

Introduction

The papers in this volume record the proceedings of the Royal Institute of Philosophy conference held in Queen's University, Belfast, on 12–14 September 1986. It is well to note briefly the antecedents of the conference—especially because it was an unusual honour for Belfast and, I venture to say, a stimulating and enjoyable experience for all the participants.

The Royal Institute had accepted in 1983 an invitation from Queen's to host one of its new series of University-based conferences. The theme proposed at that time was *Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Problems*, which has now become the title of the present volume. When we submitted this proposal, we did so in the hope that in addition to the considerable number of academic philosophers in Ireland who were concerned with issues in moral philosophy, ordinary members of the public would also find it an interesting and accessible topic.

The expectation turned out to be well founded. More than seventy people attended the conference, and lively discussion was joined by the lay people as well as the professional philosophers. The Institute's munificence in sponsoring the conference is gratefully acknowledged on behalf of all who participated. It should also be recorded that Queen's University provided a fine physical setting for the proceedings, and that a bus tour of County Down gave a much appreciated interlude in what was otherwise a continuous and heavily concentrated set of philosophical discussions. Thanks are due above all to Max Wright for ensuring that the conference arrangements worked smoothly.

Moral philosophy is an intellectual activity practised by people who are concerned to apply the most rigorous standards of conceptual exactitude to the problems of real life. Socrates, who founded the subject, would permit no relaxation of intellectual rigour; the human agent is, above all, a thinker. But as Aristotle insisted, such thinking is essentially directed upon doing. The owner of the thoughts is involved in the world of action and change, and it is this involvement that motivates the thinking. This same world also contains other intelligent agents. It is a social and political world; moral thought, by its very nature, has to attend to the actions of other people as well as the one who does the thinking.

The balance between the practical and the intellectual, and the individual and the social, is not easy to maintain. Nor has it always been well observed during the long history of moral philosophy that links the

Introduction

ancient Greeks to contemporary thinkers. In particular, until fairly recent times much moral philosophy countenanced a strong divorce between sophisticated intellectual enquiry and the practical deliberation which ordinarily precedes action. The change in the last two decades has been dramatic. Philosophers are now heavily engaged with problems in medical ethics, the moral decisions of economic life, and yet more general issues of public policy. For the most part philosophers do not themselves question this extension of their involvement; equally significant, it is also accepted by the adjacent disciplines and professions with which they increasingly collaborate. The case for applied ethics seems to be well established and accepted.

But in fact, matters are altogether less secure than this sanguine account suggests. There have been, and still are, philosophers who question the ability of the intellectual to give any useful guidance towards the resolution of real-life problems; and there are non-philosophers who do not accept that philosophers have the right to pronounce on such matters. These are issues that have been debated throughout the history of moral philosophy. It is perhaps a distinctive feature of our time that the debate is now more open, and the audience more receptive, to a variety of viewpoints than previously. I hazard an explanation for this. As the secular age comes to full flower, we are witnessing a burgeoning recognition of the importance of autonomy in human value. The ineluctable fundamental resource for autonomous human agents is their power of reasoning and argument.

These themes are illustrated in the fifteen essays that follow. Certain figures in the history of thought are prominent and recur in many of the essays—above all, Aristotle, Kant, the Utilitarians and Marx. There is considerable interest in the relation between the individual and social dimensions of morality; the question then arises whether groups of people as such can be primary bearers of moral properties. The essays of Keith Graham and David Archard are most directly concerned with this kind of issue. Another large topic in several essays concerns the proper role of the abstract and general in moral thought. There is clearly an ineliminable element of the applied in morality; and, as we have just seen, this is emphasized by many philosophers from Aristotle on. His precursor, Plato, supports a different and less hospitable attitude to the role of the particular; and the tension between these views remains to be appraised in contemporary analysis. Stephen Clark and Onora O'Neill explore this theme.

Plato played a founding role in the development of epistemological sensitivity where matters of moral decision and action are concerned. Moral philosophy has always been concerned with, and sometimes dominated by, the question of the nature of moral expertise and,

particularly, of the philosopher's claim to it. Contemporary discussion is less likely to accept the sceptical line that philosophy has nothing to contribute to life; but there remains considerable room for debate about how the philosopher's contribution dovetails into those of other, more self-professedly practical experts.

The essays of Jonathan Gorman, James Brown and Barrie Paskins address this question in broad terms. The remaining papers are more directly concerned with the investigation of actual moral problems. Some of these problems are themselves essentially general—such as those explored in Alan Ryan's discussion of justice and Desmond Clarke's of conscience. Others are slightly more restricted in that they concern a single aspect of life, albeit a pervasive one from which a person could not dissociate himself. The phenomena of leisure and work, treated in the essays of Elizabeth Telfer and Bernard Cullen, fall into this category.

Finally there are the essays which address particular and specialized problems: Bob Brecher on surrogacy, Joseph Mahon on drug-trials, Shyli Karin-Frank on genetic engineering and David Lamb on the criteria of death. It should be noted that for all the particularity of the topic under discussion in each of these essays, more general issues in the theory of moral justification come under survey.

The papers as a whole belie the suggestion that there is any important divide between issues of justification and method in moral theory, on the one hand, and the investigation of actual problems, on the other. Consideration of the latter supplies essential content to moral philosophy, but the demands of rigour and accuracy require us to pay full regard to the former issues as well. The range and depth of topics which are addressed in this volume provide clear illustration and amplification of these themes.

I wish to thank all those who have assisted me in the preparation and production of this volume. This would certainly include all the contributors, who showed great efficiency and co-operation in the way they responded to various editorial instructions and advice. The staff of the Cambridge University Press have performed their task with customary accuracy and dispatch; I should like particularly to thank Trevor Burling for all his help. Finally acknowledgement is due for the extensive and meticulous labours of the secretaries in the Philosophy Department at Queen's—Lindsay Osborne, Mary Emmerson and Alyn Hicks.

J. D. G. Evans
Queen's University
Belfast