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Moral Wisdom and Freedom

Philosophy does not begin out of nothing. It may, at best, be defined as a science with a minimum of presuppositions. It is, furthermore, involved in a specific way of thinking, in certain modes and categories of apprehension and evaluation.

*How then is personal freedom possible? Its nature is a mystery, and the formidable array of cumulative evidence for determinism makes it very difficult for us to believe in freedom. And yet, without such a belief there is no meaning left to the moral life. Without taking freedom seriously, it is impossible to take humanity seriously.**

INGREDIENTS OF A MORAL PHILOSOPHY

A Sense of Frustration

We have acknowledged that life forces choices on us, that humanity has moved from fate to choice, and that values are inescapable for us all. In general, philosophers prefer that each of us reflect on the possible values in human relations; we should make discriminating moral choices rather than simplistically accept existing values prepackaged and delivered.

However, when we begin to do ethics, the apparent simplicity of the task rapidly fades. Our reflections lead to several questions: What justifies any values? Are values subjective or objective? Are there any universal moral standards? Are rights subjective or objective? Are certain values necessary to human fulfillment?

It is an understandable temptation to abandon these nagging questions. After all, hasn't the human race survived without each person being annoyed by such philosophizing? Why not just accept what is provided by existing moral authorities? Do we really have the time to think about all of these issues? Notice what happens: In thinking about the nagging questions, we philosophize about not philosophizing. We raise further ques-

*Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1955), pp. 14, 410

tions of truth and of priorities. The real alternative to reflection is a thoughtless acceptance of someone else's moral convictions, prepackaged convincingly, delivered instantly, and consumed on the spot.

Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." No doubt this is an overstatement. The vast majority of human beings have not had and do not have the opportunity to examine and reflect. Most individuals have had the primary task of surviving or fulfilling obligations to families, work, and nation. Though we may be repelled by thoughtlessness and its consequences, we cannot justly censure the person who has had the opportunity only to gather randomly the sense and nonsense of limited moral resources. At the same time, we listen with awe to elderly people with little formal education who have a highly developed moral wisdom. The philosopher's preference for reflection, for the examined life, must be tempered by the reality of individual opportunity. Socrates would be pleased to know of increased opportunities for thought existing today in the United States. More individuals than ever before have the time and opportunity to reflect instead of merely to accept.

But the frustrations remain. The questions raised in the previous chapter are unanswered and more issues follow.

OBSTACLES TO CLEAR THINKING

As we consider any issue, large or small, our thoughts can become muddled by obstacles. Discussions seem to go nowhere, and we can't put our finger on what is holding us back. It could be that clear thinking is prevented by one or more of the following devices.¹

Tradition. "It's always been this way!" is an exaggerated response to a challenge or an attempt to validate a position by means of a claim of longevity. An appeal to habit or custom cannot support an argument for or against a claim.

Even when a religious person believes that God has guided the tradition of a faith, there are philosophical problems. Can the believer be sure that the formation of tradition is complete? Perhaps God is guiding the tradition to a fuller maturity in the distant future.

Common Sense. "Use your common sense!" is a frequent plea. But whose common sense? Yours? Mine? That subculture's? This nation's? Another country's? This year's? Although it is an attractive way to end a conversation, an appeal to so-called common sense prevents deeper reflection.

¹For a fuller exploration of the problem of knowledge, including obstacles to clear thinking, see Part 3, "Knowledge and Science," in Harold H. Titus, Marilyn S. Smith, and Richard T. Nolan, *Living Issues in Philosophy*, 7th ed. (New York: Van Nostrand, 1979).

Propaganda. "Our way is the only way!" proclaim spokespersons from many religious and political communities. Many such persons attempt to manipulate views with leaps of logic, emotional pitches, and offers of prepackaged solutions. Different from preaching (which proclaims a message with heart and mind, a free decision being left to the hearer), propaganda is a form of subtle mind control, a clear obstacle to thinking.

Authoritarianism. "Because I say so!" Although this impediment to thought is appropriate in a military command or a parent's order to a young child, it is unhelpful in philosophy. Not to be confused with the findings of a specialist—an expert, an authority on a topic who would welcome constructive criticism—the authoritarian style is tyrannical and dictatorial. No response or further inquiry is welcome.

Generalization. "They're all that way." To conclude that all (or even most) of anything is "that way" because one or some have been "that way" is no support for a claim. It is untrue that all the residents of a high-crime section of a town are immoral. It is equally unsupportable to claim moral approval for all persons living in a cultured residential area on the basis that one or some individuals are morally responsible people.

Universalization. "I've done it; therefore everyone else can and should." To universalize one's own experience or one's own group's experience is fallacious. For example, some converts can be so enthusiastic about their new lives that not only do they want to share them with others but also they prescribe their exact experience for everyone else. An accomplishment prized by one person, however, is not always desirable for all others. Persons who in their own opinion are making moral progress prevent thoughtfulness when they universalize their own experiences.

Ad Hominem Argument. "You know *why* she believes that, don't you?" Notice what has happened. The issue has been set aside; what the person believes is not being debated. Instead, the speaker is getting personal. The *why*, the supposed motivations for a belief, is receiving the attention, not the belief itself. Another example might help: Ms. X states, "Abortion is moral." Mr. Y responds, "You're saying that because you've had several." Whether Ms. X has had none or several abortions has nothing to do with the merits of the statement "abortion is moral." Such an attack shifts from issues to personalities and fails to prove or disprove a point. Clear thinking about an issue is blocked by an *ad hominem* ("to the man") fallacy.

Prejudice. "My mind is made up!" If you've reached a conclusion without examining sufficient evidence on the matter, you have made a

prejudgment, a prejudiced judgment. Although we frequently associate prejudice with issues of racial and ethnic heritage, it applies to any prejudgment. Prejudicial conclusions can be made on the basis of thoughtless bias, no evidence, or partial data that confirms our existing feelings. Prejudices help us to believe what we wish to believe, but they hinder clear thinking.

Impatience. “I’ve got to know right now.” There are situations that call for an immediate intuitive decision; little time is available for reflection. On many issues, however, there are no instant answers, and an immediate decision may not be needed. There is often some time to suspend judgment or decision for the sake of thoughtfulness. Impatience can block sufficient reflection and clear choice.

“Knowledge” Via Fallacy

There are sincere, so-called moral authorities who use these obstacles, often unknowingly. These spokespersons rely on the fallacious arguments we’ve just listed and afterwards they proclaim their so-called knowledge as indisputable certainty.

An observer of an often gullible public might become cynical about the possibility of the existence of educated persons, individuals who make discriminating moral choices. Persons who are aware of obstacles to clear thinking, however, are able to raise the sights of the victims of shoddy, inadequate thinking. Attention can be turned to issues and their merits. The obstacles can be exposed.

ETHICS AND PHILOSOPHY

We have considered some obstacles to clear thinking, but still we are faced with such questions as: How do we know anything for sure? How do we know whether values are subjective or objective? How do we know whether rights are of human origin or exist within nature itself? How can we know that our values are true or false?

True answers to these and other questions have been sought for centuries. Our desire to know for sure is understandable. Once the only true solution to a problem is discovered, our choices become easier: Select the truth and be confident in your rightness, or choose the obvious falsehood and be aware of your wrongness. With no uncertainties all rational people would have lives filled with clear decisions, loyalties, and knowledge.

The history of humanity shows us that in spite of sincere and honest attempts to answer life’s questions, several answers to most questions are

proposed. Let us now give our attention to the place of ethics in the human search for and love of wisdom.

Epistemology. The search for answers to philosophical questions is not unlike the search for truths in other areas of life. We use our powers of observation—in other words, our five senses; we examine evidence and we experiment. We also use our powers of reason, our minds, to reflect and to scrutinize views for their logical coherence. When adequate evidence is lacking or when logical inconsistencies are found, we can judge a claim as false or at least in need of further development and support. When the evidence is sufficient or when a view is logically developed, we may be ready to judge the position as true.

In philosophy the study of knowledge is called **epistemology**, from the Greek word *episteme*, “knowledge.” This branch of philosophy raises three basic questions: (1) What are the *sources* of knowledge? Our five senses? Our minds? Intuition? Divine revelations? (2) What is the *nature* of knowledge? Subjective human opinion? Objective facts? (3) Is our knowledge *valid*? Are there proofs for our claims?

These questions are related to every area of human inquiry. Whenever we engage in **normative ethics**, that is, proposals of how people ought to behave, we are open to an epistemological challenge. “You ought to be faithful” is a normative ethical judgment. The epistemological challenge may be phrased in various ways: (1) Who said so? (Or, what is the source of your moral statement that I ought to be faithful?) (2) Is it an opinion or a fact that I ought to be faithful? (3) Prove it!

Metaphysics. Other related issues surface when we begin a thorough study of the sources, nature, and validity of knowledge. If we consider the role and reliability of our five senses in obtaining knowledge, we could ask such questions as: Do our senses perceive reality as it is or only as it appears through human senses? (Is the sky really blue or blue only to humans?) What do I mean by my “mind?” (Is my mind different from my brain?) Is nature morally neutral, or are there values built into nature? Is there a God who reveals His will? Is God’s will revealed to my mind or can my senses detect it? These issues and many others are within an area of philosophy called **metaphysics**, the critical study of the nature of reality, its possible origins and essences.

What is Taken for Granted. Our study in ethics seems to grow more and more complicated. If making moral decisions is this complex, perhaps we should resort to intuition.

But we are not suggesting that for practical purposes an individual must first develop a formal, comprehensive epistemological and metaphysical system. We do suggest, however, that as we develop a moral philosophy and are engaged in the practical task of making moral decisions, we are

assuming or implying many of our own beliefs about knowledge and reality. Consider this example: An individual who proposes a spiritually oriented moral decision (I ought to worship weekly) is expressing some sort of spiritual value, a spiritual source of knowledge about spiritual values, and a belief in some kind of spiritual reality. The philosophical details of these spiritual values, their sources, and their reality may never have been thought through, but they are assumed, however vaguely.

A goal at this point in our study of ethics is an increased sensitivity to the ramifications of the seemingly innocent question of how we know anything for sure, whether in ethics or other areas of life. Even after the obstacles to clear thinking have been cleared away, a whole range of issues remains. Our sensitivity can be sharpened with the realization that we enter every judgment process (every evaluation that a claim is true or false, every statement about reality, every occasion of valuing) with certain assumptions, postulates, or axioms. We do not enter any inquiry or come to any conclusions with indifferent objectivity. We all have certain beliefs we take for granted, and these so-called self-evident truths are the foundations upon which we build our philosophies.

Not only special disciplines or areas of study but also every society or civilization rests on a number of presuppositions about the world, human nature, knowledge, and values. Each person's interpretation of his or her observations and experiences depends on these convictions and value systems. At the foundation of every system of thought is what is taken for granted.

Reasons for Philosophical Disagreements. Throughout history sharp differences have existed on issues of reality, truth, and values. Many disagreements can be traced to one or more of the obstacles to clear thinking. But differences are not always caused by fallacious thinking. Instead, it may be a matter of building differing explanations upon differing, disputable assumptions.

Is there a method by which these differences can be resolved? Although any of us might be persuaded that one or more of our own axioms are somewhat inadequate to account for our experiences or those of others, some assumptions remain for which there is no agreed-upon method of evaluation. For example, there is no mutually agreed-upon method for the scientist to use that can disprove a mystic's idea that the world of time and space is only an appearance, not a fundamental reality. That mystic's assertion is, to the mystic, a self-evident truth, an axiom requiring no proof. By way of contrast, your axioms may include the assertion that the world of time and space is real, not an appearance. For you, this conviction is a self-evident truth, an axiom requiring no proof. Can you refute the mystic's position? With what methods?

If you try to disprove the claim that the world of time and space is only an appearance, you will use assumptions and methods unacceptable to the

mystic. You may pound on the table or point to a rock, thereby (in your view) providing evidence against the mystic's claim. But you will not convince the mystic, in whose view all that you are doing is part of what merely seems to be; your pounding, the table itself, your act of pointing, and the rock are all aspects of this world, which the mystic asserts is only an appearance. Your views will never converge, because your assumptions are very different.

When a nation proclaims that certain truths are self-evident, it proclaims its assumptions, its beliefs. As philosophers think and write, they begin with presuppositions that differ from one to another.

Philosophical Pluralism. The inevitable result of our beginning with different postulates is the existence of more than one possible interpretation of issues. For example, a group of psychologists is asked to determine the reasons for certain behaviors and methods for changing them. Each responds according to the axioms of his or her school of thought—behaviorism, Freudian, Jungian, Gestalt, and so on. Each school has its own set of assumptions that provide the framework for interpreting the data.

A conference of physicists is assembled to explain the origins of the universe. With the same information available to all of them, they develop several different explanations. A meeting of mathematicians will also result in disagreements.²

By **philosophical pluralism** we mean the inevitable existence of different interpretations of reality, knowledge, and values. Setting aside systems of thought flawed by obstacles to clear thinking and exposed as inadequate or self-contradictory, we are convinced that thoughtful philosophical pluralism is here to stay.

Relativism Versus Tentativeness. Does philosophical pluralism imply that all views are equally true? Is there an unavoidable relativism among philosophers, economists, psychologists, physicists, mathematicians, and so on?

That each system is as true as its opposite makes no sense to us; we do not advocate relativism. We assert, however, that there is a certain degree of tentativeness to any school of thought, any interpretation, indeed any axiom. We propose that we human beings are limited in what we can know for sure, with finality, infallibly. Only God, if there is one, knows for sure, with finality, what is real, true, and of value. This is one of this book's axioms.

²See "Mathematics, Philosophy of," in Antony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), the more advanced essay "Mathematics, Foundations of" in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), or Morris Kline, *Mathematics: The Loss of Certainty* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980).

So why think at all? This question takes us back to our first chapter's observation: Life forces choices.

Ethical Pluralism. In some games, such as chess, there seems to be one correct solution. Think hard and long enough, and a player can find the right move. The right move, however, depends on the rules of the game. Human beings create the rules and the game itself. Even in chess one finds that all countries (outside the Orient) follow the laws of chess developed by the World Chess Federation.

Not all persons agree to the rules and goals of ethics, however. Human beings create the rules and the goals of ethics. We choose either (1) what we believe to be self-evident in nature, (2) what we believe to be revealed by God, or (3) what we believe to be a wise attitude. The initial choice of one of these three general positions reflects what we believe about reality, truth, and values.

By **ethical pluralism** we mean the inevitable existence of different views of what is taken for granted in moral matters. Human choice of different sources of ethical wisdom (nature, God, or insight), and different rules has resulted in the creation of many ethical systems throughout history. We are not suggesting that each position is as true as another; we propose that as human beings we are limited in what we can know in ethics with finality and infallibly. We hold that only God, if there is one, knows with finality and infallibly what is morally true. We proceed with ethics as with most human efforts as a thoughtful demanding art instead of a wholly objective, clear, obtainable body of truths.

We agree that once one agrees to some fundamental rules of scientific method, the truths of science are less difficult to discover than those of ethics. But even scientists choose their rules based on axioms, such as: The world is fundamentally real, not a seeming-to-be; nature is sufficiently uniform so that universal truths are discoverable; human perceptions and instruments are sufficiently reliable to perceive reality as it is.

In ethics there is more room for different sets of fundamental rules and axioms than in the physical sciences. A similar range of possibilities exists in the social sciences (economics, psychology, political science, sociology, and so on) for varied schools of thought.

Therefore, there will probably be more schools of thought in ethics than in the physical sciences. Ethicists disagree more than scientists about fundamentals—what is to be taken for granted, including what the rules of the game are. The extent of ethical pluralism will be more evident than scientific pluralism. How do we know anything for sure? To that haunting question more than one answer is possible; each answer will depend significantly on what is taken for granted by the person replying. Understanding the bases of pluralism, students of ethics are released from the frustrating search for the sole correct solution to moral dilemmas. Instead, they can come to grips with thoughtful moral options and their respective foundations.

PHILOSOPHICAL PLURALISM

Modern philosophizing recognizes no universals, no agreement as to facts, methods, or experiences. There are clearly many different views of facts, many proposed methods, many types of experiences to be found.

Philosophical fragmentation is the rule; hence attention has turned to the reasons for philosophical pluralism, and one of the reasons which has become increasingly obvious is the confessional character of metaphysical theories. Metaphysical theories differ because they are based upon different fundamental assumptions as to how the world goes, each one confessing its own version of what is the case. These assumptions may be held critically or uncritically and they may be changed through criticism and reflection, through the process of elaborating a consistent world view, or through harmonization of all the fragments of knowledge which seem well substantiated. However, at the end of the metaphysical quest the element of confession is still there. That it is still there is shown by the fact that competent philosophers disagree, after lifetimes of philosophical disputation.

Frank B. Dilley, *Metaphysics and Religious Language* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 71-72.

Frank B. Dilley (b. 1931) has taught at Smith College and Milliken University, in Illinois. Since 1967 Dr. Dilley has been on the faculty of the University of Delaware as professor of philosophy. In addition to the aforementioned book, Dr. Dilley has written numerous articles for scholarly journals.

ARE WE FREE TO MAKE CHOICES?**A Crucial Ingredient of Moral Philosophy**

We have commented frequently about choosing and choices. Not all philosophers believe that human beings are capable of making choices; the sense in which we have freedom to choose is crucial to ethics.

We usually assume that individuals can, at least at times, make things

happen that would not happen otherwise, and that to some extent persons can deliberate, decide, and direct their own lives and the course of events. Some degree of freedom of action is assumed by nearly all people in the course of their daily lives. They praise and blame, make plans for the future, and hold themselves and other people responsible for their actions. Unless human beings are free to act on moral principles, it is absurd to talk about duty, or what we ought to do, or to pursue studies in the area of ethics and morality.

On the other hand, in the light of the numerous factors influencing conduct—physical, biological, psychological, and social—it is evident that conduct is determined at least to some extent and is not to be explained merely as the product of an isolated or unhindered free will. Numerous scientific studies, interpreted by means of the cause-and-effect postulates of scientific activity, make it clear that events of nonhuman nature are determined in some way by cause-and-effect sequences. We are naturally led, therefore, to ask to what extent human life is determined, how free we are. Some scholars, impressed with the reign of natural law, have claimed that humanity, like all objects in nature, is caught in the grip of cause-and-effect relationships and that our every act is rigidly determined so that we are not free to choose. This attitude arises when human nature is interpreted not only as self-conscious and reflective, but also as part of physical nature, exclusively conditioned by the external environment. Although this is a difficult question (because human behavior can be interpreted along a continuum from total freedom to rigid determinism), students of ethics need to clarify their thinking and to be able to meet critical questions when they arise.

Moral freedom, the subject of this discussion, means the capacity to choose and act on one's choice. It involves the power to choose between alternative courses of action and the power of the individual's deliberation to act as a causal agent in the process of behavior.

In the past, moral freedom has usually been called *freedom of the will*. Today the term "will" is less often used, because we do not think of will as a separate entity or faculty but as an interplay of volitional activity or motor tendencies of the organism. In a more restricted and personal sense, "will" refers to a person's ability to perform voluntary acts. The will is the person freely expressing him- or herself in action.

Extreme Schools of Thought

Moral freedom—freedom of choice or self-determinism—stands in contrast to two other positions, **determinism** and **indeterminism**.

Indeterminism. Indeterminism, the extreme view of freedom, is the idea that there are events in human mental and moral life that are un-

caused, in the sense that the mind may work without any motivation. We may make choices, it is said, that are independent of our past actions, including our heredity and our environment.

Determinism. In contrast to indeterminism, determinism as a postulate in scientific inquiry maintains the belief that the realm of nature, including humanity, is to be treated as an unbroken chain of cause and effect, so that human behavior is dependent on natural law and is determined exclusively by antecedent events and conditions. All events, including decisions of the human will, are explainable by preceding events. What is called the act of choice is determined either by external pressures or by desires and tendencies within the agent's character.

Determinism should be distinguished from both fatalism and predestination. **Fatalism** is the view that some, not all, events in life are determined independently of our own choices and acts, so that the future is removed from our personal control. It insists on the inevitable occurrence of an event at a specific time and insists that what is to be will be. Fatalism seems to have its origin or basis in human weakness or helplessness in the face of seeming evils, especially death. This outlook is most prevalent in places without advanced means of scientific and social control. It also allows people to blame outside forces for existing conditions, thus tending to trivialize human effort to improve these conditions.

Predestination, a theological determinism, is the view that the events of our lives, including our ultimate destiny, have been decreed by God. Based on a theological and a supernatural element, this doctrine, at least in its extreme form, has always aroused protests and opposition, because it seems to make God responsible for evil as well as good and to deny genuine human freedom.

Toward a Moderate Position

Let us begin our attempt to explain this seeming contradiction between a rigid determinism and a degree of freedom of choice by pointing out some different types of behavior that we observe in our everyday experience. Take, for example, the differences that exist among a stone, a tree, a dog, and a person. A stone stands in one place unless it is moved by some outside force. Although it is affected by weathering and certain slow changes that take place in its chemical or physical properties, it sets up no goals and exerts no effort. It has its existence in the realm of physical and chemical action and reaction. The tree, in contrast to the stone, is alive and growing. Its leaves and branches grow toward the sunlight, and its roots reach toward water and minerals in the soil. Although it is alive, it is anchored to the earth, however, and has little or no power of movement or choice.

The dog, in contrast to the stone and the tree, moves about, and can learn from experience and adapt to new conditions. Dogs are very much alive, with appetites and desires and sensitivities. They grow, reproduce, and develop senses to aid them in their activities. Yet although dogs can form precepts, their ability to grasp concepts or to live by their aid is quite limited.

When we come to human life, we find a wide range of new characteristics or powers. On the physical plane, humans have erect posture and large brains. On the cultural level, we develop complex symbols, inventions, and institutions. We have unique powers. Other animals are conscious; only humans are self-conscious. We are conscious of the fact that it is we who are conscious. The growth of self-consciousness, memory, and imagination makes possible a new creativeness and enables human beings, who are children of nature, to rise to some extent above nature. Through reflective thinking and abstract thought, we are able to carry on the trial-and-error process internally and to live in a new world of meanings. We can manipulate nature to some extent to satisfy our desires. In the light of what is, we say that such-and-such ought to be. Ethical discrimination and aesthetic appreciation open up a new world to us. As self-conscious beings, we formulate ideals and strive to attain them. To hereditary and environmental factors must now be added the human capacity for personal response.

The Problem. Our problem is essentially this: On every side we seem to be surrounded by conditions that affect our lives and determine our conduct. From this point of view we are merely part of a chain of events. On the other hand, we are not like the objects of inanimate nature and not mere animal organisms. We have powers and characteristics that seem to set us apart and make us to some extent controllers of nature rather than things controlled. How is this seeming contradiction to be resolved?

We see, then, that we must reject the views of those who hold that there are only two clear-cut alternatives: You accept freedom of choice or you accept a rigid determinism, and there are no other positions. Freedom and determinism are a pair of incompatible presuppositions, and each point of view has been ably defended by outstanding thinkers. We cannot accept this rigid division; our position is not all on one side or the other.

How Free Are We? With the development of self-awareness, understanding, and organization, there opens up for a person the possibility of self-control or self-determination that was not possible before. The important question is not "Are we free?" but "How free are we?" Some individuals have little freedom, whereas others apparently have a considerable amount. Moral freedom means that people are genuine sources of action and can bring about events that otherwise would not occur. In the universe there are definite causal sequences (mechanical causation), but we believe

that there is also a significant capacity for personal response or personal causation. Freedom is in part the ability to make plans and then, within limits, to carry them out. We say that people are free when they are able to initiate action toward ends that they foresee. This position is called **self-determinism**. It provides for a sense of responsibility and moral accountability.

The Sense of Personal Responsibility. Human beings distinguish between what is and what ought to be. At times we feel a sense of personal responsibility to exert ourselves on behalf of what ought to be. The development of this sense of moral obligation is quite meaningless apart from some power of choice. The consciousness of freedom expresses itself forcibly in the sense of what ought to be. This is central to the moral life. After some choices, we have a keen feeling of blame or even of guilt because of the way we acted.

Moral Judgments on the Conduct and Character of Others. All judgments on conduct and character presuppose that persons are free moral agents. We hold children responsible for their acts in proportion to their age and experience. We do not hold very young children responsible, but as they come to an age of understanding and are able to grasp clearly the significance of an act and its rightfulness or wrongfulness, we do hold them accountable. In our courts we do not generally hold people fully responsible unless we think that they could have done otherwise than they did—that is, that their own deliberate acts made, or could have made, the difference. Our whole system of reward and punishment, praise and blame, approval and disapproval assumes a large degree of freedom and responsibility.

ETHICS AND PRESUPPOSITIONS

Every branch of knowledge assumes certain ultimate presuppositions. Moral philosophy as conceived in the West has its own presuppositions: (a) It assumes that men are free, autonomous beings capable of some choice. (b) It assumes that action proceeds from deliberation and a state of character. (c) Traditional practical ethics also holds that knowledge of moral principles has a role to play in life and that human beings may freely acquire and select standards, rules or precepts in making such choices. (d) And finally, it presupposes that individuals (and groups) are responsible for their decisions and actions.

Paul W. Kurtz and Blanchard W. Means, "A Reassessment: Does Ethics

Have Any Metaphysical Presuppositions?" *Philosophical Quarterly* 9 (January 1959), p. 8.

Paul W. Kurtz (b. 1925) has taught at several colleges including Trinity (Hartford, Connecticut), Vassar, and the New School for Social Research. He is currently on the faculty of the State University of New York at Buffalo. The author and editor of several books, including Moral Problems in Contemporary Society, Dr. Kurtz was a colleague of the late Blanchard W. Means (1905–1973) Brownell Professor of Philosophy at Trinity when they coauthored this essay.

A PAUSE IN THE SEARCH

At this point in our search for a moral philosophy, we have been acquainting ourselves with some metaethical issues; we have not been wrestling with moral problems. (**Metaethics** includes reflection on the meaning and justification of moral concepts and statements; see Chapter 4.) We have considered several issues that need to be thought about before problems of moral conduct are explored. Among our conclusions so far are the following:

1. Moral decision making is inescapable; life forces choices.
2. Our choices are based on our values.
3. Some people believe that values are subjective, whereas others are convinced that values are objective.
4. The selection of values can be based in part on some suggested principles.
5. Among human beings past and present there is a variety of values and implied moral outlooks.
6. Some persons believe that there ought to be this variety of values and implied moral outlooks; there should be no universal standards for humanity.
7. Whatever is regarded as necessary for a good life is a right; many persons assume that some values and some rights are objective or natural.
8. Whether rights are objective or subjective is an ongoing debate.
9. The frequently stated goal of human fulfillment means different things to different people, depending on the values implied in a particular use of the term "human fulfillment." No one can use these words without some implied values.
10. There are many philosophical issues to consider as a person de-

velops a moral philosophy; a sensitivity to these issues helps deepen one's reflections on morality.

11. There are many common obstacles to clear thinking that prevent thoughtfulness in moral matters.

12. What an individual takes for granted about knowledge, reality, and values is crucial to an understanding of his or her moral position.

13. Even professional scholars often differ among themselves because of their different assumptions.

14. Differences in interpretations are inevitable, frequently because people begin their thinking with different convictions taken for granted.

15. Pluralism is the position that more than one thoughtful interpretation of most matters will exist, but pluralism does not imply that all of these positions are equally true. Instead, it is an admission of the limitation of human ability to arrive at certainty about most issues.

16. The philosophical issue of freedom is crucial to a moral philosophy. A concept of self-determinism is proposed, which seeks to balance the extremes of indeterminism and determinism. Thereby a reasonable degree of moral responsibility is supported.

The Search Continues

The background provided by the first two chapters will help you as you proceed to learn of the experiences of others who for centuries have been wrestling with the goals of moral conduct, the sources of moral wisdom, and standards by which conduct can be evaluated. The search continues with a look at the great ethical theories of the past and present.

CHAPTER REVIEW

A. Ingredients of a moral philosophy

1. Discriminating moral choices rather than passively accepted morality are generally preferred by philosophers.
2. In doing ethics we are faced with several questions of a philosophical nature.
3. More individuals than ever before have the time and opportunity to reflect on philosophical issues, instead of merely accepting prepackaged answers.

B. Obstacles to clear thinking

1. Clear thinking is often prevented by one or more of the following devices: tradition, common sense, propaganda, authoritarianism,

generalization, universalization, *ad hominem* argument, prejudice, and impatience.

2. Sincere moral authorities frequently use these devices to assist with their public proclamations of their ideas.

C. Ethics and philosophy

1. An important philosophical question is, "How do we know anything for sure?"
2. Epistemology is the area of philosophy concerned directly with our sources of knowledge, the nature of knowledge, and the validity of knowledge; these topics are directly related to issues of normative ethics.
3. Another important philosophical question is, "What is reality?"
4. Reality issues are within another area of philosophy, metaphysics. Questions that exemplify the relation between metaphysics and ethics are, "Is there a God who reveals His will?" "Are values built into nature?"
5. Human philosophies are built on the beliefs we take for granted.
6. Philosophical disagreements have existed throughout history and will continue to exist, in part because in all fields of study thinkers start with different assumptions.
7. We propose that we human beings are limited in what we can know for sure, and we hold that God, if there is one, knows with finality what is real, true, and of value.
8. Ethical pluralism proposes that the existence of different interpretations of what is taken for granted in matters of morality is inevitable.

D. Are we free to make choices?

1. The sense in which human beings are capable of making choices is crucial to ethics.
2. Indeterminism, determinism, fatalism, predestination, and self-determinism view human freedom and moral responsibility in different ways.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Berofsky, Bernard, ed. *Free Will and Determinism*. New York: Harper, 1966.

Many classic discussions of the current century illustrate extreme and moderate views.

Davis, Lawrence. *Theory of Action*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979.

Beginning with an insight into the difference between human action and bodily motion, the text utilizes this insight in an attempt to resolve the perennial problem of human freedom.

Engelhardt, H. Tristram, Jr., and Callahan, Daniel, eds. *Knowing and Valuing: The Search for Common Roots*. Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Hastings Center, 1980.

A contemporary collection of essays concerned with the foundations of ethics and the impact of science on conceptions of the foundations of ethics and vice versa.

Frankena, William. *Ethics*. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973.

A careful presentation of the main types of ethical theory in modern philosophy.

Freeman, Eugene, ed. *The Monist* vol. 62, no. 4 (October 1979).

The general topic is "Objectivity in Knowledge and Valuation."

Nozick, Robert. *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1981.

For the advanced general reader, Harvard Professor Nozick seeks to replace the ideal of proof with the notion of explanation. Philosophical pluralism is included in the "Introduction," followed by provocative sections on metaphysics, epistemology, and value.

Rachels, James. "Can Ethics Provide Answers?" in *The Hastings Center Report*, vol. 10, no. 3 (June 1980).

A discussion of whether ethics can in fact provide answers; preliminary remarks about the relation between ethics and ethical theory.