ON THE INTERRELATIONS BETWEEN ETHICS
AND OTHER FIELDS
OF PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE

“Do not do unto others as you would that they
should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the
same.”

The ‘Golden Rule’ in Maxims for Revolutionists
of George Bernard Shaw

(1) It has become commonplace today to distinguish between ethical
theories proper and metaethical investigations. Originally, the latter were
intended to be an analysis of the meaning of moral expressions. Later, the
theory of justification of moral statements was included.

By means of a simple analogy I shall try to express what this develop-
ment looks like to me: Suppose somebody says that there are two kinds of
people dealing, directly or indirectly, with physical objects: first, the
physicists, and secondly, those who study the use of physical terms. As
soon as it is discovered that physicists sometimes use phrases like: ‘this
theory is better confirmed than that one’ they force the people of the
second kind to do theory of confirmation as well.

In this picture nothing is left for what is considered the main task of a
systematic philosophy of science, namely to give rational reconstructions.
Therefore, I suggest adding this kind of activity to moral philosophy as
well, so that we have a threefold distinction instead of a twofold one.
There is only an inessential difference in so far as, in the first case, only
those persons are normally called philosophers who are concerned with
philosophy of science, not with science itself, while in ethics those who
develop an ethical theory as well as those who try to reconstruct it in
precise terms are called philosophers in most cases.

This has nothing to do with the distinction between an ‘object-level’
and a ‘meta-level’. But, of course, in our case too we must distinguish
between theory and metatheory. This only shows that it was an oversimp-
lification when I spoke of a threefold distinction. As rational reconstruc-
tions can be performed either on the object-level of ethical theories or on

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the meta-level we have a *fivefold* distinction altogether. Instead of pursuing things on an abstract stage I shall now give two examples of rational reconstructions on the meta-level. Various kinds of rational reconstructions belonging to the object-level will be mentioned later in the course of this article.

(i) The first metatheoretical problem has to do with the *logical form of moral rules*. While most philosophers, no matter whether they subscribed to ‘prescriptivism’ or not, followed Kant in regarding moral rules as *categorical*, and thereby as non-hypothetical, imperatives, Harsanyi,¹ e.g., has tried to show that moral rules are *hypothetical imperatives*. This alternative reconstruction has the advantage of making our choice between alternative moral codes more intelligent. We can, e.g., easily realize whether we have to do with a humanistic code ‘based on disinterested sympathy with human interest’ or an ‘idealistic’, or, as Rawls would say, a ‘perfectionistic’ code.²

(ii) Other problems are the status of the ‘principle of universalizability’ as well as that of the so-called ‘law of Hume’ which asserts that no normative statement can be deduced from exclusively factual premises. According to some interpretation of the former it is held that ‘simply from the fact that two similarly placed people are treated differently it follows logically that somewhere in their joint case there has been some unfairness’. ‘They have been treated differently though their cases are exactly similar; therefore something has been done which ought not to have been done’. “So much the worse”, says R. Montague, “for the slogan ‘no ‘ought’ from an ‘is’” and for the merely logical status of the principle of universalizability”.³ One cannot have both: Hume’s law and universalizability as a logical principle. This is why Hare’s system, presumably, is inconsistent.

(2) What distinguishes rational ethical discourse from speculative one is, above all, its independence from *theological* as well as from *metaphysical* assumptions. ‘Theological judgements’ is hereby used to refer to *transcendent* objects, like the will of God, while, by ‘metaphysical statements’ I understand *a priori* descriptive claims about *empirical* objects, like ‘perfectionistic’ principles about the (non-)moral good of man. Most present day students of moral philosophy seem to accept something like a principle of tolerance in regard to the non-moral good. Apparently they assume that human wants must be considered as given on pain of