

PHILOSOPHY

TO THE EDITOR OF *Philosophy*.

THE RIGHT AND THE GOOD.

SIR,

I have been reading that very excellent book, *The Right and the Good*, by Dr. W. D. Ross, and the review of it by Professor W. G. de Burgh in the April number of *Philosophy*.

On pp. 4, 5, 6 Dr. Ross seeks to prove (by an argument *a fortiori*) the proposition that "morally good" does not mean the same as "that ought to be done" by trying to prove that nothing that ought to be done is ever morally good. The latter proposition he thinks follows from the proposition that only acts from a good motive are morally good together with the proposition that action from a good motive is never morally obligatory, *i.e.* action that ought to be done.

For this last proposition he has two arguments. Of the second of these Professor De Burgh writes as follows: "Dr. Ross's second argument is a *reductio ad absurdum*. 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 that it is my 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 (*ibid.*). Are we not here again faced by the antinomy which we said was inherent in all moral experience? No particular dutiful act, A, is adequate to express the principle of duty universal which is the moral motive."

The antinomy in moral experience manifests itself here, I gather, in the combination of the two facts, that (1) Dr. Ross's conclusion that action from a good motive is never morally obligatory seems unpalatable, while (2) his argument seems impeccable.

To suppose that an antinomy is involved here seems to me to be an instance of the philosopher's habit of turning puns into problems. Dr. Ross's sentence "action from a good motive is never morally obligatory" may mean (a) *It is never true of an action both that it was caused by a good desire and that it ought to be done*, or (β) *Such a sentence as "you ought to comb your hair because of a good desire" never expresses a fact, i.e. the characters in respect of which an action is a person's duty never include the character being caused by a good desire*. Not every character of an action which I ought to do is a character *in respect of which* I ought to do it. I ought to go to a meeting forty minutes from now. The character in respect of which my action forty minutes hence will be what I ought to do is the character of *bringing me to a meeting at 4.30 p.m.* The action will in fact have also the character of *increasing my pulse rate to between 80 and 90 beats per minute*. But this is not a character in respect of which it is my duty.

It seems to me that (i) "*prompted by a good desire is never a character in respect of which an action ought to be done*" is true, *i.e.* that proposition (a) above is true; that (ii) Dr. Ross's arguments prove (i); that (iii) Dr. Ross's final conclusion that "morally good" does not mean "that ought to be done" does not follow from (i); that (iv) his final conclusion does follow from his arguments for (i); that (v) "*prompted by a good desire is never a character of an action which ought to be done*" is certainly false, *i.e.* that proposition (β) above is false.

It might be argued that Dr. Ross might prove his final conclusion indirectly and via (i) in the following manner: First define the sense in which one character of a thing can be said to be dependent upon another. The beauty of a picture may be said to be dependent upon certain other and first order characters, *e.g.* having parts coloured this way and arranged that way, in respect of which the picture is beautiful. Let us say also that the goodness of a state of mind and the oughtness of an action depend upon those characters in respect of which the one is good and the other ought to be done.

But let us say also that if a thing is beautiful, then that fact about it is dependent not only on its having the characters in respect of which it is beautiful, but also upon its having the characters, if any, which make up the definition of beautiful—say *causing appreciation in the beholder*. Its beauty then depends on its having

CORRESPONDENCE

those characters in respect of which it is appreciated, and also upon those characters having their due effect on someone.

Similarly the oughtness of an action depends upon those characters which either (a) are characters in respect of which it ought to be done, or (b) are characters which make up the definition of ought.

If now *prompted by a good desire* is not a character upon which the oughtness of an action depends, it is *a fortiori* not the definition of ought.

But this argument is in a sense circular. Since "C depends on C'," means "Either C' is part or the whole of the definition of C, or if x has C, then it has it in respect of C'." And Dr. Ross would, so it seems to me, have done better to proceed directly from his ultimate premises to his final conclusion.

The confusion of these two forms of dependence has caused havoc in Ethics. Two fundamental questions for Ethics are (1) the analysis of goodness, (2) the providing of a list of characters in respect of which things have goodness. (2) is not the problem of what characters in fact accompany goodness, *i.e.* of characters having a correlation of + 1 with goodness, as wrongly asserted by Moore in the *Principia Ethica*. " ϕ is a character in respect of which things have goodness" may be defined as follows. Consider the fundamental sense of "good" which applies to states of affairs or facts. If, for all x , ϕx entails that that fact, ϕx , is good, then ϕ is a character in respect of which things have goodness. For example, *loving* is a character such that if x loves, then there must be something, namely, the very fact that x loves, which is good.

Yours, etc.,

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THE INTERNATIONAL HEGEL CONGRESS.

Readers are invited to participate in the International Hegel Congress to be held in Berlin from Sunday, October 18, to Wednesday, October 21, 1931, to commemorate the centenary of Hegel's death. There will be lectures, social gatherings, and excursions. The fee for participating in the Congress is R.M.10, which will be halved for members of the International Hegel Society and for students. Rooms in hotels from R.M.4 per day. Those who wish to attend the Congress are asked to communicate with Dr. Helfried Hartmann, Berlin-Britz, O.-Bräsigstrasse 34.