreasonableness, (2) hence any result of such attempt at justification is not an absolute value but only a value relative to the presupposed value of being reasonable, and (3) this latter value cannot itself be justified without begging the question. This argument, however, has no weight because, although one

cannot give reasons for being reasonable at all, such a demand cannot meaningfully be made. A person who does not care to be reasonable will not accept any proposed justification of being reasonable. (And if he is consistent he will not try to justify his *un*reasonableness.) He can claim that the reasonable person's values are relative to the appeal to reason but no logical difficulty results from this allegation. The reasonable person is neither inconsistent nor "ultimately" unreasonable in seeking good reasons for his moral beliefs. If someone challenges him with the questions, "Why seek good reasons to support your moral judgments? Why use rational ways of settling moral conflicts?" he can only reply, "Because I want to be reasonable." The person cannot then ask, "Why be reasonable?" without himself being reasonable in asking the question and thus rendering the question meaningless.

IV

The three types of relativism that have been distinguished may be labeled: (1) social or cultural relativism (moral values are relative to a given society), (2) psychological or contextual relativism (moral utterances are relative to the situations in which they arise and the purposes for which they are used; they can be justified pragmatically and perhaps aesthetically by reference to those situations and purposes, but they cannot be justified in any other sense), (3) theoretical or logical relativism (moral statements can be rationally justified but only by presupposing the value of reasonableness, which cannot itself be justified). The fourth and most important type of relativism may be called *methodological relativism*. This view arises from recognizing the fact that every theory of ethics other than the emotive theory declares moral statements to be verifiable or rationally justifiable, but each theory differs with the others as to the *proper method* of such verification. The methodological relativist then demands: "By what method is one to choose the correct method among all those proposed for verifying moral statements? If we attempt to justify our moral beliefs by using a certain method, how can we justify use of this method itself?" The relativist says that we cannot. He will admit that moral beliefs can be said

to be true or false, that they are true or false no matter who agrees or disagrees with them, and that the true moral beliefs apply to all men everywhere at all times. But he goes on to say that these beliefs are true only *in relation to the method of justifying them*. Values are relative not to culture or to psychological and practical conditions or to reasonableness in general, but to method.

The same principle applies with equal force to the use of rational procedures for settling moral conflicts. The resolution of a moral conflict between two reasonable people will depend upon what specific rational procedure is used to justify or invalidate the moral beliefs in question. But if one person chooses one procedure and the other person chooses another they might arrive at opposite conclusions regarding the truth or falsity of the beliefs. Hence the conflict could not be settled rationally unless one particular procedure was first agreed upon by both disputants. But on what grounds is such agreement to be reached? Won't some other procedure be needed for choosing between the two procedures which led to contradictory results? And won't still another procedure be needed to choose a procedure for choosing between the two procedures? And so on *ad infinitum*.

Let us briefly examine the actual methods philosophers have used in justifying moral beliefs. These can be classified, I think, into two broad categories: deduction and intuition. We can think of the ethical systems of such men as Aquinas, Spinoza, Hegel, and the "naturalists" (Hobbes, J. S. Mill, John Dewey, *et al.*) as deductive systems in which certain definitions are postulated and certain propositions are taken to be axiomatic, these definitions and axioms being such that a set of moral statements are deducible from them. Spinoza's *Ethics* is the most explicit presentation of a logical system in which moral statements are justified by rigorous deduction from previously justified premises, the entire system ultimately resting upon a set of intuited or "self-evident" axioms and definitions. And Spinoza, it seems to me, simply makes explicit the sort of procedure actually followed by such thinkers as Aquinas and Hegel, although each thinker differs in the kind of appeal he

makes to intuition or "reason" as the source of his axioms and definitions.

The deductive character of "naturalistic" ethical theories has not often been recognized but an important work has recently been published [8] in which is set forth with great lucidity a deductive system that can, I think, be taken as a paradigm for all naturalistic ethics. This system consists of (1) definitions of value terms ("good," "right," "ought," etc.) and other terms stipulated in light of the meanings which they have in ordinary discourse, (2) statements of inductive generalizations concerning human experience, motivation, and behavior, and (3) normative statements deduced as theorems from the stipulated definitions and inductive generalizations. I believe ethical theories like those of Hobbes, Mill, and Dewey can be so analyzed as to disclose these three kinds of statements interrelated in a similar way.[9] The truth of the normative statements which the system yields is not only determined analytically in terms of consistency with the system itself but also by empirical verification. The normative statements of any naturalistic theory of ethics turn out to be synthetic a posteriori propositions or factual descriptions. It is precisely in this respect that they differ from metaphysical and theological systems, which yield propositions that are technically only tautologies.[10]

---

[8] A. L. Hilliard, *The Forms of Value* (New York, 1950).

[9] The deductive character of naturalistic ethics is, I realize, a debatable point. To present the argument for it would be to go beyond the scope of this paper. However, even if the argument did not hold, the position of the methodological relativist would still have to be met, and the way to meet it which is suggested here would, I think, still be valid.

[10] Metaphysical and theological systems *appear* to yield normative propositions that convey information about the world because they are language systems which are not entirely artificial. They include many words of the natural language of ordinary discourse and use a syntax similar to that of descriptive statements. Thus they give the impression of formulating meaningful assertions about the world. But to the extent that the definitions stipulated in such theories are not operational definitions (i.e., no routine, operation, or procedure is specified whereby the presence or absence of the property designated by the *definiendum* can be decided in any particular case), to that extent the normative statements which such theories yield are not empirically verifiable and the impression of syntheticity is false.

The methodological relativist asks this one question of all such deductive ethical theories, naturalistic or otherwise: "Why choose one system rather than another?" And this question gives rise to the following reflection: If truth in ethics is relative to a deductive system and if there are alternative systems, it would appear to be meaningless to ask which system is the true one.

Before considering this objection let us turn to the other kind of method philosophers have used to justify moral statements. This is the appeal to direct intuition. If I want to find out what I ought to do in a certain situation, according to the ethical intuitionist I either get a direct intuition of what I ought to do (or a direct intuition of a moral principle that I ought to follow in the situation) or I inquire of a qualified person (a "normal" or "well-educated" or "cultured" or "morally sensitive" person) what he intuits that I ought to do.

The objection which the methodological relativist raises to this procedure starts with the question: How does one go about getting such an intuition? The only possible answer would consist in a description of a certain causal conditioning process of such a nature that, when a person has been conditioned in that way, he will have the same intuitions that other qualified people have in the same situation. But why, it will then be asked, should this conditioning process and not some other provide valid intuitions? The same objection may be summed up in the question, *Whose* intuitions? If the answer submitted is: Only those of qualified people, the question becomes, How does one decide who are qualified and who are not? It would be circular to reply that the qualified are all those who have the intuition that act x is right in situation A, that act y is right in situation B, etc. And it would be begging the question to reply that the qualified are all those whom I (or certain other designated individuals) *intuit* to be qualified.

The principle of ethical relativism of the fourth type is this: Granted that there are various methods for justifying moral statements, the truth or falsity of any given statement will depend on which method is used. Moral values are relative either to the particular deductive language system from which

513

they are derived or to whatever qualified persons are appealed to for valid intuitions.

I think the challenge of the methodological relativist can be met successfully only in the following manner. The proper answer to the question, Why ought this method rather than that be used to verify moral statements? is simply that this, and not that, is what we *ordinarily mean* by saying that a moral statement is true (what we ordinarily mean, that is, when we have articulated no special theory of ethics). Instead of constructing logical systems or appealing to intuitive feelings to justify moral beliefs, suppose we examine the procedures and reasoning actually used in everyday life by ordinary people (that is, people who are not professional moralists or philosophers) in resolving moral conflicts, in justifying moral statements, and in arriving at moral decisions, and then explicate (make explicit) the principles or reasons implicit in this use. Three ways of carrying out this process of "explication" have been proposed in contemporary writing in ethics and I shall conclude with a brief summary of each of these proposals.[11] Further work in this area must, I think, develop out of these or similar investigations. It is sufficient for the purposes of this paper to point out how these modes of "explication" provide the *kind* of argument necessary to refute methodological relativism.

The first mode of explication is to *describe* how people in various circumstances actually use the sentences expressing their moral beliefs, how they go about giving reasons in justification of their beliefs, and what their purposes are when they utter normative statements. Then with reference to this description an analysis is made of *what are ordinarily taken to be* "good reasons" for moral beliefs. A set of criteria is thus arrived at which will distinguish good reasoning from bad reasoning in moral disputes. For if we examine what we ordinarily mean by giving good reasons for or against moral beliefs we find certain characteristics which reasons must possess in order to be called "good reasons." We then simply make explicit just what those characteristics are so that it can always be decided in any given

---

[11] Among classical philosophers I should mention Hume and Kant as having made a beginning in the adoption of this approach to ethics.

case whether a reason offered in justification of a moral belief is a good one or a poor one.[12] This method of explication is not, therefore, merely inductive or descriptive. It yields standards of validity which can be applied to arguments for the purpose of judging the intellectual obligation we have to accept or reject them. It is an explication not only of the *facts* but of the *logic* of moral reasoning.

A second way of explicating the ordinary methods and reasons used in practical life for settling moral disputes, justifying moral beliefs, and arriving at moral decisions is (1) to define a certain class of men whom we would ordinarily accept as competent judges, (2) to define a certain class of judgments made by these men which would ordinarily be accepted as reasonable judgments, and (3) to stipulate a set of principles or standards which, if they were applied to moral disputes and decisions by a competent person, would render the judgments of that person the same as the reasonable judgments of competent judges.[13] A somewhat similar method of explication is suggested by Roderick Firth in his article, "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer." [14] Here the method consists in making explicit the characteristics an observer would have if he were an ideal observer in settling a moral conflict in a rational way or in giving reasons for a moral belief or in arriving at a reasonable decision. The characteristics of an ideal observer are found, says Firth, "by examining the procedures which we actually regard, implicitly or explicitly, as the rational ones for deciding ethical questions." [15]

The third method of explication is that used by Everett W.

---

[12] This is essentially the method used by Stephen Toulmin (*op. cit.*) and by Arthur E. Murphy in his unpublished Matchette Foundation Lectures, "How Can Moral Judgments Be Universally Valid?" and "How Can Moral Conflicts Be Rationally Resolved?" The method is also used in J. B. Pratt's *Reason in the Art of Living* (New York, 1949), ch. xiv, R. M. Hare's *The Language of Morals* (Oxford, 1952), and P. H. Nowell-Smith's *Ethics* (London, 1954).

[13] This method has been presented very cogently by John Rawls in "Outline of a Decision Procedure for Ethics," *Philosophical Review*, LX (April, 1951). I owe my use of the term "explication" to Rawls, although he might not accept as broad a usage for the term as mine.

[14] *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XII (March, 1952).

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 332.

Hall in his *What Is Value?* (New York, 1952). Hall is more concerned with syntactical and semantical than with logical or epistemological questions. He explicates what is involved in the use of normative sentences by a linguistic analysis which is constantly referred to what we ordinarily intend by uttering normative sentences in everyday life. This linguistic analysis attempts to make clear the syntax and semantics of moral discourse as it occurs in practical (nonphilosophical) situations. In particular, it attempts to make clear that which, in the case of normative sentences, is analogous to the truth-value of descriptive statements and to the facts or states of affairs which make descriptive statements true. Hall is in search of a "clarified language" which will reveal what is implicit but hidden in ordinary normative discourse. His careful account of the syntax and semantics of this "clarified language" provides one sort of explication of moral reasoning.

In conclusion, if the methodological relativist still persists in asking, "Why choose this method rather than that?" and demands an answer to the question, Why choose *explication* as a method? the reply is simply that explication does what we start out trying to do. We begin by seeing whether there is a *rational* procedure for settling moral conflicts, or whether *good reasons* can be given for justifying moral beliefs, or whether there is a *reasonable* way of arriving at a moral decision. What does this mean? It means what we *ordinarily* mean by using the terms "rational," "good reasons," and "reasonable." Why should it mean anything else? Explication is simply the process by which this ordinary meaning is brought to light and made precise. If it is then asked, "But why seek a rational way of settling a dispute, or good reasons for justifying moral beliefs, or a reasonable way of arriving at a moral decision?" the answer is that we start out to do this because it is a real problem in practical life. People just do try to find out how to be reasonable in questions of ethics. And explication clarifies for them what is ordinarily meant, that is, what *they* mean, by being reasonable in such matters.

PAUL W. TAYLOR

Brooklyn College