Ethics may be defined as the study of the logical status of our moral judgements. It differs from morals in that it does not involve making moral judgements. According to Ayer, the distinction is not always marked between the moralist, who sets out a moral code, and the moral philosopher whose concern is to analyse the nature of moral judgements. Ayer tells us that a strictly philosophical treatise on ethics makes no moral judgements. It analyses ethical terms showing to what linguistic categories they belong. In other words, philosophers stop philosophising and start moralising when they make moral judgements. Ayer’s position is a neutral one. It should be contrasted with that of Plato and Socrates. They saw the task of the moral philosopher as discovering and describing the ideal life and the social and political institutions which are conducive to that life. Aristotle’s concern was with the chief good for man.

One of Ayer’s motives for making his claim is modesty. He is reacting against the view of the philosopher being an authority on moral issues. Plato thought that the philosopher was such an authority on the ground that only philosophers could have insight into the essential nature of ‘the Good’. In Plato’s ideal society philosophers would be kings. Nowadays, philosophers would agree in not making a claim like this. The question is whether they need go to the opposite extreme. If there is a general consensus that they should, then it becomes difficult to understand why philosophers should be appointed to government commissions on moral issues. Two recent examples of this are Bernard Williams on pornography and Mary Warnock on embryo/person research.

Ayer’s approach would also exclude a number of questions...
which moral philosophers have concerned themselves with. Plato was concerned with the nature of the good life, Aristotle with the chief good for man, Butler and Kant with the motives from which people ought to act, Bentham and Mill with an objective principle which could test the rightness or wrongness of any proposed action, rule or law, and Sartre with the phenomenon of moral choice. Ayer does not show an interest in any of these questions. His concern is with the question: what meaning do ethical pronouncements have? The adoption of Ayer's approach would thus exclude from ethics much of what has been traditionally classified as moral philosophy.

There is certainly a distinction between morals and ethics but this distinction can be preserved without going to Ayer's extreme. It is not necessary for a work on ethics to contain any actual moral judgements as opposed to examples of such judgements, but neither is it necessary to rule them out. We should describe a book as a work of morals rather than ethics if it was devoted to recommending a certain moral code or moral reform. This does not mean, however, that it is illegitimate for a moral philosopher to defend his own convictions. Many have indeed tried to do this. Such a procedure can be justified on the ground that we expect the moral philosopher to state in detail his reason for making a particular moral judgement. Our expectation can be justified on the ground that he is the one who has reflected on the nature of morality.

I. PLATO'S ETHICAL THEORY

We cannot hope to understand Plato's ethical theory without understanding his theory of Forms. Plato's ethics and epistemology (theory of knowledge) are intimately connected. The connection between the two is most obvious in Plato's thesis that evil is due to lack of knowledge. For Plato, virtue is knowledge. If a man knows what is the nature of the good life, then he will act in accordance with that knowledge. It is assumed by Plato that when a man knows what is right, he will do right. The doing of evil will indicate ignorance. The questions we need to examine concern how Plato arrives at