

Against Empiricism

On Education, Epistemology and Value

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always the danger that you have fallen into an obscurantist muddle. But while this is one of the worst sorts of muddle that can occur in philosophy, it is by no means the worst thing possible in philosophy. Far worse is the superficiality that conceives nothing to be unfathomable because it has fished only in coastal waters. In any case the kind of philosophical work that is most worth having has always tended to come from those in whom a sense of mystery has been nurtured and kept alive.

Here is part of a conversation that took place forty years ago. The speaker is Wittgenstein:

Schlick says that theological ethics contains two conceptions of the essence of the Good. According to the more superficial interpretation, the Good is good because God wills it; according to the deeper interpretation, God wills the Good because it is good.

I think that the first conception is the deeper one; Good is what God orders. For this cuts off the path to any and every explanation 'why' it is good, while the second conception is precisely the superficial, the rationalistic one, which proceeds as if what is good could still be given some foundation.

This opinion of the early Wittgenstein (and I don't suppose he would ever have gone back on it) does not just run counter to a view expressed by Schlick. It amounts to an attack on the possibility of doing any moral philosophy at all in the most widely accepted manner. For it has generally been thought to be the task of moral philosophy to examine the judgements that are commonly made about the goodness or badness of things and actions with a view to establishing a foundation for some of these judgements. And it has generally been thought to be very much a part of the business to try to explain what constitutes goodness or accounts for its existence. But in the conversation I have quoted Wittgenstein intimates that to proceed as if this could be done is to proceed according to a superficial conception.

It might at once be objected that the idea of explaining judgements of value—saying wherein the goodness or the

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Is Goodness a Mystery?

For understandable reasons people get the impression that philosophy is a wholly mysterious business. But the relation between philosophy and mystery is mostly like the relation between air and a vacuum. And if mysteries are cultivated by philosophers, they are cultivated rather in the way that crimes are by sleuths—for the sake of their unravelling and with the aim of giving an account of them, so that our thoughts may become free from entanglement and the mind be set at peace.

But in pursuing this endeavour one may become struck by the sense of a difference in kind among mysteries, some of which present themselves as offering a more than accidental resistance to explanation. I am speaking now of a difference within philosophy and not of something that is the mark of any philosophical difficulty whatever. For there is a sense in which all distinctly philosophical perplexity is non-accidental, or of a necessary character, by comparison with the perplexity that is engendered by a murder mystery for instance; and this point could be expressed by saying that the former sort of perplexity is conceptual while the latter is not. But having recognized this difference, one may find oneself brought up against a kind of difficulty, within the realm of the conceptually perplexing, that offers such a peculiar resistance to explanation that other conceptual difficulties will then seem to be rather accidental again by comparison. Of course when you are presented with something that you think to be not just accidentally mysterious but necessarily mysterious, there is

