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THE AUTONOMY OF ETHICS

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It has often been said—in fact, I have said it quite emphatically myself—that it is impossible to deduce ethical conclusions from non-ethical premisses. This now seems to me a mistake, and my aim here will be first to show that it is a mistake, and then to try and find out what truth it is that has been confused with this falsehood by so many people, myself included. In the first bit at least—my *retractatio*—and perhaps in the other bit too, I shall not be particularly original; but I shall put the points in my own way.

Some of the recent writers who have denied this alleged non-deducibility of ethical conclusions from non-ethical premisses have concentrated on the word “deduce”, and have suggested that it ought not to be confined narrowly to logical entailment, and in the wider sense which they propose one could speak, e.g., of deducing the goodness of the welfare state from the fact that people are happier in the welfare state than in a strict *laissez-faire* economy. In favour of this suggestion it has been urged, for example by Toulmin in *The Uses of Argument*, that this wider sense of “deduce” is much more like the sense it bears in ordinary speech. This does not seem to me a very important consideration; I have, all the same, some sympathy with the proposal to employ the term “deduce” in such an extended sense, if only because I find it very difficult to draw a clear and non-arbitrary line between the logical and the non-logical.

It is not, however, *this* doubt about the common maxim to which I wish to give voice here. The point on which I want to concentrate now is rather one which has been emphasised by such writers as David Rynin,¹ namely that, even in quite a narrow sense of “deduce”, it is possible to deduce ethical conclusions from non-ethical premisses. In the illustrations that follow I shall not in fact use any principles of deduction beyond those of ordinary propositional calculus and quantification theory.

¹ D. Rynin, “The Autonomy of Morals”, *Mind*, July, 1957.

Having thus disposed of "deduce", I had better say something now about "ethical" and "non-ethical". How shall we decide in a given case whether the conclusion we have deduced is an "ethical" one? Well, in the first place, it must obviously contain at least one of the characteristically ethical expressions. I mean it must have in it some word or words like "good", "bad", "right", "wrong", "ought", and so on, or some turn of speech in which these are implicit, like "desirable" for what "ought" to be desired (I shall in fact confine my examples to cases in which words like "ought" occur directly and explicitly). But while this is a *necessary* condition for a statement's being an ethical one, I don't think anyone would accept it as a *sufficient* condition. It is also necessary, for example, that at least one of the ethical expressions which are present should occur "essentially", i.e., should not be just replaceable by any expression whatsoever (of the appropriate grammatical type) without change of truth-value. For example, "It either is or is not the case that I ought to fight for my country" is not an ethical statement, since the truth-value of the whole would be unaltered if the ethical phrase "ought to" were replaced by "frequently do" or "am believed by my neighbours to", or if the whole clause "I ought to fight for my country" were replaced by "two and two are five" or "bread is sixpence a loaf".

I would go further than this too. (It will be appreciated that in piling on these conditions I am making my own job of deducing ethical conclusions a harder one.) I would not count as "ethical" a statement in which *only* ethical and logical expressions occurred essentially. For example, I should not regard any of the following as ethical statements:—

It is obligatory that what is obligatory be done.

If anything is obligatory it is permissible.

It is forbidden to do anything that is incompatible with what is obligatory.

I would say that statements of this sort belong to the *logic* of ethics, or "deontic logic" as it is sometimes called, but not to ethics itself. In genuinely ethical statements like "Tea-drinking is wrong" there must be a non-vacuous mention of something, like tea-drinking in this example, which is *brought into relation* to ethical concepts.

Even these conditions are not quite stringent enough; for they would let through, for example, "Tea-drinking is common in England, and if anything is obligatory that thing is permissible". Here the expressions "tea-drinking", "obligatory" and "permissible" all occur essentially, but the statement as a whole is not an

ethical one but a mere conjunction of an empirical statement with one from deontic logic. I would in fact accept the principle that no truth-function with non-ethical arguments only can be counted as being ethical as a whole.

Finally, in case my conditions are not stringent enough, I shall with all my examples proceed as follows: Wherever I claim that a certain statement is an ethical conclusion, and give a deduction of it from purely non-ethical premisses, I shall also give a deduction of the same conclusion from premisses which are *not* all non-ethical, and the deduction will be of a sort generally recognised as leading to an ethical conclusion. That is, to anyone tempted to query the "ethical" status of my conclusion, I shall say "Look, you can also get it *this* way; and if that was where you had first met with it, you wouldn't have dreamed of denying its 'ethical' character".

Any doubts as to where "ethical" statements end will of course *ipso facto* be doubts as to where non-ethical ones begin, but it is at least clear that if any one of the above conditions for a statement's belonging to Ethics is not met, then that statement must be non-ethical, and all but the last of the examples of "non-ethical premisses" which I propose to use will not meet even the first condition of being counted ethical, i.e., they will not explicitly or implicitly contain any of the distinctively ethical expressions "good", "ought", etc. (The one exception at the end is an inference which will have a premiss from deontic logic.) I shall also exclude *self-contradictory* premisses and sets of premisses, from which one could deduce not only ethical conclusions but any conclusions whatever, trivially. (This amounts to re-stating the common maxim as "Ethical conclusions never follow from *consistent* premisses all of which are non-ethical", but I don't imagine anyone will object to this.)

The way is now sufficiently prepared for my first demonstration of an ethical conclusion from a non-ethical premiss, namely this: "Tea-drinking is common in England; therefore either tea-drinking is common in England or all New Zealanders ought to be shot". There is nothing peculiar about this deduction as a deduction; it has the form "*P*; therefore either *P* or *Q*". The premiss is certainly non-ethical, and the conclusion ethical. If you are tempted to wonder whether this *is* an ethical conclusion, see how it looks when deduced in the following manner:—

Anyone who does what is not common in England ought to be shot;

All New Zealanders drink tea;

Therefore either tea-drinking is common in England or all New Zealanders ought to be shot.

No doubt what the conclusion expresses is not a simple duty but a duty with a proviso, but much ethical information has this form.

With regard to disjunctions of ethical and non-ethical statements, the "autonomists" are in fact in the following dilemma: Either such statements are as a whole ethical or they are not. If they are, we may deduce ethical from non-ethical propositions as above. And if they are not, we may deduce ethical from non-ethical propositions by using the form "Either P or Q, but not P, therefore Q": e.g. either grass is blue or smoking is wrong (now counted as non-ethical), but grass is not blue, therefore smoking is wrong.

Here is another case; and this time I'll put the unimpeachable deduction (from partly ethical premisses) first: "There is no one who is allowed to sit in a chair which will not bear his weight, and no ordinary chair will bear the weight of a man over 20 feet high; therefore there is no man over 20 feet high who is allowed to sit in an ordinary chair". Certainly some ethical information, about what is allowed and what not, is conveyed by the conclusion of this inference; and why shouldn't it be, considering how we got it? But we could equally have got it thus: "There is no man over 20 feet high; therefore there is no man over 20 feet high who is allowed to sit in an ordinary chair". And here the sole premiss is non-ethical.

These inferences are of course non-syllogistic, and Dr. T. H. Mott, who first pointed out to me² the possibility of using "P, therefore P or Q" to disprove the common maxim, observed at the same time that it does hold where syllogistic inferences are concerned. It must obviously do so if the premisses are "non-ethical" in the sense of not containing ethical expressions, for the conclusion of a syllogism cannot contain any expression (beyond purely logical constants in the narrowest sense) that does not occur in at least one of its premisses. It is worth adding, though, that the converse maxim, that non-ethical conclusions cannot be deduced from premisses all of which are ethical, does not hold even for syllogistic inferences. Consider, for example, "One should always wear a coat on a rainy day, but there's no need to wear a coat today, therefore it's not raining today", i.e., "All rainy days are days on which one ought to wear a coat, today is not a day on which, etc., therefore today is not a rainy day".³

² In a letter of February 9, 1954.

³ Cf. P. T. Geach, "Imperative and Deontic Logic", *Analysis*, January, 1958, and C. D. Broad, *The Mind and its Place in Nature*, pp. 487-491.

Further, although one cannot syllogistically deduce an ethical conclusion from a non-ethical premiss, one can do so by forms of inference which are very close to syllogisms. For example, since the two premisses "All Church officers ought to be reverent" and "Undertakers are Church officers" jointly imply that undertakers ought to be reverent, the single ethical premiss "All Church officers ought to be reverent" implies that *if* undertakers are Church officers they ought to be reverent, and the single *non*-ethical premiss "Undertakers are Church officers" implies that *if* all Church officers ought to be reverent undertakers ought to be. In fact this non-ethical premiss "Undertakers are Church officers" implies that *whatever* all Church officers ought to do, undertakers ought to do. This conclusion is comparatively complex, but its complexity is not of such a kind as to deprive it of all ethical content, as should be plain when we see it deduced not as above but as follows: All who have to do with the dead, whether they are themselves Church officers or not, ought to do whatever all Church officers ought to do; undertakers have to do with the dead; therefore undertakers ought to do whatever all Church officers ought to do (e.g. if all Church officers ought to be reverent, undertakers ought to be reverent).

In view of such examples as these, it is hard to see how anyone can any longer maintain that ethical conclusions are never formally deducible from premisses all of which are non-ethical. It must be admitted, however, that there is *something* peculiar about each of the examples I have given, though it is not easy to pick out a single oddity that attaches to them all, and when picked out not easy to see it as having any very profound significance.

In the first two cases one obvious peculiarity is that the premisses suffice to prove not only that a certain thing *ought* to be done but also that that very thing *is* done, so that the duty established is not one that we need ever be practically anxious about. Thus from the non-existence of men over 20 feet high we inferred in effect that no men over 20 feet high ought to sit on ordinary chairs; but it equally follows from this premiss that no men over 20 feet high *do* sit on ordinary chairs. Similarly, from the fact that tea-drinking is common in England it follows not only that either tea-drinking is common in England or New Zealanders ought to be shot, i.e., that New Zealanders ought to be shot-if-tea-drinking-is-not-common-in-England, but also that either tea-drinking is common in England or New Zealanders *are* shot, i.e., that New Zealanders *are* shot-if-tea-drinking-is-not-common-in-England (in view of the premiss, this is of course a very harmless sort of shooting). And this peculiarity is absent from the parallel

cases in which the same conclusion is drawn from mixed premisses; i.e., in the parallel cases the obligation established is one which *could*, consistently with the given premisses, fail to be discharged. Thus, given that whoever does what is not common in England ought to be shot, and that New Zealanders drink tea, while it does follow that New Zealanders ought to be shot if tea-drinking is not common in England, it does *not* follow that they *are* shot if tea-drinking is not common in England. Similarly with the man-over-20-feet-high example.

Moreover, it is clear that in the first two examples the moral expressions which occur in the conclusions have what we might call a *contingent vacuousness*. If a conclusion containing an expression E is validly inferred from a certain premiss or set of premisses, and the inference would remain valid if E were replaced by any expression whatever of the same grammatical type, then I say that in that inference the expression E is contingently vacuous. The expression "ought to" is in this sense contingently vacuous in the inferences "Tea-drinking is common in England, therefore either tea-drinking is common in England or all New Zealanders ought to be shot" and "No men are over 20 feet high, therefore no men over 20 feet high ought to sit in an ordinary chair", since the validity of neither of them would be affected if we replaced "ought to" by "think they are going to", for example. And it is very tempting to say that any "ought" that is deduced by ordinary modes of inference from a pure "is" *must* be contingently vacuous in this sense. For since there is no "ought" in the premisses, it would seem that no "ought" can possibly get into the conclusion except by processes which would bring anything at all into the conclusion in the same position.

My third example shows, however, that this last conjecture, for all its plausibility, is mistaken. For if we consider the inference

Undertakers are Church officers,

Therefore undertakers ought to do-whatever-all-Church-officers-ought-to-do,

the first and principal "ought to", i.e. the one which expresses the duty of undertakers, is *not* contingently vacuous in the above sense. It will not do, for example, simply to omit it, for it does not follow from the given premiss that undertakers *do* whatever all Church officers ought to do, but only that they do whatever all Church officers *do*; similarly it does not follow that they *think they* do whatever all Church officers ought to do, but only that they think they do whatever all Church officers think they do. (That is, this last follows in the sense "For all F, if all Church officers

think they F, then undertakers think they F", though of course it does not follow in the sense "Undertakers think that for all F, if all Church officers think they F, they themselves F", for the premiss only states that undertakers are in fact Church officers, not that they know they are.)

In the above example, it is evident, the principal "ought" is only prevented from being contingently vacuous by the presence of a second "ought" in a subordinate clause; and it is also evident that the only duties that are not contingently vacuous and that may nevertheless be inferred from purely non-ethical premisses are ones whose statement does thus require the use of at least two "oughts" (or other distinctively ethical expressions). They are all, one would say, *parasitic* duties, presupposing other duties. They are in this way rather like many propositions of deontic logic, e.g., "We ought not to do anything incompatible with what we ought to do". They are not, however, propositions of deontic logic, since other expressions occur non-vacuously in them beside ethical and formal ones (in our example, the expressions "undertaker" and "Church officer"), and we must resist any suggestion that duties of this parasitic sort are not, as far as they go, perfectly genuine and significant duties, or that they are duties only in some special and abnormal sense. No one could seriously say this, for example, of the duties expressed in such precepts as that one *ought* not to promise to do what one *ought* not to do, or that one *ought* to be punished for doing what one *ought* not to do, or that one *ought* to spend some time, though not too much time, in finding out what one *ought* to do.⁴ Nor is it odd or unusual for the duties of one class of people to be parasitic upon the duties of another class of people, which may or may not include the former class as a sub-class. For example, it could be the duty of, say, magistrates to impose unpleasant experiences upon all those (including, it may be, magistrates) who have done what they ought not to do.

It is, indeed, difficult to see how any of the duties just mentioned, e.g., that of not promising to do what one ought not to do, could be deduced from purely non-ethical premisses; so perhaps those parasitic duties which are so deducible all fall into some sub-class of parasitic duties which do have something peculiar or empty about them. I have not, however, been able to identify any such sub-class. Moreover, if one includes propositions of deontic logic among non-ethical propositions, the impression that such principles as the above could not possibly

⁴ Cf. T. Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers*, II.iii.

follow from purely non-ethical premisses is erroneous. For example, the following valid deduction has for its sole premisses a proposition of deontic logic and a proposition with no ethical terms in it at all, while its conclusion expresses a duty of the kind we are considering:—

No one ought to do what invariably accompanies the doing of something wrong;

X.Y. invariably acts as he says he will act;

Therefore X.Y. ought never to say that he will do anything that he ought not to do.

(I am not saying that the deontic-logic premiss is *true*, only that it and the other premiss do formally imply the conclusion.)

It is true that in our example about undertakers a *sort* of contingent vacuousness attaches to the two “oughts” in the conclusion taken together, in that the inference (“Undertakers are Church officers, therefore undertakers ought to do whatever all Church officers ought to do”) will remain valid if *both* “oughts” are replaced at once, and by the same replacement; and it is evident that at least this sort of contingent vacuousness will be present in *any* inference of an ethical conclusion from non-ethical premisses. This, however, seems to me a very trivial sort of contingent vacuousness, since it does not even imply that the duties inferred are automatically discharged. Thus in the given case, as we noted earlier, it cannot be inferred from the premiss that undertakers in fact *do* whatever all Church officers ought to do; so the duty that one *can* infer is by no means something that they have no real choice about.

I am driven to admit, therefore, that one simply *can* derive conclusions which are “ethical” in a quite serious sense from premisses none of which have this character. The undertaker, for example, who learns that he is a Church officer, can learn as a logical consequence of this something about his duty that he did not know before. This something will indeed require supplementation by other things—I mean other things of an *ethical* sort—before the undertaker is in possession of a precise recipe for action or abstention from action at place P and time T; but in this it resembles much else that nevertheless constitutes, as far as it goes, significant information about what one ought to do.

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