CHAPTER II

DUTY AND GOODNESS

To the question "Why ought we to do certain acts?" most moral philosophers since Plato have answered "Because by doing these acts we produce something that is good." For such philosophers we have duties only because certain things have value; it is our duty to promote the good and eschew the evil. In this chapter I shall examine the appeal to goodness as a justification for moral obligation, by asking the questions, Can this appeal provide a good reason in support of our beliefs about what we ought to do? Can any knowledge about the goodness of anything yield us any knowledge about the reality of duty in general or of our duties in particular?

1. TYPES OF THEORY

Historically, the appeal to goodness as a justification for moral obligation has taken several different forms. The main theories can be classified in various ways but, for the purpose of answering the question of this book, perhaps the most helpful classification is a division into two general groups: (1) Theories that present different views of the nature of the relationship between goodness and duty and (2) theories that present different views of the nature of goodness itself. The most important theories within the first general group are (a) those that find a justification for duty in the goodness of the consequences of our acts and (b) those that find it in the goodness of the motives from which we act. The first type (a) is the utilitarian theories, which hold that the sole and sufficient reason why we ought to do an act is that our doing it will lead to the best consequences possible in the situation in which we find ourselves. The second type of theory (b), which is associated historically with Kant, has no special name; because the goodness of motives is often called moral goodness, I shall call theories of this type "moral goodness" theories. Moral goodness theories may in turn be subdivided into two classes, depending on the kind of motive that is held to provide the basis for moral action. This classification divides

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moral acts into those that are conscientiously motivated, that is, are motivated by the “sense of duty” (are done because the person believes that he ought to do them), on the one hand, and into those that are virtuously motivated, that is, are motivated by some morally commendable feeling like love, benevolence, or sympathy, on the other.

The second main way in which to distinguish theories that attempt to justify duty by an appeal to goodness is (2) by their conception of the nature of goodness itself. Here again two major types of theory can be distinguished. I shall call these (a) intuitionistic theories and (b) reductionistic theories. Intuitionistic theories hold that goodness is a unique, indefinable property which characterizes whatever is good. Reductionistic theories, on the other hand, hold that goodness is definable. (I use the term “reductionistic” here in a purely neutral, non-evaluative, sense; it seems to me to be the most apt descriptive term to apply as a label to these theories.) Because philosophers have defined “good” in a variety of ways, there are many kinds of reductionistic theory. Historically, probably the most important types of reductionism are metaphysical, theological, and naturalistic. Metaphysical reductionism defines “good” in metaphysical terms, an example being the idealist identification of goodness with Reality or Realization of the True Self; theological reductionism defines it in theological terms, as for example in Emil Brunner’s view that the good is what God wills; naturalistic reductionism—or, as it is usually called, naturalism—defines it in empirical terms, a good example being R. B. Perry’s equation of value with any object of any interest.

The division of theories according to the second principle (the nature of goodness) can be applied to both of the two kinds of theory of the relationship between goodness and duty. That is to say, it is possible to hold either an intuitionistic or a reductionistic utilitarian theory or an intuitionistic or reductionistic moral goodness theory. Historically, however, the more important distinction has been between intuitionistic and reductionistic utilitarian theories. For this reason I shall separate these two types of theory in my discussion, dealing with each in turn, but shall not concern myself with the distinction when I come to examine moral goodness theories.

The kinds of theories I have just listed cover, I believe, most of the historically important ways in which moral philosophers have attempted to provide a justification for duty by an appeal to goodness. Although my classification is not exhaustive, I think I have included the major theories; if none of these can succeed in providing a basis