

Against Empiricism

On Education, Epistemology and Value

R. F. HOLLAND

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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

badness consists—is a perfectly familiar idea both inside and outside philosophy. But I should wonder here whether the examples that the objector might have in mind would include judgements of relative value as well as judgements of absolute value. Wittgenstein drew a firm distinction between these two kinds of judgement. He saw no difficulty at all in the idea of explaining the relative kind and what he had to say about the two conceptions of theological ethics related only to judgements of absolute value. In an ethics lecture belonging to the same period (written in 1929 or 1930 and published in *The Philosophical Review* in 1965) he explained the distinction between relative and absolute value as follows. Expressions like 'good', 'important' and 'right' are used, he said, in two very different senses:

If for instance I say that this is a *good* chair this means that the chair serves a certain predetermined purpose and the word good here has only meaning so far as this purpose has been previously fixed upon. In fact the word good in the relative sense simply means coming up to a certain predetermined standard. Thus when we say that this man is a good pianist we mean that he can play pieces of a certain degree of difficulty with a certain degree of dexterity. And similarly if I say that it is *important* for me not to catch cold I mean that catching a cold produces certain describable disturbances in my life and if I say that this is the *right* road I mean that it's the right road relative to a certain goal. Used in this way these expressions don't present any difficult or deep problems. But this is not how Ethics uses them. Supposing that I could play tennis and one of you saw me playing and said 'Well, you play pretty badly' and suppose I answered 'I know, I'm playing badly but I don't want to play any better', all the other man could say would be 'Ah, then that's all right'. But suppose I had told one of you a preposterous lie and he came up to me and said 'You're behaving like a beast' and then I were to say 'I know I behave badly, but then I don't want to behave any better', could he then say 'Ah, then that's all right'? Certainly not; he would say 'Well, you *ought* to want to behave better'. Here you have an absolute judgement of value, whereas the first instance was one of relative judgement.

One possible reaction to the remarks I have just quoted might

be the following: Granting the distinction between relative and absolute value and confining ourselves to cases where we hold something to be absolutely fine and wonderful (or the reverse), still we surely are familiar with the idea of explaining our judgements. For instance in the case of works of literature or pieces of music we may call attention to the way the story unfolds or the way the themes and passages in the musical composition are put together. We can point here to a variety of elements in combination. And in the case of actions likewise there will often be a variety of conspiring considerations to be mentioned—how the person came to do whatever he did, what the action led to (especially, it might be urged, in the way of misery or happiness to other human beings), or the need that it answered, and then perhaps the adversity in the circumstances or the temptation that was overcome, and so on.

I do not know how Wittgenstein would have responded to this objection. I should myself agree that it is often possible to mention separately certain elements or considerations the presence of which in combination has led to the placing of an absolute value upon some action for good or ill. For instance I might say, in the case of a deed that has struck me as wonderful, that it was not only the courage but even more the magnanimity of it; or in the case of another action I might say that there was an element of duplicity and also of meanness alongside the brutality. In speaking thus I should be substituting more specific terms of evaluation for the unspecific term with which perhaps I had begun. What I should be doing here would be distinguishing and characterizing certain forms or typical faces of good and evil. But I should not be making plain what makes them forms of good and evil, nor should I be offering any explanation of the nature of that of which these forms are forms—I should not be explaining this however much detail I were able to go into. Suppose for example that I spoke of someone who, while he was himself in a vulnerable position, had disregarded his own danger in the exertions by which he succeeded in getting a victim of injustice out of harm's way. In so describing what he did I should be employ-

ing evaluative terms anyway; and if someone were then to ask what was so good about it I should think there must be something wrong with him. I should certainly not try to tell him what was good about it and if I were to try I should not succeed. To understand the description I gave is to understand it already as the description of a deed on which an absolute value is placed. I mean especially the part about getting a victim of injustice out of harm's way, for the vulnerability of the agent and the exertions involved are significant considerations only to the extent that they bear on this. Otherwise they might have amounted to nothing more than a stunt. Or again, suppose there had been some special temptation to be overcome, which had also been mentioned as a factor contributing to the fineness of what was done. This likewise presupposes the assignment of an absolute value to the deed: otherwise I could not have spoken intelligibly of a temptation.

It is true that through the disclosure of further details or by paying attention to the surrounds of an action one can often enough be brought to change one's judgement. It is possible also to compare different cases and sometimes to see writ large in one what was writ small and hence difficult to discern in another. Or a comment from someone else might enable one to see what one could not see before and perhaps might never have seen on one's own. But once, whether after much or little consideration and help of this and other sorts, I have been forcibly struck by the splendidence or the dreadfulness of something I have seen and I register this by characterizing the action in one way or another according to its significance for good or ill, and I am then requested by someone to say what the good or the ill of it amounts to, and he does not mean this as a request to have any more details described to him or to be told about any further repercussions of what transpired, but he wishes to be told (so he says) what the good is or what the ill is in itself, or what the nature of it is: then I simply do not know what to reply. And my situation is a queer and perplexing one, in that I can see—as it would be natural for me to say—I can see the good or the evil without difficulty; I see it in the action. I

recognize quite clearly *that* it is there. But *what* it is I cannot for the life of me explain.

So a mental fog descends and what precipitates the fog is not just the fact that I find myself unable to make plain something that I feel I ought to be able to make plain, but also the fact that the nature of my inability is itself not plain. Suppose I felt frustrated at my inability to lift a dumb-bell or to calculate the volume of a pyramid; there the sort of ability that is required would be perfectly clear to me and if I lacked it I should lack it only accidentally. But in the present case I find myself unable to do something and I do not have even a moderately clear idea of what it is that I cannot do.

When I say that I do not know what is wanted by the man who asks for the explanation of the goodness—and neither, I think, does he—I mean that I cannot imagine what would be conceptually appropriate, though I am aware of numerous proposed answers that are conceptually inappropriate. The history of moral philosophy is full of them. It also contains important negative findings, among which the following three are due to Plato: first that goodness does not consist in or depend upon pleasure, although counterfeit forms of it are commonly generated by an attachment to pleasure. For as Plato put it, some men are brave-out of a kind of cowardice and temperate out of self-indulgence: they barter pleasure for pleasure, but there is no more virtue in this than in being a money-changer. The second negative finding of Plato I wish to mention is that goodness has nothing to do with getting on or getting more, nothing to do with consumption, aggrandisement or the glamour of worldly esteem. His third finding was that goodness is not a conventional creation and does not consist in following the prevailing *mores* or being within some social swim.

But then in relation to the kind of example I was considering—and we all know of such—where a man does something marvellous that is in no way a dictate of office or a thing that is generally expected and where he displays not just courage or devotion but conspicuous selflessness, it should be perfectly

plain that none of the three sophistical conceptions which Plato threw out is seriously in the running as an explanatory possibility. Nobody's pleasure is being considered, least of all 'the pleasure of the greatest number' (whatever that could mean—numbers don't come into it); there is no concern with prestige or with advancement; while as to conventionality, nothing marvellous was ever conventional.

Leaving Plato on one side, the movements that have most often been made in the history of philosophy towards a positive explanation of absolute goodness have taken as their signpost the fact that judgements of relative value are explainable and the kind of explanation that can be given for them has been used as a model from which to extrapolate. Now goodness of a relative sort is characteristically associated with a set of notions among which the chief are *function*, *role*, *purpose*, *aim* and *desire*. For example, a good knife is one that serves its purpose; its function is to cut and if you desire that function to be performed it is a good thing to have. Cutting is doubtless an aim that you will only have at certain times and even then it will be subordinate to some more comprehensive aim like upholstering, which in turn will be comprised within the more general aim of furniture-making, which again is only a relative aim since perhaps you only do it for a living. And as to why you are doing that you may say 'Well one has to keep one's head above water' or 'Goodness knows what it's all about,' whereupon the whole progression is brought to a stop. But if one could go on and speak intelligibly of the aim in living: if one could speak of a desire or objective so general and comprehensive that it included everything, then one would have a purpose that was no longer relative. And a good that had its role on the level of that purpose would no longer be a relative good but would be an absolute good; indeed it would be *the* absolute good and it would have its explanation in that all-embracing purpose. This was how Aristotle reasoned. I shall call it the goal-seeking explanation of value. There are variants upon it which dispense with the notion of a single ultimate purpose—and this is an advantage because, as soon as you try

to specify the ultimate purpose, whatever you come up with will be bound to be either obscure on account of its abstractness, or if not obscure then contestable precisely in so far as it is specific and hence exclusive. Aristotle said that the goal was Contemplation, and there might be a way of taking this in which it would contain profundity: but then it would have to be made compatible with much else that he did not say; whereas what he did say about it is strongly suggestive of scholarly pursuits which are plainly not suitable for everybody. He did not connect contemplation with either the beauty of the world or the pain and evil in it; and while he emphasized the pleasure to be had from contemplating, it was only in a quite separate context that he spoke of love.

The variants of the goal-seeking arguments that dispense with the notion of a single ultimate aim postulate an irreducible plurality of desires. These are supposed to form a kind of psychological democracy and the problem of absolute value then presents itself as a problem of organization—the task of achieving harmony and a stable balance. For instance, according to the theory of value put forward by I. A. Richards in his *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 'Anything is valuable which will satisfy an appetency without involving the frustration of some equal or *more important* appetency; in other words, the only reason which can be given for not satisfying a desire is that more important desires will thereby be thwarted.' The importance of an appetency or impulse is then defined as 'the extent of the disturbance of other impulses in the individual's activities which the thwarting of the impulse involved.' There are variations on the argument which try to get the harmony of purpose into the picture from the start by postulating a common objective or concern that is supposed to be connected with the nature of society or shared among mankind as a whole. This is sometimes identified as the good of society, or the human good.

So when I speak of the goal-seeking explanation of value I am referring altogether to a very large family of positions. I reject the whole family. For the recognition of an absolute

value, as in the case I mentioned earlier, where one is struck by the egregious fineness of an action like the rescue of an innocent person who is harmed or wronged—acknowledgement of the goodness of such an action involves the awareness of a demand that can as readily obstruct as further any purpose howsoever elevated and irrespective of whether the purpose be conceived as private or communal. And instead of its being the case that anything could come to have absolute value by being related to a superordinate purpose, purposes that are not subordinate to other purposes call for assessment from the standpoint of absolute value just as they do when they are merely subordinate. The same applies to desires, unless the desire in question is already an aspiration for absolute good. But in that event it would be impossible to explain the nature of the aspiration otherwise than by reference to the goodness towards which it is directed (I do not say we have no means of indicating the direction: this might be done by citing exemplifications of the goodness or alternatively by means of negative stipulations like those I gave earlier from Plato).

In regard to the branch of the goal-seeking argument which posits as the absolute value a good that is thought to be in or of society, I cannot see what this position amounts to other than the placing of a value upon association as such, or the belief that it is absolutely good just to keep things going. The objection is that whether or not there is a value in association will depend upon the nature and worth of that in which you are associated. It could be said perhaps that what you are associated in is the carrying on of the life of your people and country, the upholding of its traditions and the maintenance of its institutions. And I do indeed think that the capacity to love one's country and its past, when untainted by jingoism or fondness for 'gloire', is not unconnected with the capacity to have an aspiration for absolute good that I spoke of a moment ago—if only because it is an example of a kind of love which while being something outside oneself, and therefore taking one out of oneself, at the same time helps one to find oneself. However there will be in one's country and its life a mixture of

good and ill, and while this does not mean that one loves the country only in a qualified way, still if the good were not present or were exiguous by comparison with the ill, then one could not love it, except chauvinistically.

There has been an attempt to make non-relative goodness intelligible by recourse to the idea of 'what is required for the carrying on of *any* human life'. Although I shall contend that this idea ends up in the same boat as the goal-seeking argument, it is not really a species of it, for it is not said that the maintenance of some kind of human life is what we are ultimately aiming at, but rather that whatever we attach absolute value to and call a virtue or a moral requirement always makes a kind of difference to life that extends beyond the immediate occasion. Virtues and moral requirements are in their non-special character akin to the laws of logic. They run through the entire fabric of life. There has to be honour, just as there has to be logic, among thieves. And it might be said that whatever is covered by the term 'honour' here is inescapably a value. No form of human life is possible in which for instance truthfulness would not in general be accounted a virtue. (Peter Winch, 'Nature and Convention', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1959-60.)

I shall call this the life-form argument. The version just sketched was so slanted as to support a qualified absolutism. But the mainstream of life-form argumentation flows in the direction of moral relativism, thus: Somebody who was so used to counting and to giving and receiving the correct change that this was second nature to him would probably find it unimaginable that there might be folk who could get along without this—folk to whom commerce was important I mean. And yet, so long as they engaged in some practice which, while it need not be counting, nevertheless fulfilled, perhaps in a truncated way, the same sort of role and had consequences analogous to those of counting, then commercial dealings among them could still flourish and even be virtually all that interested them. It could well suffice for the needs of such a people if, in place of numerals, they had say just

three locutions in their language, corresponding to 'large', 'small' and 'an amount'. And if they had a conception of giving change it might bear no resemblance to what we understand by 'the right change' or 'honest change' but might rather suggest 'doing somebody down whenever one can get away with it'. Now if you should be reluctant to credit these people (as thus far described) with a sense of moral value, an enthusiast for life-form arguments will rush to correct you. For there is something on which they place a value: that they do so, and what it is they value, is shown in the way they carry on. It may not be what you or I value, but then a value is whatever the way of life makes it. Looking at the other life you may say gloomily, 'What a life!' But from the standpoint of their life the same can be said about yours. At this bedrock level we come up against an irreducible relativism. And the user of the life-form argument might comment further upon the sense of your judgement 'What a life!' by saying that you are here looking at things on which a value is placed within the other life—things which, as it seems to you, give a certain colour to that life. You are judging them, however, in terms of ideas and connections that exist and have meaning only within your own form of life. And this is necessarily to misunderstand, to misconstrue the sense of, what you are misguidedly presuming to judge.

Such is the sound that is made when a life-form argument blows its horn. The first version I gave, with its qualifiedly absolutist twist, need not be considered incompatible with what I called the main-stream version. Some relativities are less relative than others. But the possible differences between versions of the life-form argument are in any case not vital so far as I can see, because all versions boil down in the end to the position that placing an absolute value upon something—or as I should prefer to say because it fits certain cases very much better, seeing that there is an absolute value in something, or being struck by the absolute value of something—is the same as favouring it or otherwise supporting it (registering a choice, influencing someone in respect of it, and so on) against a

background of arrangements composed of a nexus of natural and institutional needs. In short, the existence of the value is reduced to a matter of there being an approval and the approval is made intelligible by the background. What is illuminating here, and what makes life-form arguments attractive, is the idea that approval can be explained by reference to its surrounds. This is a notable advance on David Hume and I shall return to the respect in which it is an advance because I want to give life-form arguments all the praise they deserve. But first a word about Hume—the classical exponent of 'approval ethics' in its purest form.

Hume's position is arrived at by taking a short cut in the direction in which functionalist accounts of value carry us in any case. What I mean is this. The procedure whereby positive explanations of absolute value have most often been attempted has been, as I have said, by extrapolation from the instrumental explanations that are ordinarily given of relative goodness. In this procedure the distinction between absolute and relative gets lost; and not surprisingly, because there is a relativizing tendency in the very idea of an absolute value's being what it is in virtue of its having a function or role. Furthermore, in the goal-seeking explanation or in the role-playing explanation of absolute goodness, the instrumental concept of function is knitted together with the psychological concept of wanting. However, in order that this conceptual link with wanting should be explanatory, the wanting must be already a datum. In other words an anchoring point must be found among existing wants, and this imports into the explanation a self-centredness or social-centredness which again relativizes the value. Now in order to reach self- (or social-) centredness by a short cut, you do not need to begin by thinking of function. Instead you adopt a contemplative standpoint (which I should want to say is the right approach to absolute value so far as that goes). You also have a scientific outlook (which should have been left hanging on the door of the physics building). You then make the following observation: Good and evil do not have a nature in the way that material substances or material

