Our search here, as in all ethics, is for the nature of the good and of its operation, and hence also for the approximation of its attainment. We are relying upon a general definition of the good, a definition in which all human considerations are not only encompassed but exceeded. The good is the quality which emerges from the relations between wholes. It is the ambition of every whole to become a proper part; that is to say, to fit in exactly where it ought, and it “ought” to fit where it is designed to fit. When the whole becomes a part, if that is followed by all the necessary wholes becoming parts, then we have a new whole, and moreover one which is related to other new wholes. The quality which emerge from the relation of whole to whole is the good (that which emerges from the relation of part to part, the beautiful).

Such a conception extends beyond the human; it applies equally well to ant societies or to those astronomical societies called galaxies. Now see what is implied when we examine human ethics. We have to deal with human individuals as our first level of wholes. The single human individual is the greatest lower bound of the ethical. The relation between single human individuals, even between just two, is social; and then between more: between those two, say, and another two, is how a society is eventually constituted. And as the relations are proliferated in this manner, the good increases, and we see here, too, the good in operation.

The single human individual and his social relations was not always the accepted ground for the examination of ethics. Those who have wished to trace the search for the good to its source have been in the habit of analyzing the psychological capacities. The tradition is an old one, and received its greatest if not its first impetus from Plato. His recurrent image of “intelligence” as the charioteer driving the twin
steeds of “emotion” and “character” set the stage; and although the personages from time to time received different names, for the most part they remained essentially the same. When the western religious tradition became the inheritor and preserver of Greek philosophy, the list of the psychological capacities underwent a change. Intelligence remained, while emotion spread out into an assortment of virtues and vices which were to be sought or avoided, and character was somehow transmuted into contemplation. Now it happens that contemplation has never been sufficiently recognized as a species of action: for refraining from action may require an equal effort and so be a kind of action. The modern world since the renaissance has retreated from what it supposed to be imaginary objects into subjects which were held to be safer though they have proved no less imaginary. And so the triad of psychological categories became “thought,” “feeling” and “will.” No one has ever seen a will or been able to isolate one for study. Investigation always begins with certain preconceptions concerning the objects to be investigated, though this is seldom recognized to be the situation by the investigator who always fancies that he is addressing himself unhampered to the task at hand. And the chief of his preconceptions is the supposition that there are such objects as those he proposes to investigate, and either that there are no alternative objects or that if there are then these are the preferred objects.

Other ways of looking at the psychological capacities exist. We would be more inclined now to say, “thought,” “feeling” and “action.” When we adopt these categories, we seem to be doing what we had said at first ought not to be done: we are dipping below the whole individual and appearing to include elements which are not primarily concerned with his social relations. But that is the precise difference between the older consideration of the psychological categories and our own. We shall look at these three capacities as they are outwardly involved: as they are the result of external stimuli and as they themselves issue in external results. The psychological capacities would not exist as empirical categories were there nothing to think about, nothing to be felt, nothing with which to construct character – no relations, qualities or events. Thought and feeling in academic psychology have come to be affairs of intelligence testing and skin sensitivity, while action has been turned over to the behaviorists, who have been applauded for the discovery of conditioned reflexes. It is an elusive affair, the notion that has been alternatively described as “character,” “contemplation,” “behavior,” and “action.” Ordinarily, one might