A Philosophical Primer on Ethics and Morality

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For Eleonore Stump

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PREFACE

This book attempts a comprehensive overview of how ethics works. After all, before embarking on substantive deliberations about ethics one needs to determine just what the field is about and what its contentions are.

Not a single section of the book purports to be "the last word" on the matter. Each merely touches the surface and addresses matters that admit and indeed demand book-length developments. But here sketchiness is not a defect but lies in the very nature of the project. For a primer is not a treatise (let alone library), but rather seeks to present an overview of essentials. The matter is one of cognitive cartography, and a map is not an atlas.

During the covid-19 epidemic there was ample time for a philosopher to philosophize. This book is one of the fruits of this period.

I am greatly indebted to Estelle Burris for her conscientious and competent work in preparing a manuscript able to meet the printer's needs.

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0. INTRODUCTION: NOT *WHAT* BUT *WHY*

This book presents one philosopher's exposition of the complex demands of ethics and morality. However, it will address matters of theory rather than dealing with case studies addressing the particularities of specific practice. The focus is less on the detail of *what* ethics and morality require than on *how* it is that these demands are made and *why* it is we should heed them. For however difficult and complicated it may be to reach the specific ethical decision-rulings at the level of concrete situations, the general principles at issue in ethical deliberation are comparatively straightforward and unproblematic. Such ethical injunctions as "One should honor one's commitments," "One ought to keep one's promises," "One should try to help the needy," etc. carry no news to the benevolent people we all should try to be. At the level of generality, the precepts of ethics are in large measure things that should have been learned "at mother's knee." All this reflects the nature of ethical theory which is, after all, not an instruction manual that gives particular specific action-directives, but rather seeks to account for why those particular mandates are what they are, and what entitles them to make their demands on us.

Two very different lines of consideration stand at the forefront here, the practical with its procedural demand to "Act ethically—be an ethical person," and the theoretical, with its cognitive injunction: "Understand ethics—get a cognitive grasp on what 'being ethical' is all about." And these clearly are different issues. For in the end, you need no more understand ethical theory to be a good person than you need to understand aerodynamics to be a good basketball shooter. Unfortunately, mastering this primer's deliberations on ethical theory will not make you a better, more ethical person. It should, however serve to make you a better judge of what it takes to qualify as such.

Although ethics is taught in the philosophy departments of all colleges and universities, there is a textual shortfall. Instructors teach from anthologies that examine what various classical and contemporary authors say *about* ethics and so generally deal with what is called "meta-ethics." But, surprisingly, there is no text that presents an account of the basics that ethics requires of us and the reasons for maintaining them. The present book—

duly entitled *a Primer*—is original in its effort to fill this gap by providing an overview of the fundamental principles of the field. After all, before one can profitably engage in *meta-ethics*, and assess what philosophers have to say about ethics, one needs to consider what *ethics* itself says on its own account.

I. The Ethical Realm

Personal goodness is the ruling concern of ethics, as per the following questions: What is it that makes actions right and good? Need the good agent realize this? Does he perform them for that reason?

Ethics is a purposive project aimed at channeling people's modes of action and interaction into communally beneficial lines. And ethical theory as an explanatory endeavor seeks to elaborate the nature and the rationale of this effort. Concerned for the, the good and bad, proper and improper, the right and wrong in what agents do, its goal is the articulation of a coherent theory of rational propriety in matters of choice and conduct.

Ethics is thus a functional enterprise whose aim is to direct agent interaction so as to canalize our activities into constructive, productive, and generally beneficial lines. And since its origin in classical antiquity, its aim has been twofold—to foster on the one hand those virtues that lead a person to produce the best realizable version of himself (proper self-development), and on the other to provide for benevolent social integration (the doing right by others which Plato called *dikaiosynê*). And as the ancient moralists insisted, the two are inseparable, since a cogent claim of merit in oneself calls for its correlative acknowledgement in others of one's kind. Accordingly, ethical goodness—like goodness of every kind—provides is its own objective: it is to be pursed because that itself is for the good.

Ethics demands a concern for the best interests of people. But just what is it that is of authentic benefit to them? The immediate answer is clearly: their well-being. But wherein does this consist? Early on offer among the ancients it was: *pleasure.* But would not discontented sagacity be perfected to pleased buffoonery? Then came another try: *happiness*. But cannot this psychic condition be achieved inappropriately, e.g. by drink or drugs? Then came Aristotle's suggestion: rational warranted contentment or selfsatisfaction: *eudaimonia*. And this is certainly a step in the right direction—even though it opens up the difficult question of warrant and validation.

From the standpoint of ethics, people have a dual aspect: the overt *public persona* consisting of what they observably do, and the non-observable, personal and *private persona* consisting of what they would do if there were no humanly managed obstacles to action. Either or both of these personalities could be good or bad—though ideally the two ought to be both harmoniously uniform and alike good.

In every culture, Eastern and Western alike, human life has been viewed as analogous to a journey, with ethics analogized to guidance along "the right way," routed to avert the misery of becoming lost in the dark forest of error and evil. And the mandates of ethics are grounded in the inherent need of rational beings for effective interaction with their fellows towards realizing benign conditions of communal life.

Two questions are pivotal in this context:

- What should I do?
- Why should I do it?

The first seeks to orient action-choices; the second seeks to elucidate the reasons for this. And both questions share the key commonality of a concern for people's interests. For as to the former, one should do that which takes into proper account the best interest of those concerned. And as to the latter, one should do it for that very reason itself, because it takes proper account of their best real interests.

Ethics envisions two main categories of involvement:

- *Obligatees*: Groups or individual agents who bear obligations

and

- *Beneficiaries*: Groups or individuals who benefit for the obligations borne by obligation.

Obligation is a fundamental reciprocal process: One can only bear obligation toward those who themselves are capable of bearing obligations—with one exception, namely the exception to all of the rules, viz. Reality-at-large. This mega-example apart, you can only be obligated to a beneficiary who can bear obligation to others, who can be responsible for heeding the interests of others. And this means that you cannot bear obligation obligated to irresponsible items, and specifically toward animals, artifact, and natural configurations. The idea of obligations to dogs, to temples, and to trees is a peculiar myth. You can only be obligated to other bearers of obligation.

However, while you would be obligated *to* them, you can—and do—certainly have obligations *for* them: you are obligated to respect the, and accord them due care. But this obligation for (and not *to*) them is a diminutive consequence to your obligation to yourself, viz. to realize the best-avail-

able version of yourself. For by maltreating these (let alone having or destroying them) you are making yourself into a bad person and thereby damaging yourself. Such obligation as you have for respecting them is a natural consequence of your duty to yourself—that of realizing the very best version of yourself that you can possibly be.

What sort of beings are of ethical concern? Just who bears ethical obligations and responsibilities? The answer is that it is the welfare of intelligent beings—rational agents—that is the definitive concern of ethics. However, we humans (and perhaps certain of our animal fellows)—are the only such beings naturally provided within our earthly reach and range. The human person accordingly occupies a central sector in the domain of ethical concern. Broadly considered, however, it is not we humans alone that belong. The crux is not membership in the species *homo sapiens*. For there are no decisive grounds for excluding high-grade mammals. Nor should we exclude the alien extra-terrestrials who might visit us in airships from outer space. And the celestial spirits or even angels (should they exist) would also belong to the domain. The concern of ethics is for *persons* and these are not necessarily *humans*. Ethical comportment is thus incumbent on rational agents in general. Whenever a being can make choices on the basis of reasons, the range of reasons at issue in ethics comes into operation.

To what extent does the constitution of agents determine their eligibility for ethical responsibility? In large part it hinges on mental capacities but the issue is complex and difficult. There will be many situations where even small children are eligible. Inability to perform in general provides an adequate excuse. However excuses become inappropriate and unavailing when the circumstances of the excuse are produced by the agent himself or is something the agent could have foreseen and averted. However, self-provided incapacitation through drugs and drink poses problems, though as a rule such self-induced incapacities leaves ample room for recrimination.

And so, in the end it is not *humanity* that is the crux of ethics, but *rationality*. Rational creatures—beings that can act on the basis of thought—are at the center here. After all, rationality is what we humans ourselves see as paramount here. It stands at the essential core of how we view ourselves and claim to be what we are. Who would not rather lose an arm or leg than to lose their reason? And so respect for reason is a key aspect of ethics, with concern for the welfare of rational beings at large as its fundamental mandate.

Modern ethical theorists incline to adopt a theory of animal rights and even to project such an expanded conception of rights and entitlements to the inanimate realm of our natural environment. As they see it, we should treat animals well, avoid vandalism, and preserve nature because animals,

artworks, and trees all have entitlements and rights that we would violate in proceeding otherwise. All such items are entitled to beneficiaries of our ethical comportment because "we owe it to them" in view of their intrinsic worth. At bottom, we are obligated to those trees, those horses, those temples, on account of the claims that these particular merits have upon us.

From the present perspective all this looks to be a far-fetched and implausible myth.

As the present perspective has it—only ethical agents figure in the ethical calculus: it is they alone that qualify as ethical beneficiaries able to make demands for recognition by others. They do have rights, entitlements, and obligations.

But what then of the animals cruelty, artifact vandalism, abuse of nature? All this continue to be seen as being as bad and wicked ever, but for very different reasons. Thus we must continue to treat Rivers well, and to respect the Acropolis, and to preserve the Brazilian rainforest to because of their entitlement and due to our "owing it to them" but rather because of what it is that we owe to ourselves. For in being committed to doing good we have to be the sort of agent who respects animals, prize noble artifacts, value the beauties and riches of nature. In sum, it is in virtue of what is required of us rather than of what is due to them that we have those ethical obligations to respect items which, in themselves, fall outside the sphere of ethical agency.

On this view then only players on the stage of ethics are rational agents. They are the only items to which we owe ethical comportment and the sale banners of ethical entitlements. But they are not the only beneficiaries of ethical obligation. Because we also have obligations for the respectful treatment of animals, artifacts, and natural configurations—not because we "owe it to them" but because we owe it to ourselves (as rational agents) and to others (and appreciation to their positivities).

The question is, what entitles to stake claims, assert rights, affirm entitlements? Only agents can do this not animals, nor artifacts nor natural configurations. But all these things can have value and qualify for being valued. And it is because this ought to be rationale agent that they deserve respect and gain ethical relevance. They are steps of ethical *XXX* not because of their claims but because of their merits which deserve respect by others.

I should treat Rover well not because he has a claim on me but because I respect him but because I (should) respect myself—and would lose warrant for self-respect were I to do otherwise. It is not because *he* is entitled to something but because I am entitled to it. In treating Rover well I acknowledge my debt not to him but to Reality—because I owe it to the best version of myself. It is an obligation not rooted in *their* rights but rooted in

my-obligation issuing from my indebtedness to the Real. Because of the Reality-oriented obligation, I have to try to produce the best version of myself.

The reasoning is to I owe Rover good treatment: I shall treat Rover well but: a world in which Rover is well treated is a better world: I shall treat Rover well.

Rover is only an oblique beneficiary of one obligation whose mental beneficially is mine and whose ultimate beneficiary is Reality.

But what about the "lower" forms of organic being—or indeed even for the inert objects of natural or productive artifice? Is not the natural environment, or the realm of artifice also ethically relevant? Do not environmental abuse, animal cruelty, or sheer vandalism constitute modes of ethical wrongdoing? Is respect for nature's bounty or for human creativity not something for which ethics demands respect? Yes, of course they are! But not because flower and forests are in themselves ethically positive factors but, rather because they matter to us, the rational beings who care about them. We owe it to ourselves to have concern for the things that rational beings do and should prize and value. The ethical relevancy of such items ultimately lies not in themselves as such, but rather in the fact that they do and should matter for us.

Ethics is concerned both with actual and with merely possible action. But somewhat different issues arise in the two cases.

With the actual acts of rational agents an inquiry concerned for ethical credit will begin by asking:

- Are someone's best interests (likely to be) affected negatively or positively by the act at issue?
- Does (or in the circumstances should) the agent realize this?
- Does the agent actually indeed the act to contribute to realizing this foreseeable result?

With situations that involve the possibility of acting, an inquiry concerned for ethical merit will begin with a different set of questions:

- Does the situation call for an agent to act for the sake of someone's best interest?
- Can, does, or should the agent realize this?

- Does the agent respond to this realization in an ethically appropriate way?

- If not, does the agent have an appropriate excuse?

When an intelligent agent acts benevolently despite having a valid excuse for not doing so we enter into the realm of the ethically supererogatory—of going above and beyond the mandatory requirements of ethics.

From an ethical point of view, actions can be graded on a five-category scheme as per Display 1, and omissions are open to analogous appraisals. Perhaps the idea of ethically positive omissions may seem somewhat counter-inductive. But it is clear that (for example) you should refrain from giving medical assistance where someone more qualified than you is available.

The ethical acceptability of decisions and actions does not lie "in the eye of the beholder." Rather, it is a matter of their predictable tendency to serve the best (or "real") interest of those who have a stake in the matter which may be an individual agent or the community at large.

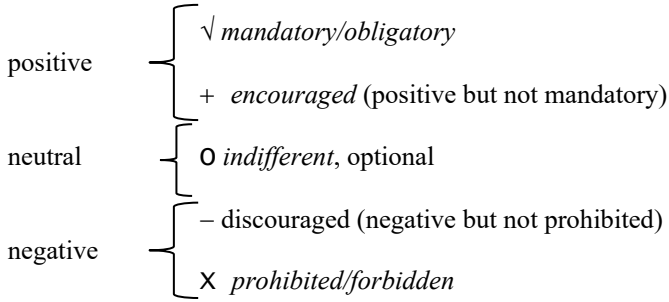
The ancient Greeks analogized ethics to medicine. They paired good/bad with healthy/unhealthy, and viewed ethics as a matter of psychic well-being just as medicine is a matter of physical health. By contrast, the theorists of the Enlightenment analogized ethics to mathematics and viewed ethics as a matter of right thinking about action just as mathematics is a matter of right-thinking about figures. The moderns tend to analogize ethics to engineering and see ethical propriety as a matter of social engineering in arranging the modes of personal interaction into generally constructive and productive lines. Each of these perspectives makes a positive contribution to understanding ethics.

Morality is arguably the most significant sector of ethics, so that the mandates of ethics apply in the domain of morality as well. When ethics says "be fair," "be just," "be reliable," "be honest," morality says "Amen." Ethics deals with how people ought properly to act overall; morality deals with how people should properly interact with other intelligent beings, and so to act when the best interest are concerned.

Not every sort of error in human relations or mistake is an ethical failing—a sin in the old-fashioned sense of the term. Some are social mis-steps (*faux pas*), others are cognitive mistakes—miscalculations for example. Only those errors that are blameworthy—*reprehensible* in their failure to do what is right and proper in relation to the interests of people—will fall into the realm of ethical reproach.

Display 1

Modes of Ethical Status



Must ethics be theologically grounded? Is doing "the will of God" the only—or main—function and mandate of ethics? Is pleasing God by doing His will the ultimate basis of ethics?

The answer has to be a negative. It does not go to the heart of the matter because it bypasses the key issue of rationale—of why it is that God would prize ethical comportment. His reason cannot but be that it serves the best interest of rational agents. No doubt a creator-God would want good, ethically motivated agents for his world. But He would do so because of his benevolent intent in the well-being of the intelligent creatures.

The Christian resolution of any conflict between obligations to one's faith and to one's society should proceed without compromise: one must render onto Caesar that which is Caesar's and onto God that which is God's. On this basis, the resolution of these matters is relatively straightforward. It should be guided by two principles: (1) A reasonable religion would not impose requirements at odds with our ethical and moral commitments, but would reinforce and sustain them, and (2) a reasonable state would not make demands of people that run counter to their moral and religious commitments. Of course, things in this world are not always as they ought to be. But when they are not, then we ourselves have the obligation to do our best to make them so.

II. The Mission of Ethics

The aim of ethics as a purposive endeavor is to channel conduct into generally beneficial lines—to orient actions into ways that are positive and constructive in relation to the best interests of those concerned. The goal of the enterprise is to induce agents to act in ways that optimally benefit the relevant stakeholders. As regards our individual fellows, ethics enjoins us to respect and foster the best interests of our individual fellows and of the wider community. Ethics thus has a straightforward task: to explain how to live and act virtuously: how to be a good person. And the welfare of intelligent beings—rational agents—is the definitive concern of ethics.

The mission of ethical theory is to elucidate the principles that ground and explain our ordinary per-systematic assessments of human actions and interactions. It seeks to systematize and explain the appropriate standards of right and wrong, benevolent and evil, good and bad in these matters.

The idea—first articulated in Ralph Cudworth's 1672 tract *On the Laws of Nature*—puts the pivotal principle here as "a due regard for the common good of all." And this is a matter that encompasses both altruism and enlightened self-interest.

So understood, ethical theory seeks to provide cogent answers to three basic questions:

1. What is it that people should do to care for the interests of others? What demands does moral appropriateness put on us in this connection?

2. How is it that those things are asked of us? What is the moral rationale for theses ethical requirements and injunctions?

3. Why should we honor these demands? What endows them with the force of obligations?

Of course, the basic requirements of *ethical conduct* are just that: they are basic and not the fruits of sophisticated theory. For the most part they are things one learn at mother's knee—and on the children's playground. ("Play fair," "Let Johnny have a turn," "Obey the rules," . . .). In contrast, the key questions of ethical theory are more challenging generalities such as: What

is it that accounts for those ethical demands beings as is? And, no less importantly, Why is it that we should honor them? For in the end, ethical comportment is a matter of *doing the right thing for the right reasons* so as to make us into good persons.

Ethics seeks to promote the best interests of intelligent agents at large—to forge a user-friendly social environment of the kind that (virtually) all of us would prefer to inhabit—the aim is to promote modes of individual action conducive to the best interests of agent and the community at large that constitutes his life-context.[1]

Does ethics have concern for the interests of "lower" beings who lack intelligence or does it come only from their intelligent kind-mates? Yes, of course it does. For intelligent beings do and should take them to heart, taking an interest in and having a concern for their interests as well. Even the wanton destruction of the inert—pointless vandalism against the creations of nature and of man—is anathema to ethics.

Goodness largely consists in heeding the strictures of ethics and morality by acting both *as* their mandates require and *because* they require it. Ethics accordingly involves elucidating:

- what goodness is
- what virtue—the pursuit of goodness—consists in
- why people should be virtuous and accept goodness as a key desideratum

And virtue in this context roots in so acting as to make the world a better place that it otherwise would be. In fact, we can see this as the *Fundamental Principle of Ethics* to which all of ethics and morality is somehow subordinated. It is embodied in classic principles of generality—"Do unto others . . .", "Act as you would have others do," and "Act so that you could reasonably have your actions become universal" are immediate consequences of this Fundamental Principle. Being encompassed under an appropriate generalization is the key here.

In a world that is often difficult and uncooperative—where all too often people fail to so "the right things" and to get their "just deserts"—a good person will not necessarily have what is called a good life. But there is nevertheless a connecting linkage between the two. This is based on the principle that a good person will—as such—make an endeavor to enable some among his fellows to have a good life, and will certainly not do anything that impedes this outcome unnecessarily.

How you are thought of by others will be a consequence of your observable actions. But the overt externalities need not actually reflect your true moral condition, since ethical propriety requires proper motivation. You are a good person not because others *do* think well of you, but because others *should* think well of you because you deserve this on the basis of what you *try* to so—what may not be all that evident in the circumstances.

III. Ethics, Morality, and Mores

A faux pas is one thing and a sin another. Morality and mores have a complex relationship. Mores are a matter of communal custom—of the behavioral ways of country or culture. They are subject to the rule: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." Honoring their injunctions is more a matter of prudence than of morals, of pleasing people rather than only giving them just due.

Morality requires the individual to rise above narrowly construed self-interest to an appreciation of the general good that includes the real and best interest of the whole, oneself included. It is predicated in the realization that the general interest not only encompasses the overall best self-interest of individuals but is itself encompassed therein. Mores are something else again. What is at issue is not a mandate but a social presumption whose violation is not a moral transgression but whose acknowledgement is generally a thing of credit and positivity. The violate of morality's mandates marks one as an immoral and bad person, to transgress the mores makes one ill-mannered and, at its most, a boor. Yet the two are not entirely disconnected. For to behave in ways indifferent to the discomfort of others and heedless of their expectations is indeed something of an ethical transgression. Indifference to and heedlessness of the locally established ways of behavior manifests an ethical negativity that should not be indulged in the absence of good and cogent reasons to the contrary.

And so, even mere customs thus have some moral weight—there is something of a "loose coupling" between mores and morals prevailing under an aegis of the principle that it is an act of kindness and courtesy to treat people as they are accustomed to and expect. Thus while morality and mores are very different and morality respects mores, via the principle of social solidarity: "Respect others: honor the established practices of those about you, do not ignore let alone violate their ways unless there is good reason for it." (However that "unless" caveat it crucial here.)

It needs to be stressed that the present contrast between the normative, ideality-oriented understanding of morality and the factual, reality-oriented understanding of mores is in diametrical opposition to the Hegelian idea that propriety (normativity) roots in the customs, instantiations, and laws of the community to which the agent belongs. The gap between mores and morality mirrors that between actuality and ideality, with mores geared to a reality

potentially far remote from the idealities at issue with ethics. For all too commonly we humans honor the ways of ethics more in the breach than in the observance.

All the same, mores—the modes of customary behavior—do not furnish the standard of *ethical* propriety, simply because people are not in general good and their behavioral customs need not be so. The author of the excellent article on Ethics in the classic 11th (1910) edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* wisely observed that "the need which most philosophers have felt for some philosophical foundation of morality arises, not from any desire to subordinate moral insight to speculative theory, but because the moral facts themselves are inexplicable except in the light of first principles which metaphysics alone can criticize [i.e., validate]." (Op. cit.) And this seems completely right because the ultimate foundation of ethics is not the scientifically accessible status of the behavioral scheme of things, but the speculatively accessible status of rational beings in the general scheme of things that is the ultimate basis of moral validation.

IV. Group and Professional Ethics

Collective responsibility is just exactly that—collective. It emphatically does *not* function distributively and it cannot automatically be projected upon the individuals who constitute that collectivity. We can indeed reason from "Tom, Dick, and Harry talked about mathematics" to "Tom and Dick talked about mathematics." But we can no more reason from "Tom, Dick, and Harry carried the piano upstairs" to "Tom and Dick carried the piano upstairs" than we can reason from "Tom, Dick, and Harry filled up the sofa" to "Tom and Dick filled up the sofa." Only in very special cases will features of collectivities project down to their component units.

The community of persons is an organism—a whole composed of parts whose coordinated functioning is essential to the well-being of its members. Group responsibility has two different versions: the collective, where the responsibility belongs to the group as a whole without explicitly involving any of its members, and the distributive, where responsibility derobes individually to each and every group member. And we cannot move automatically from collective to distributive obligation in moral reasoning. It is true—even if unfortunate—that collectively geared obligations do not always engender distributively specific duties. What is collectively obligating may fail to be so at the level of individuals.

When there is occasion for warning people of an imminent danger, this should doubtless be done by somebody, yet no one in particular can be blamed for not doing so. There is no distributivity here: you can be member of a reprehensible group without being reprehensible yourself. Where group action or inaction is reprehensible, its individuals may possibly be guiltless. Jones is embarking on an unhealthy lifestyle and self-destruction. Someone among his associates ought to warn him. If no one among them lifts a finger, then this group deserves reproach. But no single member bears culpability. (The saying has it that what is everyone's business is nobody's business.)

It makes sense to say that a collectivity wants or intends something only when we have either:

i. *consensual subscription*: when the macro-objective at issue is something that the generality or the substantial majority of group members want *as such*, and thus rendering it into an object of the collective *volonté générale*, so to speak;

or:

ii. r*epresentative endorsement*: when the duly delegated representatives of the group's members agree to producing the result in question.

To be sure, distributive coincidence is not sufficient to yield deliberateness of intent at issue. The element of collective coordination must be present and such coordination must be of the right sort of coordination. The members of a board may distributively happen to be of one mind in all wanting the chairman dead, but this does not mean that the one who goes and shoots him is implementing a group consensus. Those who have remained inert have certainly not "agreed" to the murder simply in view of their (doubtless reprehensible) attitude. For collective responsibility, the group must constitute something of a "moral person" with a collective unity of mind.

However, if there is to be responsibility it must be individualized responsibility requires responsible individuals: group responsibility cannot exist without individual responsibility. And this need for a proper grounding in the responsibility of individuals means that it cannot happen that a group does something wrong without there being culpable individuals at whose door some of the blame can be laid. (Note that it is crucial for the tenability of this statement that it reads "something *wrong*" and not merely "something *bad*.") Group responsibility must have a basis in the responsibilities of individuals and cannot manage to exist without this.

The mandates of ethics are matters of conditional universality. What they prescribe holds for everyone and anyone, albeit for everyone and everyone who finds themselves in certain condition or circumstance. For even in matters of seeming universality, there can intrude a restricting conditionality that provides for variation and flexibility. This is exhibited, for example, in the injunction:

- Find some effective way of making a constructive contribution to the community of which you are a part.

It appertains to everyone but permits of endless variation in line with talents, interests, etc.

An agent can act:

- on his own personal account

- as a commissioned agent acting for someone else, either as an individual or as an organization. In the first case the agent bears the entire responsibility in the ethical situation; in the latter case there is a division of responsibility in line with the exact details of their relationship of representation. (The shop attendant bears virtually no responsibility for flaws in the product he sells, the ship captain relief officer bears virtually total responsibility for the mishaps on his watch.)

- in a professional capacity—that is, a member of a certain group.

On this perspective, we come up against the fact that every line of constructive endeavor, every mode of employment, and every profession—be it as a store clerk, a plumber, or a medical doctor—has its own characteristic body of ethical rules. This yields a proliferation of varying modes of ethical obligation all subject to that aforementioned variability, but linked by subsumption under the universal principle:

- Whatever be your line of constructive endeavor, cultivate it appropriately: competently, conscientiously, honestly.

Thus while the ethical obligations of a plumber, a physician, or a ship's captain, etc., are all very different, they all fall within the scope of the generic fundamental prescription of performative propriety, and follows from its adaptation to the modus operandi at issue.

This situation makes ethics into a complex enterprise with a vast number of situation-correlative rules. The fact of it is that groups can sometimes produce terrible results for which, as such there is no individual fault. But when this happens there is always something in the situation for which all individuals bear some responsibility. And there is a significant lesson here. Causal and moral responsibility behave very differently in situations of collectivity. By hypothesis, an agent whose intended actions play a contributing part on the side of *causal* production will thereby and for this very reason bear a share of *causal* responsibility in relation to the overall product. But, of course, *moral* responsibility is not like that; it is not simply a matter of aggregation. For here, the whole can be less than the sum of its parts—or more. No causal collective results can exist without individual causal contributions. But collective morally negative or positive results cannot emerge in situations where no individual make any personal contributions of a morally positive or negative coloration.

* * *

There is a crucial difference between morality and mores. After all, customs and manners can and often do go morally awry. Nevertheless, customs deserve some respect from the moral point of view.

Being antisocial—flaunting the established rules and customs of the society—is something that merits not just displeasure but also condemnation. It is a matter of doing something that is not just annoying but also bad, not just boorish but also wrong. It deserves not just dislike and disapproval, but also reproach and reprehension. But how is it that social practice has normative force? What accounts for the fact that we *should* drive on the putatively mandated side of the road, greet random strangers we encounter in the morning, or eat our food in a mannerly way? Whence comes this link between social conformity and ethical normativity? Why is social conformity not only common but also ethically mandated?

The answer is straightforward. What ties social conformity to moral propriety is the factor of *social benefit*—of public utility and general advantage. For acting with a view to the interests of others is at the heart and core of morality, and those laws and customs have come to be established practices and constituted exactly because following them is to the general benefit of the community at large.

To be sure, there may be no inherent advantage to driving on the left (or right) side of the road. But once customs or laws coordinate a generality of procedure one way or the other, keeping to the rule is obviously to everyone's advantage in avoiding inconvenience, delay, and collisions. Accordingly, it is the factor of general advantage that mediates between mere—and often arbitrary—custom and ethical propriety, endorsing the former with the authority of the latter. In this way, what is on first view mere social practice comes to acquire the force of moral mandate. Conforming to the rule of practice is something one *ought to do* (with all ethically due normativity) because it effectively advantages the general benefit, thus making an ethical mandate out of what is inherently a mere social practice.

After all, the uniformization inherent in an established social practice serves the communal benefit in many ways, specifically by:

—reducing friction in social interaction,

—aligning conduct that makes it easier to indicate what is going on,

—shaping expectations in ways that facilitate social interaction,