

The Right and the Morally Good:
A commentary on the first chapter of
Ross's *The Right and the Good*

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During the twentieth century, it became all but impossible for anyone plausibly to claim that they had carefully read most significant past and contemporary works in philosophy. The focus on ongoing debates, which has of course been characteristic of philosophy throughout its history, resulted for the first time in the danger of philosophy's losing touch with its past. That is as true in ethics as in any area of philosophy. Not only is Wlodek Rabinowicz fully aware of the danger, but his work stands out as a clear exception to the generally ahistorical nature of much current writing in ethics.¹

There is much to be learned from close reading of important texts, as any ancient philosopher knows. Perhaps the greatest benefit of such reading for a philosopher, as opposed to a historian of ideas, is that arguments and positions may be uncovered which might well not have occurred to someone seeking answers to the universal questions of philosophy through their own unaided thought. In that spirit, then, let me offer a brief commentary on the first chapter of Ross's first book in ethics, *The Right and the Good* [RG], published by the Clarendon Press in Oxford in 1930 and recently republished in a helpful edition with introduction and notes by Philip Stratton-Lake.² I shall proceed paragraph by paragraph, first citing Ross's text, then summarizing what I take to be the main point or points of the paragraph (in some cases, these summaries will be heavily interpretative), and finally in some cases appending notes of my own. When there are several such notes to the same paragraph, I shall sometimes identify them with square-bracketed references to the relevant section of the summary. Ross's own footnotes are marked with lower-case letters, my own numerically.

1. The purpose of this inquiry is to examine the nature, relations, and implications of three conceptions which appear to be fundamental in ethics—those of 'right', 'good' in general, and 'morally good'. The inquiry will have much in common with the inquiries, of which there have been many in recent years, into the nature of value, and I shall have

¹ See e.g. the masterly survey of the historical background to the current debate about 'buck-passing' accounts of the good in Wlodek's essay co-written with Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, 'The Strike of the Demon: On Fitting Pro-attitudes and Value', *Ethics* 114.3 (2004): 391-423, at 394-400. This section of their paper can be contrasted with the section of *What We Owe to Each Other* by T.M. Scanlon (Belknap Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1998, 95-100) which, though reigniting an old debate and reviving an old position (Ewing's), cites the influence only of Gerald Gaus and Elizabeth Anderson (383-4, n. 16).

² The text below is adapted from the electronic version of Ross's text, edited by Stratton-Lake, available at Oxford Scholarship Online:

<http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/oso/public/content/philosophy/0199252653/toc.html>

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occasion to discuss some of the more important theories of value; but my object is a more limited one. I offer no discussion, except at most a purely incidental and illustrative one, of certain forms of value, such as economic value and beauty. My interest will throughout be ethical, and value will be discussed only so far as it seems to be relevant to this interest.

Summary: The focus of the book is on ‘right’, ‘good’, and ‘morally good’.

Note: Ross’s use of the word ‘conceptions’ in the first sentence, and his use of quotation marks, might be taken to suggest that the topic of his book will be the *concepts* of ‘right’, etc. But the rest of the paragraph implies that he is not distinguishing between concepts such as ‘right’ and their instantiations – rightness, the right, or whatever. See next para. and note. Ross is assuming that these concepts are worth analysing, and would presumably reject outright any highly counter-intuitive debunking account of them. For a good statement of his broadly Aristotelian form of dialectic, see the first paragraph of his *The Foundations of Ethics* [FE] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939).

2. I propose to begin with the term ‘right’. A considerable ambiguity attaches to any attempt to discuss the meaning of any term. Professor G. E. Moore has well indicated three main objects that such an attempt at definition may have. ‘When we say, as Webster says, “The definition of horse is, ‘A hoofed quadruped of the genus Equus’,” we may, in fact, mean three different things. (1) We may mean merely: “When I say ‘horse’, you are to understand that I am talking about a hoofed quadruped of the genus Equus.” This might be called the arbitrary verbal definition. . . . (2) We may mean, as Webster ought to mean: “When most English people say ‘horse’, they mean a hoofed quadruped of the genus Equus.” This may be called the verbal definition proper. . . . But (3) we may, when we define horse, mean something much more important. We may mean that a certain object, which we all of us know, is composed in a certain manner: that it has four legs, a head, a heart, a liver, etc., etc., all of them arranged in definite relations to one another.’

Summary: Three ways of talking about the meaning of any term (taken from Moore):³

- (1) Arbitrary verbal definition (AVD): When I say ‘ ϕ ’, I shall mean ‘ ψ ’.
- (2) Verbal definition proper (dictionary definition): When people say ‘ ϕ ’, they mean ‘ ψ ’. [I.e. ‘ ϕ ’ means ‘ ψ ’.]
- (3) Substantive definition [my term – Ross gives none): This object ϕ is composed in the following way ψ . E.g. a horse has four legs, a head, etc., and these parts are arranged in relations to one another.

Note: The interesting contrast here is between 2 and 3. The former is pretty clear – it consists in giving the meaning of some word. But what about 3? It might be understood broadly, to cover any case in which one offers an account of something by saying what it is. This might be thought to allow for a case in which one offers an account of some ‘simple’ notion by giving a synonym. But Moore and Ross would presumably think such definition pointless, unless it is in fact a covert verbal definition. What about ostensive

³ Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 8.

definition of a simple term? That could be helpful, so should be included under (3). But it seems pretty clear that what Moore and Ross have in mind are cases in which some complex object is broken down into its 'parts', so as to enable someone to understand what it is. Imagine you've never seen a horse before, but you know what legs, heads, and so on are. Then the substantive definition mentioned by Moore would help you to identify the animal in front of you as a horse. So one important question for Ross is going to be whether rightness can be successfully analysed in this way.

3. We must ask ourselves whether, in discussing the meaning of 'right', we are attempting any one of these kinds of definition, or something different from them all. I certainly do not wish *merely* to indicate a sense in which I propose to use the term 'right'. I wish to keep in touch with the general usage of the word. While other things may be called 'right' (as in the phrases 'the right road', 'the right solution'), the word is specially applied to acts, and it is the sense (by general consent a very important one) in which it is so applied that I wish to discuss. But we must be prepared to find that the general usage of the word is not entirely consistent with itself. Most of the words in any language have a certain amount of ambiguity; and there is special danger of ambiguity in the case of a word like 'right', which does not stand for anything we can point out to one another or apprehend by one of the senses. Even with words that do stand for such things there is this danger. Even if two people find that the things the one calls red are just the things the other calls red, it is by no means certain that they mean the same quality. There is only a general presumption that since the structure of their eyes (if neither is colour-blind) is pretty much the same, the same object acting on the eyes of the two men produces pretty much the same kind of sensation. And in the case of a term like 'right', there is nothing parallel to the highly similar organization of different people's eyes, to create a presumption that when they call the same act right, they mean to refer to the same quality of it. In point of fact, there is a serious difference of view as to the *application* of the term 'right'. Suppose, for instance, that a man pays a particular debt simply from fear of the legal consequences of not doing so, some people would say he had done what was right, and others would deny this: they would say that no moral value attaches to such an act, and that since 'right' is meant to imply moral value, the act cannot be right. They might generalize and say that no act is right unless it is done from a sense of duty, or if they shrank from so rigorous a doctrine, they might at least say that no act is right unless done from *some* good motive, such as either sense of duty or benevolence.

Summary: I don't want only to offer an AVD. I want to talk about 'right' as generally applied to acts. But we have to expect that usage may not be consistent. Indeed in the case of 'right' there's a big disagreement over its application. Consider the case of someone who pays a debt through fear of the legal consequences of defaulting. Some would say this is right; others would deny it, on the ground that such an act has no moral value and 'right' implies moral value. They might generalize and say that no act is right if it's not done from a sense of duty, or at least from some good motive.

Note: On the face of it, Ross appears to be claiming that the fact that people disagree over the application of the term 'right' implies that they are not referring to the same quality. But they may agree about what rightness is, and differ over whether it is to be found in the action under discussion. For example, both sides may think that rightness is what is approved of by God, but only one side may believe that God approves of the repayment of debts prompted by fear alone. In fact, Ross is aware of this – see next para.

4. This difference of view may be due to either of two causes. Both parties may be using 'right' in the same sense, the sense of 'morally obligatory', and differing as to the further character an act must have in order to have this quality. *Or* the first party may be using 'right' in this sense, and the second in the sense of 'morally good'. It is not clear to me which of these two things is usually happening when this difference of view arises. But it seems probable that both things really happen—that some people fail to notice the distinction between 'right' and 'morally good', and that others, while distinguishing the meaning of these terms, think that only what is morally good is right. A discussion of the first of these positions only is strictly in point here, where we are discussing the *meaning* of 'right'. It seems to me clear that 'right' does not mean the same as 'morally good'; and we can test this by trying to substitute one for the other. If they meant the same thing we should be able to substitute, for instance, 'he is a right man' for 'he is a morally good man'; nor is our inability to do this merely a matter of English idiom, for if we turn to the sort of moral judgement in which we do use the word 'right', such as 'this is the right act', it is clear that by this we mean 'this act is the act *that ought to be done*', 'this act is *morally obligatory*'; and to substitute either of these phrases for 'morally good' in 'he is a morally good man' would obviously be not merely unidiomatic, but absurd. It should be obvious, then, that 'right' and 'morally good' mean different things. But some one might say that while 'morally good' has a wider application than 'right', in that it can be applied to agents as well as to acts, yet when applied to acts they mean the same thing. I should like therefore to convince him that 'right act' cannot mean the same as 'act that ought to be done' and *also* the same as 'morally good act'. If I can convince him of this, I think he will see the propriety of not using 'right act' in the sense of 'morally good act'.

Summary: There are two possibilities here. (1) Both parties are using 'right' to mean 'morally obligatory', and differ over what's required for an act to be morally obligatory. The second party thinks that only what is morally good is right. (2) The first group are using 'right' to mean 'morally obligatory', and the second to mean 'morally good'. We're talking about meaning, so we should focus on (2). And it's clear that 'right' doesn't mean the same as 'morally good'. You can't say e.g. 'He is a right man' instead of 'He is a morally good man'. 'Is right' means 'ought to be done'. Objection: 'Morally good' has a wider application than 'right', but applied to acts they mean the same thing. But: I want to show that 'right act' can't mean the same as 'act that ought to be done' *and* 'morally good act'.

Note: 'Right act' can be used in two ways, with either the indefinite or the definite article. Ross focuses on the latter (see next para.), so he should really have spoken here not about 'moral goodness' but 'bestness'. 'The right act' clearly doesn't mean 'a morally good act', since there may be several such acts available. Nor can it mean 'the morally good act' for the same reason – there may be several morally good acts available, one of which is right. So the story must be that 'the right act' means 'the morally best act'.

Is it clear that Ross is wise to concentrate on meaning here? Someone might agree with him that the person returning the loan through fear is doing the right act, but think that 'right' means both 'morally obligatory' and 'morally best'. What we should be interested in is what we have reason – especially what we have most reason -- to do, and it's not

clear that the best way to approach that question is via an analysis of the meanings of words.

5. But we ought first to note a minor difference between the meaning of 'right' and the meaning of 'something that ought to be done' or 'that is my duty' or 'that is incumbent on me'. It may sometimes happen that there is a set of two or more acts one or other of which ought to be done by me rather than any act not belonging to this set. In such a case any act of this set is right, but none is my duty; my duty is to do 'one or other' of them. Thus 'right' has a somewhat wider possible application than 'something that ought to be done' or any of its equivalents. But we want an adjective to express the same meaning as 'something that ought to be done', and though we have 'obligatory' at our disposal, that also has its ambiguity, since it sometimes means 'compulsory'. We should have to say 'morally obligatory' to make our meaning quite clear; and to obviate the necessity of using this rather cumbersome expression, I will use 'right' in this sense. I hope that this paragraph will prevent any confusion arising from this slightly inaccurate usage.

Summary: NB a minor difference between 'is right' and 'ought to be done'. There may a set of acts each of which is right, but none of which is what ought to be done (I ought to do one of them). When I use 'right', though, I mean 'morally obligatory'.

6. Some might deny the correctness of the distinction just drawn. They might say that when there are two or more acts one or other of which, as we say, we ought to do (it not being our duty to do one rather than another), the truth is that these are simply alternative ways of producing a single result, and that our duty is, strictly, not to do 'one or other' of the acts, but to produce the result; this alone is our duty, and this alone is right. This answer does, I think, fairly apply to many cases in which it *is* the production of a certain result that we think obligatory, the means being optional: e.g. to a case in which it is our duty to convey information to some one, but morally immaterial whether we do so orally or in writing. But in principle, at any rate, there may be other cases in which it is our duty to produce one or other of two or more *different* states of affairs, without its being our duty to produce one of them rather than another; in such a case each of these acts will be right, and none will be our duty.

Summary: Note that you can't try to deal with the above by saying that one's duty in such cases is not to do one or the other of the acts in the set but to produce a certain result to which there are various means. For there are cases where our duty is to produce one or other *different* states of affairs.

7. If it can be shown that nothing that ought to be done is ever morally good, it will be clear *a fortiori* that 'morally good' does not *mean* the same as 'that ought to be done'. Now it is, I think, quite clear that the only acts that are morally good are those that proceed from a good motive; this is maintained by those whom I am now trying to convince, and I entirely agree. If, then, we can show that action from a good motive is never morally obligatory, we shall have established that what is morally good is never right, and *a fortiori* that 'right' does not *mean* the same as 'morally good'. That action from a good motive is never morally obligatory follows (1) from the Kantian principle,

which is generally admitted, that 'I ought' implies 'I can'. It is not the case that I can by choice produce a certain motive (whether this be an ordinary desire or the sense of obligation) in myself at a moment's notice, still less that I can at a moment's notice make it effective in stimulating me to act. I can act from a certain motive only if I have the motive; if not, the most I can do is to cultivate it by suitably directing my attention or by acting in certain appropriate ways so that on some future occasion it *will* be present in me, and I shall be able to act from it. My *present* duty, therefore, cannot be to act here and now from it.

Summary: If I can show that nothing that ought to be done is ever morally good, it would be clear that 'morally good' doesn't mean the same as 'ought to be done' [a]. It's clear that the only acts that are morally good are those done from a good motive [b]. So I need to show that acts done from a good motive are never morally obligatory. This follows from (1) the Kantian 'ought implies can' principle [OIC] [c]. I can't by choice produce a certain motive. I can act from a certain motive only if I have the motive. If not, I can only try to cultivate it. My present duty can't be to act here and now from it [d].

Note: [a] Why doesn't Ross just use the open question argument here to show that 'morally good' doesn't mean the same as 'ought to be done'? Perhaps because he thinks that some people will respond that the question isn't open. Note also that Ross's replies here will work against both parties from para. 4 – i.e. against both those who think that 'right' doesn't mean 'morally good' but that only morally good acts are right, and those who are equating the meaning. So the chapter can be read as about more than just meaning.

[b] Some people use 'morally' in a broader sense than Ross allows. They might say that the effects of some earthquake are 'morally bad'. So Ross needs to clarify what he means by 'morally'. Presumably he has something like praise- and blameworthiness in mind, so that what is morally good is praiseworthy, and what is morally bad is blameworthy. The people talking about the earthquake must mean something different by 'morally' – e.g. 'objectively', 'impersonally', 'agent-neutrally'. Ross's thought, then, is that an act which doesn't proceed from a good motive can't be praised, since the praise is a response to or reward for the agent, and he doesn't deserve it here. But his opponents might say that they are quite happy with the idea that the repayment of the debt *can* be praised – after all, it was the right act! – even if the agent themselves does not deserve any praise. Or they might claim that the agent is in fact deserving of praise, but praise of a quasi-aesthetic kind (as for e.g. the moral saint). Or they might just deny the idea that an act which is morally good has to be praiseworthy. In general, it would seem that Ross is not going to be able to rely strongly on linguistic intuitions here.

[c] The OIC principle is open to a number of interpretations. As Stratton-Lake points out,⁴ if the thought is that when it is (metaphysically or practically) impossible for me to ϕ , then I have no obligation to ϕ , this would mean that if I have promised to ϕ and then culpably make it impossible for myself to ϕ , my obligation lapses. Stratton-Lake says this

⁴ Introduction to his edition of *RG*, xxxi-ii.

seems wrong, since I still have the obligation to ϕ : ‘what I did was wrong *because* it meant that I would no longer be able to fulfil my obligation... We can only make sense of this if we assume that I have made myself unable to fulfil an obligation that survives my inability to fulfil it’.

Stratton-Lake’s worry here seems to be that, on this understanding of the OIC principle, I can get myself off the moral hook by freeing myself of obligations through making it impossible to fulfil them. But actually I’m not off the hook, because people can be – indeed often are – criticized morally not for what they are now doing or not doing, but for what they have done or not done. There is a past tense of ‘ought’: ‘ought to have’. And this, Ross might claim, implies ‘could have’. In this case, then, I ought to have fulfilled my promise, and this is something I could have done. And I ought not to have created conditions which would make it impossible for me to fulfil some obligation – and that is something I could have not done. To explain why criticism of me is appropriate, then, we need not assume that there can be existing obligations that are impossible to fulfil.

But might someone not say of me, right now, ‘Look – you ought to be fulfilling that promise you made’?. Well, yes. But a coherent response to such a charge does appear to be: ‘But I just can’t do that now. Though I agree with you that I ought not to have put myself in the position I’m now in’.

Which way one goes on this issue is, I think, likely to depend on one’s understanding of ‘ought’ itself. If one understands ‘I ought to ϕ ’ as something like ‘I have reason, overall, to ϕ ’, then it seems easier to deny the OIC principle. For if we say that a reason is a property that favours the doing of some course of action, there seems no logical obstacle to speaking of courses of action that in fact I cannot follow as favoured in various ways. When the tiger is charging at me, I have a reason to jump six feet in the air and stay there until the animal has withdrawn. Such reasons are of course deliberately irrelevant, but that isn’t to say that there are none. If, however, one understands ‘I ought to ϕ ’, where ϕ -ing is understood in terms of present or future action, as involving the idea of my being morally *blameworthy* if I fail to ϕ and of my failure to ϕ as being something I could coherently feel *guilty* about, then one might be more tempted to accept the Rossian version of OIC. For there seems something both unreasonable and unfair about sanctions’ being inflicted on someone for failure to do something they cannot do. And it wouldn’t be similarly unreasonable or unfair for sanctions to be inflicted on someone for having failed to do something they could have done.

But there does still seem to be something unconvincing about the Rossian account. For surely I would be blamed (now) for not fulfilling my promise (now), and I might well feel guilty for not fulfilling my promise. Blame and guilt don’t appear obviously inappropriate, and who is to say that their rationality is to be assessed in the light of OIC rather than at face value?

In other words, it appears that OIC as understood by Ross is at least quite controversial, and it would be open to those who equate rightness with moral goodness coherently to deny it.

[d] The equivalence theorist might be prepared to accept both OIC and that Ross is correct to point out that I cannot by choice produce a motive. So there will be no cases in which I ought to ϕ from some motive I do not now have (though of course, as Ross points

out, it may be that in such cases I ought to try to acquire such a motive). But, as Ross also notes, there may be cases in which I do have the motive in question. And in such cases, the equivalence theorist may claim, the right thing for me to do is to act from that motive. So Ross has failed to show that action from a good motive is never morally obligatory. In a draft of his TS on Ross,⁵ Stratton-Lake claims that Ross's argument here 'is premised on the principle that "I ought (here and now) to ϕ " implies "I can choose (here and now) to ϕ ", and suggests that in para. 7 Ross is making two claims: (1) I cannot choose to act from a certain motive if I do not have it; (2) even if I have such a motive, I cannot choose to be motivated by it, rather than by some other motive. He then supports his interpretation by close analysis of arguments about choice in *FE*. That doesn't seem unreasonable, though it should be noted that *FE* came nine years after *RG* – and that in one of those years Prichard's 'Duty and Ignorance of Fact' was published, an article which clearly influenced Ross heavily.

I don't want to deny that Ross needs something like the argument Stratton-Lake finds here. But on the face of it it is hard to find here in para. 7 either the "ought to ϕ " implies "can choose to ϕ " principle or claim (2). Having stated OIC, Ross says: 'It is not the case that I can by choice produce a certain motive ... in myself at a moment's notice, still less that I can at a moment's notice make it effective in stimulating me to act. I can act from a certain motive only if I have the motive'. Stratton-Lake is reading the 'still less' clause as claim (2). I read it as restricted to the case of someone who lacks the motive in question, the idea being that, since I cannot even produce the motive in question, it is absurd to suggest that I can make it effective in motivating me to act. My interpretation rests on the final sentence of the quoted passage, which appears to be contrasting the case just discussed – that in which I lack a motive and so cannot make it effective – with that in which I have the motive (and so, one might assume, *can* make it effective). And that contrast continues in the clause immediately following this passage. It may well be that Ross denied in *FE* that I can make a motive effective. But it is not clear how he can be doing that here, given the contrast on which this para. rests.

8. (2) A similar conclusion may be reached by a *reductio ad absurdum*. Those who hold that our duty is to act from a certain motive usually (Kant is the great exemplar) hold that the motive from which we ought to act is the sense of duty. Now if the sense of duty is to be my motive for doing a certain act, it must be the sense that it is my duty to do that act. If, therefore, we say 'it is my duty to do act *A* from the sense of duty', this means 'it is my duty to do act *A* from the sense that it is my duty to do act *A*'. And here the whole expression is in contradiction with a part of itself. The whole sentence says 'it is my duty to-do-act-*A*-from-the-sense-that-it-is-my-duty-to-do-act-*A*'. But the latter part of the sentence implies that what I think is that it is my duty to-do-act-*A* simply. And if, as the theory in question requires, we try to amend the latter part of the expression to bring it into accord with the whole expression, we get the result 'it is my duty to do act *A* from the sense that it is my duty to do act *A* from the sense that it is my duty to do act *A*', where again the last part of the expression is in conflict with the theory, and with the sentence as a whole. It is clear that a further similar amendment, and a further, and in the end an infinite series of amendments would be necessary in the attempt to bring the last

⁵ Ch. 3, 73-93, esp. 73-7.

part of the expression into accordance with the theory, and that even then we should not have succeeded in doing so.

Summary: The second argument (2) for the view that action from a good motive is never morally obligatory is a *reductio*. The good motive people usually have in mind (see Kant [a]) is the sense of duty. So we might say:

It is my duty to (ϕ from a sense that it is my duty to ϕ).

But the whole expression is in contradiction with a part of itself [b]. If we try to amend it, we get:

It is my duty to (ϕ from a sense that it is my duty to ϕ from a sense that it is my duty to ϕ).

But the last clause is again in conflict with the theory as a whole, and to avoid it will continue the regress.

9. Again, suppose that I say to you ‘it is your duty to do act *A* from the sense of duty’; that means ‘it is your duty to do act *A* from the sense that it is your duty to do act *A*’. Then *I* think that it is your duty to act from a certain motive, but I suggest that *you* should act under the supposition that it is your duty to do a certain thing, irrespective of motive, i.e. under a supposition which I must think false since it contradicts my own.

Summary: Suppose I say to you:

(I) It is your duty to ϕ from the sense of duty.

That means:

(II) It is your duty to ϕ from the sense that it is your duty to ϕ .

But then *I* think that it is your duty to ϕ from a certain motive, but I suggest that *you* should act under the supposition that it is your duty to do a certain thing irrespective of motive – i.e., under a supposition I must think false, since it contradicts my own [c].

10. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that our duty is to do certain things, not to do them from the sense of duty.^a

Summary: So we can conclude that our duty is to do certain things, not to do them from the sense of duty.

^a It should be added, however, that one, and an important one, of our duties is to cultivate in ourselves the sense of duty. But then this is the duty of cultivating in ourselves the sense of duty, and not of cultivating in ourselves, from the sense of duty, the sense of duty.

Note on 8-10: [a] Kant himself often does not make the claim in the form that follows. Rather, he says that the morally good action is the one done from a sense of duty, or that the morally good maxim is duty-based. But he does allow (*Groundwork* 4: 399) that there is a ‘law’ that I should further my happiness not from inclination but from duty, and that (*Groundwork* 4: 400, as translated by Paton and by Beck, but not as by Hill and Zweig) duty is the necessity to act out of reverence or respect for the law.

[b] Ross says that the whole expression is in contradiction with a part of itself. The contradiction he has in mind is:

- (i) It is my duty to ϕ from a sense of duty.
- (ii) It is my duty to ϕ .

This does not seem to be a straightforward contradiction, however, of the kind that we would get by combining (i) with:

- (iii) It is not my duty to ϕ from a sense of duty.

or

- (iv) It is my duty to ϕ not from a sense of duty.

So what we must do is incorporate the thought that what we have here are full stories about duty:

- (v) The full story about duty is (i).
- (vi) The full story about duty is (ii).

Here we have a contradiction, because the content of each of (i) and (ii) is substantively different. The problem, however, is that (i) and (ii) may not both be intended by the Kantian as offering the full story about duty. The full story about duty is (i). (ii) merely gives the content of the motivation required by morality. And it doesn’t seem clear that this motivation itself must figure in the motivation of the person acting rightly. Indeed it seems pretty plausible, on several theories of ethics, that it shouldn’t. A virtue theorist, for example, will assert:

- (vii) It is my duty to help others through concern for them.
- (viii) It is my duty not to be motivated to help others by the thought that it is my duty to help others through concern for them.

Is the problem supposed to arise in particular because of the focus on duty in both the full story about duty and in the story about the motivation required by duty? But it isn’t clear what is special about this case if indirection is permitted elsewhere in ethics.

Nor is there anything especially funny going on in the case of duty. The agent is moved by the thought ‘This is my duty’, and that thought is correct. Ross has indeed pointed out an error into which Kant himself falls at some points; but it is an error which he needn’t have fallen into.

Does making this distinction between the full story about duty and what motivates the agent require us to admit that ‘morally good’ and ‘right’ are not equivalent? I don’t think so, since (i) and (ii) can be restated as:

- (i) It is morally good for me to ϕ from a sense that it is morally good to ϕ .
- (ii) It is morally good for me to ϕ .

Stratton-Lake reads the argument as directed against those who think that ‘morally good’ means ‘that ought to be done’.⁶

- (1) If the motive of duty were the only morally good motive, and if the claim that our duty is always to act from a morally good motive is an analytical truth, it would follow that when we say ‘ ϕ -ing is our duty’ we mean ‘our duty is to ϕ from duty’.
- (2) (1) entails that ‘duty’ means ‘act done from duty’.
- (3) But then the term to be analysed (duty) appears in the analysis.
- (4) (3) means either that there is a conception of duty which contradicts the supposed analysis, or the analysis will lead to an infinite regress.
- (5) (4) entails that the analysis must be false.

This argument is a powerful one – its force is rather similar to that of an open question argument, since it relies on a failure of substitution. But I think it cannot be what Ross meant, since he explicitly says in para. 7 that he intends to show that action from a good motive is never morally obligatory, and that it will follow from this *a fortiori* that ‘right’ doesn’t mean the same as ‘morally good’. So the argument is indeed directed against those who hold the ‘equivalence in meaning’ thesis, but only in so far as they are a sub-group of those who think that action from a good motive can be obligatory.

[c] Ross’s expression here seems confusing. He begins by saying that what is meant by (I) is (II). The idea appears to be that *we* as addressees of Ross’s claim about duty are to take (I) in its normal sense, but as readers of his text we are to understand him as making claim (II). Then the oddity is meant to be that Ross thinks both that it is our duty to ϕ from a certain motive (the sense that it is our duty to ϕ) and that it is our duty to ϕ under the supposition that it is our duty to ϕ irrespective of motive. As I have shown already, though this might appear odd, it is not in fact incoherent once one distinguishes between the different types of claim about duty and motivation in play.

⁶ TS, ch. 3, 72-3.

11. The latter of these two arguments ((1) and (2)) cannot be used against those who hold that it is our duty to act from some other motive than the sense of duty; the sense of duty is the only motive that leads to the infinite series in question. But the first of the two arguments seems in itself sufficient against *any* theory which holds that motive of any kind is included in the content of duty. And though the second argument does not refute the view that we ought to act from some other motive, it would be paradoxical to hold that we ought to act from some other motive but never ought to act from a sense of duty, which is the highest motive.^b

Summary: Only argument (1) above applies against those who say it's our duty to act from some other motive than the sense of duty. But it would be paradoxical to claim we ought to act from some motive but not from a sense of duty, the highest motive.

Note: Ross was writing, of course, before the attacks on Kantian impartialism by Bernard Williams and others, and the rise of modern virtue ethics. Many might now think that the highest motive is something like concern for others, not the sense of duty, which may often, perhaps always, be alienating and inappropriate.

12. Let us now return to the three senses in which Professor Moore points out that we may understand an attempt to define a certain term.^c So far, the position we have taken up with regard to 'right' includes something of each of the first two attitudes he distinguishes. In using 'right' as synonymous (but for the minor distinction already pointed out)^d with 'what is my duty', and as distinct from 'morally good', I believe I am conforming to what most men (if not all men) usually mean when they use the word. But I could not maintain that they always use the word in this way. I am, therefore, to some extent adopting the first of the attitudes he distinguishes, and expressing my own intention to use 'right' in this sense only. And this is justified by the great confusion that has been introduced into ethics by the phrase 'a right action' being used sometimes of the initiation of a certain change in the state of affairs irrespective of motive, and at other times of such initiation from some particular motive, such as sense of duty or benevolence. I would further suggest that additional clearness would be gained if we used 'act' of the thing done, the initiation of change, and 'action' of the doing of it, the initiating of change, from a certain motive. We should then talk of a right act but not of a right action, of a morally good action but not of a morally good act. And it may be added that the doing of a right act may be a morally bad action, and that the doing of a wrong act may be a morally good action; for 'right' and 'wrong' refer entirely to the thing done, 'morally good' and 'morally bad' entirely to the motive from which it is done. A firm grasp of this distinction will do much to remove some of the perplexities of our moral thought.

^b If any one doubts that it is, I beg him to refer to pp. 164-5, where I give reasons in support of the contention.

^c Cf. p. 1 [para. 2 above].

^d pp. 3-4 [para. 5 above].

Summary: So far I've concentrated on the first two of Moore's kinds of definition [a]. In using 'right' as synonymous with 'what is my duty' and not 'morally good', I'm conforming to general use. But since not everyone uses the word in this way, I'm also offering to some extent an AVD. My justification is the great confusion caused in ethics by 'a right action' being used sometimes of the initiation of a change irrespective of motive, and at others of such initiation from some particular motive [b]. Further clarity would come from using 'act' of the thing done, the initiation of change, and 'action' of the doing of it, the initiation of change, from a certain motive. So the doing of a right act might be a morally bad action [c].

Note: [a] In fact, though Ross has had the meaning of right in his sights, his strategy has led him into the territory of substantive definition. He has said a fair amount about what he thinks a right act is and is not. But see note [a] to para. 13 below.

[b] This is surely only a small part of Ross's justification for his AVD. His main justification is that the view he opposes runs into the objections he has outlined.

[c] This distinction is not straightforward, and it would have been helpful if Ross had included some examples. An act, according to Ross, is a thing done, whereas an action is the doing of it from a certain motive. On the face of it, however, a thing done is a doing. Consider a case in which I visit a sick friend. The thing done here is the visiting of a sick friend; but a visiting is one kind of doing. Perhaps what is doing the work in Ross's distinction is the idea of motive. So an act would be a doing considered independently of motivation: the visiting of a sick friend. While an action would be a doing considered along with its motivation: the visiting of a sick friend from kindness, self-interest, a sense of duty, or whatever. In other words, Ross's 'act-action' distinction maps straight onto his 'right'-'morally good' distinction. David Wiggins persuaded me nearly twenty years ago that there is a useful distinction to be made between 'act' and 'action', but that distinction does not involve reference to motivation. Rather, 'act' refers to type, and 'action' to token. So when Wiggins and I cleaned our teeth after lunch, we were performing the same act; but his cleaning and my cleaning were different actions.

13. The question remains, what attitude we are to take up towards Professor Moore's third sense of 'definition'. Are we to hold that 'right' can be defined in the sense of being reduced to elements simpler than itself? At first sight it might appear that egoism and utilitarianism are attempts to define 'right'—to define it as 'productive of the greatest possible pleasure to the agent' or as 'productive of the greatest possible pleasure to mankind'; and I think these theories have often been so understood by some of those who accept them. But the leaders of the school are not unanimous in so understanding their theory. Bentham seems to understand it so. He says^e that 'when thus interpreted' (i.e. as meaning 'conformable to the principle of utility'), 'the words *ought* and *right* . . . and others of that stamp, have a meaning; when otherwise, they have none'. And elsewhere^f he says 'admitting (what is not true) that the word *right* can have a meaning without

^e pp. 3-4 [para. 5 above].

^f *ib.* § 14. 10.

reference to utility'. Yet, as Sidgwick points out,^g 'when Bentham explains (*Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Chap. I, § 1, note) that his fundamental principle "states the greatest happiness of all those whose interest is in question as being the right and proper end of human action", we cannot understand him really to *mean* by the word "right" "conducive to the general happiness"; for the proposition that it is conducive to general happiness to take general happiness as an end of action, though not exactly a tautology, can hardly serve as the fundamental principle of a moral system'. Bentham has evidently not made up his mind clearly whether he thinks that 'right' *means* 'productive of the general happiness', *or* that being productive of the general happiness is what makes right acts right; and would very likely have thought the difference unimportant. Mill does not so far as I know discuss the question whether right is definable. He states his creed in the form 'actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness',^h where the claim that is made is not that this is what 'right' means, but that this is the other characteristic in virtue of which actions that are right are right. And Sidgwick saysⁱ that the meaning of 'right' or 'ought' 'is too elementary to admit of any formal definition', and expressly repudiates^j the view that 'right' means 'productive of any particular sort of result'.

Summary: Can we give a substantive definition of 'right', reducing it to elements simpler than itself? Utilitarianism, for example, might be thought to be an attempt to do this, defining 'right' as 'productive of the greatest possible pleasure to mankind' [a]. Bentham seems to think like this, but as Sidgwick pointed out we can't really understand him as *meaning* by 'right' 'conducive to the general happiness', since this would be to ground ethics on a tautology. Bentham hasn't made up his mind whether he thinks this is the meaning of 'right', or whether being productive of the general happiness is what makes right acts right. Mill doesn't speak of definability at all, and Sidgwick says that 'right' is too elementary to be defined [b].

[a] Ross's understanding of substantive definition here is in tension with that quoted from Moore in para. 2, and this probably explains why he claimed in the previous para. that he had so far restricted himself to the first and second of Moore's senses (see note [a] above). What he appears to have done is turned Moore's third kind of definition into a sub-category of his second kind. So a substantive definition turns out to be a verbal definition proper of a reductive kind. In other words, rather than its being, for example:

A horse is an object with four legs, a head, etc.

it will be:

'Horse' means 'an object with four legs, a head, etc.'

As Ross implies, a simple open question argument is enough to dispose of utilitarianism, or any other normative view, offered as a reductive verbal definition proper.

^g *Methods of Ethics*, ed. 7, 26 n.

^h *Utilitarianism*, copyright eds., 9.

ⁱ *Methods of Ethics*, ed. 7, 32.

^j *ib.* 25-6.

[b] This view is close to Ross's own. But in fact he allows that verbal definitions proper of 'right' are available. 'Right', he says, means 'morally obligatory', 'that ought to be done', 'that is my duty', 'that is incumbent on me'. So 'right' is definable. And note that these definitions could be said to be reductive: 'that ought to be done', for example, involves the notions both of 'ought' (rather than, say, 'must') and 'doing' (as opposed to, e.g., 'feeling'). So Ross offers a substantive definition, in his own sense, of 'right'.

14. The most deliberate claim that 'right' is definable as 'productive of so and so' is made by Prof. G. E. Moore, who claims in *Principia Ethica* that 'right' means 'productive of the greatest possible good'. Now it has often been pointed out against hedonism, and by no one more clearly than by Professor Moore, that the claim that 'good' just means 'pleasant' cannot seriously be maintained; that while it may or may not be true that the only things that are good are pleasant, the statement that the good is just the pleasant is a synthetic, not an analytic proposition; that the words 'good' and 'pleasant' stand for distinct qualities, even if the things that possess the one are precisely the things that possess the other. If this were not so, it would not be intelligible that the proposition 'the good is just the pleasant' should have been maintained on the one hand, and denied on the other, with so much fervour; for we do not fight for or against analytic propositions; we take them for granted. Must not the same claim be made about the statement 'being right means being an act productive of the greatest good producible in the circumstances'? Is it not plain on reflection that this is not what we *mean* by right, even if it be a true statement about what *is* right? It seems clear for instance that when an ordinary man says it is right to fulfil promises he is not in the least thinking of the total consequences of such an act, about which he knows and cares little or nothing. 'Ideal utilitarianism'^k is, it would appear, plausible only when it is understood not as an analysis or definition of the notion of 'right' but as a statement that all acts that are right, and only these, possess the further characteristic of being productive of the best possible consequences, and are right because they possess this other characteristic.

Summary: Moore often claims that 'right' means 'productive of the greatest possible good'. It's clear that this isn't so, on the basis of Moore's own open question argument.

15. If I am not mistaken, Professor Moore has moved to this position, from the position that 'right' is *analysable* into 'productive of the greatest possible good'. In *Principia Ethica* the latter position is adopted: e.g. 'This use of "right", as denoting what is good as a means, whether or not it is also good as an end, is indeed the use to which I shall confine the word'.^l 'To assert that a certain line of conduct is, at a given time, absolutely right or obligatory, is obviously to assert that more good or less evil will exist in the world, if it be adopted, than if anything else be done instead.'^m 'To ask what kind of actions one ought to perform, or what kind of conduct is right, is to ask what kind of effects such action and conduct will produce . . . What I wish first to point out is that "right" does and can mean nothing but "cause of a good result", and is thus always identical with "useful" . . . That the assertion "I am morally bound to perform this action"

^k I use this as a well-known way of referring to Professor Moore's view. 'Agathistic utilitarianism' would indicate more distinctly the difference between it and hedonistic utilitarianism.

^l p. 18.

^m p. 25.

is identical with the assertion “this action will produce the greatest possible amount of good in the Universe” has already been briefly shewn . . . ; but it is important to insist that this fundamental point is demonstrably certain. . . . Our “duty”, therefore, can only be defined as that action, which will cause more good to exist in the Universe than any possible alternative. And what is “right” or “morally permissible” only differs from this, as what will *not* cause *less* good than any possible alternative.’ⁿ

Summary: Moore has in fact moved to the position that what makes acts right is that they produce the best possible consequences. In *Principia Ethica* he holds that ‘right’ is analysable into ‘productive of the greatest good’.

16. In his later book, *Ethics*, Professor Moore seems to have come to adopt the other position, though perhaps not quite unequivocally. On page 8 he names as one of the ‘more fundamental questions’ of ethics the question ‘what, after all, is it that we mean to say of an action when we say that it is right or ought to be done?’ Here it is still suggested that ‘right’ is perhaps analysable or definable. But to this question *Ethics* nowhere distinctly offers an answer, and on page 9 we find, ‘Can we discover any single reason, applicable to all right actions equally, which is, in every case, *the* reason why an action is right, when it is right?’ This is the question which Professor Moore in fact sets himself to answer. But the *reason* for an action’s being right is evidently not the same thing as its *rightness*, and Professor Moore seems already to have passed to the view that productivity of maximum good is not the definition of ‘right’ but another characteristic which underlies and accounts for the rightness of right acts. Again, he describes hedonistic utilitarianism as asking, ‘can we discover any characteristic, over and above the mere fact that they *are* right, which belongs to absolutely *all* voluntary actions which are right, and which at the same time does not belong to any except those which are right?’^o This is the question which he describes hedonism as essentially answering, and since his own view differs from hedonism not in logical form but just by the substitution of ‘good’ for ‘pleasure’, his theory also seems to be essentially an answer to this question, i.e. not to the question what is rightness but to the question what is the universal accompaniment and, as he is careful to add,^p the necessitating ground of rightness. Again, he describes hedonistic utilitarianism as giving us ‘a criterion, or test, or standard by which we could discern with regard to any action whether it is right or wrong’.^q And similarly, I suppose, he regards his own theory as offering a different criterion of rightness. But obviously a criterion of rightness is not rightness itself. And, most plainly of all, he says, ‘It is indeed quite plain, I think, that the meaning of the two words’ (‘duty’ and ‘expediency’, the latter being equivalent to ‘tendency to produce the maximum good’) ‘is *not* the same; for, if it were, then it would be a mere tautology to say that it is always our duty to do what will have the best possible consequences’.^r If we contrast this with *Principia Ethica*, page 169, ‘if I ask whether an action is *really* my duty or *really* expedient, the predicate of which I question the applicability to the action in question is precisely the same’, we see how much Professor Moore has changed his position, and changed it in the direction in which, as I have been urging, it must be changed if it is to be made plausible. And if it is clear that ‘right’ does not mean ‘productive of the greatest

ⁿ pp. 146-8. Cf. also pp. 167, 169, 180-1.

^o p. 17.

^p pp. 44, 54.

^q p. 43.

^r p. 173.

possible good', it is *a fortiori* clear that it does not *mean* 'productive of the greatest possible pleasure, for the agent or for mankind', but that productivity of the greatest possible pleasure for the agent or for mankind is at most the ground of the rightness of acts, rightness itself being admitted to be a distinct characteristic, and one which utilitarianism does not claim to define.

Summary: In *Ethics*, however, he seems to have changed his view, if not unequivocally.

17. But there are theories other than utilitarianism which claim to define 'right'. It would be tedious to try to refute all such theories. With regard to many of them^s it seems to be enough to ask one's readers whether it is not clear to them on reflection that the proposed definition of 'right' bears in fact no resemblance to what they mean by 'right'. But there is one group of theories to which some reference should be made, viz. those that give what may be called a subjective theory of 'right', that identify the rightness of an act with its tendency to produce either some feeling or some opinion in the mind of some one who contemplates it. This type of theory has been dealt with very thoroughly by Professor Moore,^t and I should have little or nothing to add to his convincing refutation. But such theories are perhaps even more prevalent with regard to 'good' than to 'right', and in my fourth chapter I discuss them at some length. I would ask my readers to read the argument there offered, and to reflect whether the refutation I offer^u of subjective accounts of 'good' does not apply with equal force to subjective accounts of 'right'.

Summary: There are theories other than utilitarianism which claim to define 'right', and in the case of most of them it is enough to ask people whether the proposed definition bears any resemblance to what they mean by 'right'. An exception is subjective theories, which 'identify the rightness of an act with its tendency to produce either some feeling or some opinion in the mind of some one who contemplates it' [a]. Moore has dealt adequately with such views, and my arguments in ch. 4 against subjective theories of 'good' apply with equal force to subjective accounts of 'right'.

Note: [a] Again Ross is possibly confusing the Moorean sense of substantive definition with his own. The subjective theories he has in mind are not all those that identify rightness with a tendency to produce a feeling, etc., but only those within this group that offer a verbal definition proper of 'rightness'. That will be a pretty small sub-group. Nor is it clear why these theories appear any more plausible than the ones which can be despatched quickly using the open question argument.

18. Any one who is satisfied that neither the subjective theories of the meaning of 'right', nor what is far the most attractive of the attempts to reduce it to simpler objective elements, is correct, will probably be prepared to agree that 'right' is an irreducible notion.

^s e.g. the evolutionary theory which identifies 'right' with 'conducive to life'.

^t *Ethics*, Chs. 3, 4.

^u pp. 80-104.

Summary: Anyone who thinks that the subjective theories of the meaning of ‘right’ fail, along with the most attractive attempt [a] to reduce it to simpler objective elements, will think that ‘right’ is irreducible [b].

Note: [a] Does Ross mean Moore’s view?

[b] What Ross means here by ‘simpler objective elements’ is, probably, natural properties.⁷

19. Nor is this result impugned by inquiries into the historical development of our present moral notions from an earlier state of things in which ‘what is right’ was hardly disentangled from ‘what the tribe ordains’. The point is that we can now see clearly that ‘right’ does not mean ‘ordained by any given society’. And it may be doubted whether even primitive men thought that it did. Their thoughts about what in particular was right were to a large extent limited by the customs and sanctions of their race and age. But this is not the same as to say that they thought that ‘right’ just meant ‘what my race and age ordains’. Moral progress has been possible just because there have been men in all ages who have seen the difference and have practised, or at least preached, a morality in some respects higher than that of their race and age. And even the supporters of the lower morality held, we may suspect, that their laws and customs were in accordance with a ‘right’ other than themselves. ‘It is the custom’ has been accompanied by ‘the custom is right’, or ‘the custom is ordained by some one who has the right to command’. And if human consciousness is continuous, by descent, with a lower consciousness which had no notion of right at all, that need not make us doubt that the notion is an ultimate and irreducible one, or that the rightness (*prima facie*)^v of certain types of act is self-evident; for the nature of the self-evident is not to be evident to every mind however undeveloped, but to be apprehended directly by minds which have reached a certain degree of maturity, and for minds to reach the necessary degree of maturity the development that takes place from generation to generation is as much needed as that which takes place from infancy to adult life.

Summary: Nor is the irreducibility claim thrown into doubt by inquiries into the history of our moral notions. ‘Right’ may have meant ‘what the tribe ordains’ (though it probably didn’t), but we can see that it doesn’t now. Moral progress has consisted in people putting forward a morality higher than that of their own age. And even if there was a lower consciousness, continuous with ours, which had no notion of right, we needn’t doubt the irreducibility claim nor that the rightness of certain types of act is self-evident. For the self-evident is not evident to all, but only to those sufficiently mature.

20. In this connexion it may be well to refer briefly to a theory which has enjoyed much popularity, particularly in France—the theory of the sociological school of Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl, which seeks to replace moral philosophy by the ‘science des mœurs’, the historical and comparative study of the moral beliefs and practices of mankind. It would

⁷ See Stratton-Lake, TS, xvi-xxvi.

^v For this qualification cf. pp. 19-20.

be foolish to deny the value of such a study, or the interest of many of the facts it has brought to light with regard to the historical origin of many such beliefs and practices. It has shown with success that many of the most strongly felt repulsions towards certain types of conduct are relics of a bygone system of totems and fetishes, their connexion with which is little suspected by those who feel them. What must be denied is the capacity of any such inquiry to take the place of moral philosophy. The attitude of the sociological school towards the systems of moral belief that they find current in various ages and races is a curiously inconsistent one. On the one hand we are urged to accept an existing code as something analogous to an existing law of nature, something not to be questioned or criticized but to be accepted and conformed to as part of the given scheme of things; and on this side the school is able sincerely to proclaim itself conservative of moral values, and is indeed conservative to the point of advocating the acceptance in full of conventional morality. On the other hand, by showing that any given code is the product partly of bygone superstitions and partly of out-of-date utilities, it is bound to create in the mind of any one who accepts its teaching (as it presupposes in the mind of the teacher) a sceptical attitude towards any and every given code. In fact the analogy which it draws between a moral code and a natural system like the human body (a favourite comparison) is an entirely fallacious one. By analysing the constituents of the human body you do nothing to diminish the reality of the human body as a given fact, and you learn much which will enable you to deal effectively with its diseases. But beliefs have the characteristics which bodies have not, of being true or false, of resting on knowledge or of being the product of wishes, hopes, and fears; and in so far as you can exhibit them as being the product of purely psychological and nonlogical causes of this sort, while you leave intact the fact that many people hold such opinions you remove their authority and their claim to be carried out in practice.

Summary: The school of Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl seeks to replace moral philosophy with the *science des mœurs*. There is a tension within it, in its advocating obedience to conventional morality while showing that such codes are the product of bygone superstitions.

21. It is often said, in criticism of views such as those of the sociological school, that the question of the validity of a moral code is quite independent of the question of its origin. This does not seem to me to be true. An inquiry into the origin of a judgement may have the effect of establishing its validity. Take, for instance, the judgement that the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles. We find that the historical origin of this judgement lies in certain pre-existing judgements which are its premisses, plus the exercise of a certain activity of inferring. Now if we find that these pre-existing judgements were really instances of knowing, and that the inferring was also really knowing—was the apprehension of a necessary connexion—our inquiry into the origin of the judgement in question will have established its validity. On the other hand, if any one can show that *A* holds actions of type *B* to be wrong simply because (for instance) he knows such actions to be forbidden by the society he lives in, he shows that *A* has no real reason for believing that such actions have the specific quality of wrongness, since between being forbidden by the community and being wrong there is no necessary connexion. He does not, indeed, show the belief to be untrue, but he shows that *A* has no sufficient reason for holding it true; and in this sense he undermines its validity.

Summary: It is often said that the question of the validity of a moral code is independent of the question of its origin. But inquiries into origins can in fact establish or undermine validity.

22. This is, in principle, what the sociological school attempts to do. According to this school, or rather according to its principles if consistently carried out, no one moral code is any truer, any nearer to the apprehension of an objective moral truth, than any other; each is simply the code that is necessitated by the conditions of its time and place, and is that which most completely conduces to the preservation of the society that accepts it. But the human mind will not rest content with such a view. It is not in the least bound to say that there has been constant progress in morality, or in moral belief. But it is competent to see that the moral code of one race or age is in certain respects inferior to that of another. It has in fact an *a priori* insight into certain broad principles of morality, and it can distinguish between a more and a less adequate recognition of these principles. There are not merely so many moral codes which can be described and whose vagaries can be traced to historical causes; there is a system of moral truth, as objective as all truth must be, which, and whose implications, we are interested in discovering; and from the point of view of this, the genuinely ethical problem, the sociological inquiry is simply beside the mark. It does not touch the questions to which we most desire answers.^w

Summary: In principle, the sociological school is seeking to undermine the validity of our ethical views. But we can see that there are respects in which one moral code is worse than another [a]. Indeed we have *a priori* insight into certain broad principles of morality. There is a system of moral truth which we are interested in discovering – this is the genuinely ethical problem. And the sociological inquiry is irrelevant to that.

Note: [a] Ross is assuming that the choice is between accepting the sociological position that no moral code is better or worse than any other and his version of moral realism. But one might think that the sociological position undermines the idea that there are particularly *moral* reasons for acting, and so there is no *moral* truth, but that there are nevertheless good reasons for adopting a certain moral code instead of some other, such reasons perhaps being grounded in well-being and being storable without using moral concepts.⁸

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^w For a lucid and up to a point appreciative account of the sociological school, and a penetrating criticism of its deficiencies, see ch. 2 of M. D. Parodi's *Le Problème Moral et la Pensée Contemporaine*.

⁸ For comments on and discussion of previous drafts, I am grateful to Krister Bykvist and Philip Stratton-Lake, and participants in a graduate seminar on *RG* the three of us ran in Oxford during Trinity Term 2006.