CHAPTER X

SOME MORAL NICETIES

Angles on Moral Norms

Why, we have asked, do states obey the law? Why, we might have asked, does anyone obey it? To this some might answer: Because he knows, or because he considers, or because he feels, that he ought to. But what precisely do we mean by this 'ought' with respect to which men may report themselves as having knowledge, or beliefs, or feelings—if not all three, or at any rate two, of these at once? If we are to think about 'ought-ness', we had better reflect a little on how far we ourselves would claim to have knowledge, or beliefs, or feelings in reference thereto. It might be difficult except in the presence of some specific moral issue—some concrete question of 'ought-ness'—to examine ourselves realistically as to how exactly we can describe our position in this matter.

Let us first of all note that for the focusing of moral issues there are three distinct perspectives: those (*a*) of the social analyst, with his interest in the ways that men behave and are expected to behave; (*b*) of the moralist, with his evaluative standpoints; and (*c*) of the social practitioner, the live individual with his participation in the struggle of life and his involvement in the particular situations where the moral issues present themselves for appraisement. To the social scientist the given elements include the given norms. With respect to these his interest is in at least three questions: (*a*) What are the norms in a given milieu? (*b*) How far is respect for them expected (in the sense of foreseen as likely in practice to be shown)? and (*c*) How far is it expected (in the sense of demanded)? The social analyst as such is not interested in the intrinsic value or validity of the norms, but in their status as obtaining in a given 'world'.

To the moralist the norms are standards, criteria, canons,

yardsticks, touchstones, ideals, wherewith as from the sideline to test the propriety of behaviour not his own. To the participant they are a framework with reference to which he renders his responses in the hourly routine of living. What to the moralist are predilections are scruples to the practitioner.

Behaviour as Affected by Norms

Behaviour in social situations is, we may say, affected by (*a*) what people in such situations are supposed to do; by (*b*) what in fact they generally do do; by (*c*) what it would be congenial to do; and by (*d*) the scruples whereby, in the circumstances obtaining, the congenial is rendered inadvisable—these scruples being in part inspired by (*a*) and (*b*) and in part, with some people, by (*e*), namely considerations of an ethical nature having weight with them individually or as members of special sub-groups, rather than having the status of common social norms.

It is a natural assumption that the norms whereby one values the conduct of others are those by which in like conditions one's own conduct would, one believes, be guided. Few of us admit that our judgments upon others are harsher than those we would be content to have passed on ourselves. If in similar circumstances we were to behave like that, we should, rightly, we tell ourselves, feel ashamed, and would feel no surprise at being frowned upon for it by our neighbours. Such seems to be the implication.

The Claims of the Sociological Approach

There is nothing inherently objectionable in the role of the moralist practising his appreciating of behaviour in the light of moral norms. What is regrettable is the way the attraction of that role may draw people away from the independent role of social analyst, or social physician. What the sociological approach should produce is not a de-moralising of the student's view of politics, but an improvement of his spectacles.

Aspects of Ethical Judgments

We all have our feelings on moral issues. How we will have come by them is a question on which Freudian psychology,

and metaphysical speculation, may alike purport to assist us. Enough, for present purposes, to note that we often are not at a loss to know and to specify just how something strikes us, as considered from the moral point of view. We may note too that on a moral issue we may often have little difficulty in sensing the existence of a prevalent, or communal, or at least a fashionable, standpoint, as one which, as seeking social respectability in our milieu, it is propitious for us to espouse. We also may note that, whatever our feeling and whatever the fashion, the judgment in such cases involved usually admits of being so expressed as seemingly to claim a universal, and not merely relative, validity, and that what makes this all so easy is the fact that the very framing of the question to be answered will commonly not have been undertaken until it was known in advance what the answer was to be. If we wanted one answer then the question arising was: Are we in favour of peace? If the other, then: Are we in favour of appeasement? Either way, our formulation reads as if dictated—inescapably—by the very nature of the case.

Belief in Others' Badness

It is among the facts of life—whether international or not—that man's brother does not hold him guiltless. People do in fact find fault. Herein they expose their basic position on two metaphysical points. They show themselves to be assuming that man is indeed possessed of that freedom, failing which no imputation to him of responsibility for his doings would make much sense at all. And they show themselves as further assuming that in matters of conduct there is, not just conventionally, but ontologically, an opposition between the right and the wrong. Bad behaviour may be iniquitous, as bad weather never is. For the badness of bad behaviour is a moral badness. Men do therefore seem to assume the reality of a moral order, not just as a mental construct invented by a particular community but universal in its embrace. They do not prove this and might be hard put to it even to pretend to do so. But they assume it, as a rule without any question. It appears in short to be a key ingredient in their understanding of life.

Why So Certain?

If he happens to be a theist, the student should ask himself whether he thinks anyone is in a position to say with certainty what, in a given situation, the will of God prescribes. If, on the other hand, he is an atheist, or an agnostic, he should ask whether he does not, even so, believe in the ontological validity of the right–wrong antithesis. If not, has he any ground whatever for maintaining that anything ever is right, as distinct from supposedly right? Believing, if he on the other hand does, in the validity of the distinction, he should ask himself whether either he or anyone else has good reason to feel confident of knowing what in a given situation the distinction requires.

Acknowledgments to Parmenides

A man may believe absolutely that God's will should be done, and yet not claim to know with certainty what in a particular matter it requires. A sceptic too in things religious may as a moralist equally accept as absolute the distinction between right and wrong; and yet, here again, not claim in a given situation to know with certainty which is which. And this even with respect to the behaviour of others, though on this it seems in general to be so much easier to pass confident judgment than on one's own. A world in which no one believed in the objective validity of the right–wrong distinction might have its drawbacks. But hardly less would a world in which everyone felt certain he knew what in practice was right and what was wrong. The Greeks had a distinction—between *doxa* (opinion as available in say art) and *episteme* (knowledge as available in say mathematics). (Plato probably believed that *episteme* was in principle not ultimately unattainable in matters of right and wrong. But as yet, as he saw, what men had had in such matters was nothing better than *doxa*.) Even when my opinion is elevated into an orthodoxy, mere *doxa* it remains. It is one thing to fight and die, to murder and destroy, in defence of one's opinion because one believes it is the right thing to do. It is another to claim that one knows it is the right thing to do: or to claim that one's opinion, one's orthodoxy, is *episteme*. The crusader is one who is not merely

confident that his orthodoxy is the truth, but also that it is his duty to impose this belief upon others who take the like view of theirs. In the seventeenth century relative domestic peace was achieved in England because men with opposing orthodoxies agreed in effect to live and let live. Were the world as a whole to follow England in the adoption of this principle, the future for mankind might be brighter than it now appears to be. But even in England men are not all of them equally convinced that it would be right to apply in the world as a whole this principle now traditional domestically within the U.K.

Puritanism in Odd Places?

There thus would seem to be six questions on which it is well, if one can, to clear one's mind.

(*a*) Does one believe that there is a will of God for mankind?
(*b*) If yes, does he believe that he, or anyone else, can be certain of what it is?
(*c*) Does he believe that the antithesis right–wrong is objective and absolute?
(*d*) Does he believe that he, or anyone, can be certain as to what, in any given situation, is, for anyone involved in it, the right thing to do?
(*e*) Does he believe it can be right to co-exist peacefully with those who do not share his conviction as to what is right and what is wrong?
(*f*) Does he, where he happens to have the means of doing so, believe it right to impose upon others conformity with convictions which they do not hold on what is right and what is wrong?

The chiefly important thing perhaps is to recognise that it is possible, while believing in the absoluteness of the right–wrong antithesis, to doubt if anyone can say with certainty what in given circumstances it implies; and, in any case, to believe that it is not necessarily wrong, and may even be right, to respect in such matters the freedom and the duty of others to live in terms of their own convictions rather than of ours. Even to believe that one knows what would be right for others does not entail believing that one should make war upon them to compel their conformity with what one 'knows'.

Whom and What Does One Blame?

It is wise, particularly in relation to international politics, to be awake, even though one have no remedy for it, to the war between one's intelligence and one's emotions; and to be on guard for the moments when it is by one's emotions and not one's intelligence that one's judgment, and actions, are chiefly determined. No one, presumably, in his more coldly self-critical moments would be heard to reproach himself for being a man and not a woman, or a mortal and not an angel. One accepts no responsibility for how one was born. And does anyone in his fairer-minded moments blame a bluebottle fly for having been born a bluebottle? Yet which of us, when pursuing, to destroy it, the not-intendingly-offending fly, does not blame it for being what it is? Do we when thinking judicially blame the child for his parentage, or for the sins of his forebears? Do we not acknowledge to ourselves that the threatening part of the Second Commandment bespeaks a philosophy of punishment the strict fairness of which, in human terms, can only remain a mystery? Yet does this suffice to enable us, as rational people, wholly to jettison the pre-civilised mentality that issues in attitudes of that kind? Which of us is not basically ambivalent on whether one is really entitled to accept credit for the achievements of one's ancestors, or the greatness of one's country? Which of us wholly rejects the idea that the Germany of tomorrow (meaning in practice the Germans of tomorrow) will at least be more to blame than we are for the misdoings of the Germany of a generation back? As the individual quite reasonably feels to blame, still, for his failings in the past, so, in idea, has she the person Germany to accept responsibility, and Germans of today to share the odium, for her misdoings under former dispensations.

Should Batsmen Take Wickets?

In the kind of comments we commonly hear on what governments do, there is often a seeming indifference to the facts of their concrete situation; and especially to the choices effectively open to them at the moment of their choosing as they do. Criticism seems mostly preoccupied with showing that politicians are not so high-principled as they may look. Almost

every popular judgment upon a government's action tends to run in moral terms. Often of more interest might be a view on the virtuosity, rather than on the virtue, of the action. Governing is the filling of a role, which itself is never the invention of those who come to fill it. The role is an incidental feature of the multi-governmental and inter-governmental global set-up which is the source of its meaning. A man may be better at bowling than at batting, but even so one does not fault him for not bowling when it is now his turn to bat.

If then one is to evaluate behaviour, one had better have some claim to understand it—and what behaviour is it possible to understand save in the context in which it occurs? If one is to evaluate behaviour—even that of a statesman—it is necessary that one understand its context—and this means knowing the world situation—and therefore the world. Watch a surgeon at his work: does one think to appreciate his performance by criteria other than those germane to the judging of surgery? Is ingenuity in ethical speculation an alternative, for his purposes, to skill in the use of the knife? Why then, for the purposes, hardly less specialised, of the practitioner of political therapy?

The patient who engages a surgeon to perform on him a certain operation would reasonably complain were he to find that the operation done on him was a different one, at which the surgeon just happened to be better.

Those in governmental seats are there to do a given, and not some other, job. A sound performance will be accounted such in terms of the tests for the doing of that particular job. The conduct of foreign policy is a particular kind of job, and the Scriptures, for example, tell us little that is specific on how it should be done. Diplomacy of course is one thing, and war another: but, for all the grace and elegance of its manners, in its preoccupations and practice diplomacy is apt to be more like war than like tea, or even croquet, on the lawn!

The Propriety of Partisanship

While one cannot in strict fairness blame a fly for being a fly, one might if so-minded, blame a dipsomaniac for having taken to the flask, or even a miner for having taken to the mine. Why one should think to do this, rather than to praise him for

it, is hard to see: but still, one presumably could. Less easy would it be to blame him in theory, as now a miner, for feeling, and making a virtue of, his solidarity with others similarly employed—not perhaps on issues of every kind, but in situations affecting particular interests which the miners have in common. And if the miners happen to have organised themselves for the collective protection of those interests and to have entrusted their defence to paid officials, it would be odd to feel irritation should those their spokesmen, in their approach to issues of professional importance, fail to avoid the attitudes of the partisan.

One does not expect a leader-writer to take a line other than that of his paper, or counsel for the defence to make a gift of arguments to the prosecution, or bankers not to be grimly alive to the financial aspects of programmes that they are invited to support. The editor, the barrister and the bank-manager are professionals, filling well-defined roles, in relation to which society has routine expectations. For the purpose of its fulfilment, the role may be more significant than the one who fills it. Like the miner and the trade union representative, these others, the banker, the barrister and the editor, are parts in the social mechanism, functioning in the manner required by their place in the machine. The mining, the representing of the miners, the leader-writing, the defending of the accused and the handling of the moneys entrusted to a bank, are jobs proper to be done—by persons of whom the relevant expectations will socially be entertained. For behaving consistently with these, will anyone think to hold such 'rolesmen' worthy of reproach? For altruistic courses not compatible with them, will anyone wish to excuse them? Can it ever be wrong for a statesman to do as best he can such things as must be expected of a statesman?

Where Scruple Comes In

Between subordinating politics wholly to ethics on the one hand and dissociating them altogether on the other, there lies the intermediate possibility of considering in the appreciation of any political issue whether there are ethical elements involved, and attaching to these such weight—but such weight only—as one reasonably can. Is not this after all what we do

in our personal affairs of every day? Our practice, typically, when weighing, say, a business opportunity, is to form an impression of what, ethics apart, would look like a profitable course, and then to consider whether, from the angle of business ethics as we understand them, we need have any scruple in taking it, perhaps in some modified form. We do not, in business, feel simply indifferent to ethical ideas, but it is to an ethics applying to business as such that we so pay heed.

Who at a poker table would forbear to mislead an opponent, within the limits defined by ethical considerations pertinent to the playing of poker? If no deception were considered admissible how, at poker, could one hope to hold one's own?

'Strategics' is not poker; and 'diplomatics' not pure 'strategics'. Nor is domestic of a piece with international politics. Scruples, when we feel them, are always about behaviour in some kind of context: and always the nature of the scruples is conditioned by the nature of the context. A private-affairs context is not the same as a context of business or diplomatic affairs, or even of domestic-political affairs.

Fewer, or More, than Two

If asked, then, whether we therefore recognised a dual standard in matters of right and wrong, our answer would have to be: No, not exactly. For, according to how we look at the matter, ours is either a single standard, or else a combination of many more standards than two. Viewed as single, it is the standard of doing always the best that the circumstances allow. Viewed as a plurality, our standards are one for each distinctive set of circumstances. As aesthetic considerations may enter into surgical deliberations, and functional into architectural, so may ethical considerations arise in every department of human enterprise. Why is there any doubt, or confusion or puzzlement about that? How else, in practice, has the problem ever been viewed? In practice? The trouble it would seem arises when, not in their personal activities but in their assessing, as from an armchair, of those of other people, men of doctrinaire disposition assume to pass judgment on issues of policy or diplomacy by bringing the case before them under some sort of abstract canon of behaviour, an item in some sort of pre-formulated code. What such judgments

presuppose is that the difference is known between rightness and wrongness, even as is the difference between darkness and light.

The Rightness of the Right

Actually it is right choosings that we want, between concrete alternatives, not rightness, as opposed to wrongness, in the abstract. The concrete alternatives require to be understood in their concrete immediacy before the nature of the possible choices can be seen. For example, regarding the telling of the truth: By what general principle can one resolve to be guided? To tell the truth so far as circumstances allow? But that only refers us back to the study of concrete conditions. And it is on our appreciation of these that we base our decision on how much of the truth we ought to tell. If we judge it right to tell part only of the truth, we judge it absolutely—repeat absolutely—and not only partly or relatively, right. What we have to watch for in others and to correct in ourselves is not a lack of moral principles, but a lack of moral scruple. Whether in business, or in games, or in teaching, or industry, in marketing, or politics or diplomacy, a desire to do only what is right will best express itself in a genuine endeavour to see in the various situations what in each case the right thing will be. And we shall not claim that the right, the absolutely right, thing to do will necessarily be a good, even a fairly good, thing to do. Sometimes the right choice is one between two evils.

Eyes on the Road

For an understanding of life as it is lived, it may be more important to consider the floor upon which Nature might seem to have meant men to crawl than the clouds among which, defiant of Nature's apparent intentions, they insist on aspiring to fly. Survival first, says Aristotle, in effect—and the good life only afterwards. In practice a state, however exceptional, is less likely than is the exceptional individual to lose contact with the solid ground of self-regard, far into the stratosphere though its dreams may mount. Any proposed arrangements for having states live with their heads in the upper atmosphere had better therefore be compatible with their feet remaining on the ground. And the serious student will discover that it

is harder getting acquainted with the conditions on the ground than with the standards up there in the sky.

Demonstrables, Provables and Merely-arguables

And now, what amounts to a further difference between the political and the sociological, the ideological and the scientific, ways of talking. It illustrates the distinction between issues inviting proof of what is believed to be the correct answer and those inviting argument for what is believed to be a tenable answer. This has been put as the distinction between 'inquisitive' and 'deliberative' questions. To the question: Did Napoleon win at Waterloo? the answer would be categorically no, the justification here being the consensus among historians. To the question: Who did win at Waterloo? the answer would not be categorically Wellington, the objection to this being the absence of such a consensus. If nonetheless someone were to insist on answering categorically Wellington, his argument would presumably be the existence of at any rate a near-enough consensus among enough historians.

The stickler for precision, one must assume, will note these several possibilities, and will qualify his answer, Wellington, with the words 'to my way of thinking', or their equivalent. He might for instance cushion his answer with the mention that it has been conceded, if indeed it has been, by a respectable minority even of German historians. But the politician, if of the 'Wellington won' school of thought, may be likely to declare his conviction as if reporting a fact of history just as far beyond debate as is the death of Queen Anne. At least that is what he will be likely to do if he expects to get away with it. He may even avail himself of the tactic of the U.N. delegate in the margin of whose speech there were detected the words: 'Weak point. Shout.' As a politician, however, he may equally know when to pose as the strict thinker, with his cult of scholarly detachment, and his avoidance of over-confidence in the statement of a belief that it was indeed Wellington and no other.

Sociological Plausibilities as Arguables

When, in his hostility to what he termed utopian socialism, Marx essayed to marry socialistic ideals with sociological

understanding, an understanding at which he apparently thought he had arrived by scientific research, we ought hardly to blame him for presenting his conclusions as if beyond debate. It was in those days widely seen as the essence of a scientific conclusion to be beyond debate. Nowadays by contrast we appreciate that it is no more than a high degree of probability that even in the physical sciences the empirical method can provide. Inquiry in say the social sciences domain is not therefore to be belittled as less than scientific merely because its findings must be tentative at the best. What one does nowadays, or should do, is notice the different sorts of results to be sought for in different sorts of inquiry. In mathematics, demonstration, as before; in statistics, probability; in the natural sciences, verifiability; and, in sociology, sometimes verifiability perhaps, but sometimes plausibility only. International Relations, as a line in sociological reflection and inquiry, need make no apology when able to offer plausibility and nothing more. But plausibilities themselves are not, of course, created equal. Some are more so than others; more plausible, that is. A due combining is called for of caution with courage. Caution in the testing of impressions, courage in speculation and in acting upon the best impressions one has been able to form. Even in the gathering of impressions the investigator can proceed at least in the spirit, whether with the techniques or not, of science.

Values as Arguables

So far our illustrations have been on issues of historical judgment, judgment on what might be regarded as issues of historical fact. The line between matters of fact and matters of value is however a blurred one. Whether 1066 was a good thing might perhaps be discussed as if a simple question of fact. But whether Cromwell was a good man would probably be recognised as a matter for argument. Here again the politician may be disposed to use the adjective as if the judgment were beyond debate. The sociologist by contrast will specify whether there is a consensus, or a near consensus, or no consensus at all. How many young students have acquired the scruples and mental habits of the social scientist in this regard?

Sometimes, moreover, even a consensus may be matter

merely of verbal form. No harm, for instance, in speaking non-tentatively of 'good' Queen Bess, since here the epithet has become so conventional as to be meaningless. No harm for the like reason in speaking similarly of the naughty 'nineties. But it might be better not similarly to speak of 'good' Lloyd George, for might there not be reservations to that?

Now in matters of taste, it may in the last resort be not worthwhile having an argument. And in matters of value the cautious commentator should be happy to offer his view, as persuasively as he may, and as relying, if he can, on such near-consensus as he may believe there to be.

Definitions as Arguables

More complex is the matter of definitions. One does not need in a mathematical statement to begin with one's personal definition of a triangle. Neither in a discussion of seamanship need one say what one means by a yardarm or a sloop. Nor, perhaps, in an economics seminar, need one mention what one understands by diminishing returns or full employment. One can use economic terms in the confidence that there is a consensus among 'those who know about these things' on the proper definition of such terms.

How many a statement made by others, and how many indeed that one might oneself be moved to make, would not be better justified if prefaced by 'to my way of thinking', this giving to it a second-order, in place of its first-order, formulation and ensuring to it a possible factual validity which it will have been a category mistake to put it as possessing before! How many an affirmation about what 'ought' to be—'by rights' —would not be better justified if so prefaced! But, so far from expressing themselves simply in terms of their personal judgments as such, men purportedly supply information on how things objectively are. So far from saying that X seems to us to have in justice a claim to this or that, what we baldly assert is that X is being denied his 'right' to it. The difference is one of metaphysical vision, and not of idiom only.

The Ontological Status of the Moral Order

Let the reader therefore consider what precisely he himself understands by rights. Does he ascribe to them an existence

independent of the milieu in which they are claimed, acknowledged, presupposed? Does he believe man's rights to be his by nature—whether by his nature as a man or by that of human society as such? Or does he see rights merely as part of the social apparatus of a given society? Let him consider which position in this matter is his own.

If rights, and the moral norms which safeguard them, are grounded in nothing more cosmic than a local folklore, if they are part merely of a given society's cultural patrimony, a monument to the social artistry of past generations, how can they be thought of as having, intrinsically, any real, as distinct from merely notional, theoretical, claim, upon the obedience of an autonomous being? Is the 'ought' which supports the moral norm a merely prudential 'ought'? Does one not feel a difference in quality between the moral, and the prudential, ought? And if one's sense of this difference had to be dismissed as mere illusion, what does one suppose would become of a society if a high proportion of those who in that society set the standards were to become persuaded of what one had thus come to see? Do such leading elements in any dynamic, robust, and forward-looking society regard the norms of their society as merely prudential? Is it not of the very essence of their 'ought-ness' that men should believe it to be rather more than that? The student will do well to give some thought to this cardinal conundrum. And, having done so, he will also of course do well to preface his conclusions with those five little words: 'To my way . . .'