

## INTUITIONS OF FITTINGNESS

A. W. Price

My purpose is to say something new in favor of quietism. As I mean the term here—which is how it is commonly used in current analytical philosophy—quietism signifies an attitude of assurance about the epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions of ethical discourse. It is opposed to any skeptical claim that any ethical judgment, simply by virtue of being ethical, must be ill-grounded in one or both of two ways. The skeptic may claim that such a judgment could not be known to be true even if it were true, and/or he may claim that its truth would demand the real existence of metaphysically problematic entities, while such entities as ethical qualities or moral obligations are irreconcilable with a scientific view of the world and only mysteriously cognizable by us. In contrast, a quietist is free of any philosophical disquiet about ethical thinking as such.

Quietism, in this sense, is a position in metaethics about a very broad range of judgments (which I have simply indicated by the term ethical). Quietism is compatible with anxieties about the pretensions of any particular morality or about the possibilities for morality within some contingent setting. Suppose we grant, as defenders of ethical truth must, that not all ethical truths are accessible from points of view available to all cultures at all times. We should allow that even valuable truths can be lost: not all development is progress, and distinctions that matter may lose their hold upon a civilization that is in some ways becoming less civilized. We may hope that, in compensation, as certain timeworn discriminations wither, even ones that had point and whose disappearance is a loss, others will spring up in their place. But there

is also room for traditionalist worries that what is lost may be irreplaceable or, at least, unreplaced. One may think, relatively trivially, of distinctions between degrees of acquaintance and friendship that now risk being obliterated by a universal mateyness. More gravely, one may think of distinctions between what is just and unjust in war, which come to be disregarded when bad precedents erode inhibitions and inequalities of power offer offenders effective immunity. As I use the term, quietism is compatible with such anxieties.

My present argument focuses upon relations of fittingness, commonly though not exclusively conveyed by the English term ought and its equivalents in other languages. Hence the argument requires what may seem a long detour through ought and other terms important in our ethical thinking. I shall raise certain antiquiest worries initially, returning to them only after my detour, when I can answer them by applying my results in a limited, but I believe new, argument for quietism. It may be that only considerations of some complexity can offer some simple reassurance.

### **Thick and Thin Terms**

Within metaethics, there is room for degrees of quietism. Certain kinds of ethical judgment may be more questionable than others. Influential here has been Bernard Williams's distinction between "thick" and "thin" terms. He writes of the former as follows:

"Thicker" or more specific ethical notions . . . , such as treachery and promise and brutality and courage, seem to express a union of fact and value. The way these notions are applied is determined by what the world is like (for instance, by how someone has behaved), and yet, at

the same time, their application usually involves a certain valuation of the situation, of persons and actions.<sup>1</sup>

It seems right to say that the application of a thick or specific virtue-term like courage is guided by an open-ended set of criteria that fleshes out its meaning in ways that are sensitive to different kinds of danger and different modes of response—that makes its use informative and not just barely evaluative. These criteria may enable one to infer applications of the term even from descriptions of acts or agents whose content is neutral, in the sense that they contain no ethical terms. Take, for example, a narrative of the future Charles II's escape from the English republicans after the Battle of Worcester. Such a narrative may plausibly entail that the king acted bravely even if it uses neither the term brave nor any other evaluative vocabulary. Of course there are harder cases; but a recognition that a man who behaves so is brave could be a test of a simple mastery of the concept of courage. Take, by contrast, what Williams counts as thin terms, such as good, right, and ought. It is less plausible to say that one can infer from the neutral narrative that Charles acted not only bravely, but also well and even rightly in virtue of criteria attaching to the very meanings of the terms good and right. It is not clear that someone who is uncertain how to apply such terms in many cases thereby displays an imperfect grasp of what they mean. A contrast with thick terms may be expressed by application of G. E. Moore's notion of an open question. Even if the narrative entails an answer to the question, "Did Charles act bravely?," it may entail no answer to the question, "Did he act rightly?"

Hence there should be room for a position of mitigated quietism that is generally skeptical about thin ethical judgements (and notably those using the term

right) but is not generally skeptical about thick ethical judgements (including those that apply the term brave).

I have said nothing at all to define the term ethical and so am open to question about whether, on such a conception, a term such as brave should be counted as ethical at all. Perhaps it rather belongs with psychological terms, such as fearless, nervous, strong-willed, and sympathetic, whose meanings are somewhat indeterminate but linked to context-sensitive criteria of application. However, there should be room for a conception that grants this commonality but draws a distinction. David Wiggins has written that evaluative predicates are “non-natural predicates with a distinctive sentiment-involving kind of sense.”<sup>2</sup> To assess an action as brave is to be, to an extent, for it and not against it. If it is impossible to give a single criterion for what counts as acting bravely, this is because our attitudes toward responses to danger are very varied, partly because dangers and responses vary, partly because the associated gains and losses vary. What gives unity to the various criteria is some pattern within our attitudes. We must suppose that there is some underlying and unifying point to courage, to which we appeal when we use the very term brave, which is detectably absent in the case of acts that resemble brave acts to a degree but fail to achieve that point or purpose.

We then, however, face a contrasted objection, not that we are lowering brave to a level of ordinary descriptive terms, but that we are elevating it to a position where it shares the problems attaching to the application of thin terms. The epithet brave is indeed not reducible to fearless. Courage and lack of fear may coincide to an extent; but the brave man achieves the point, or value, of courage not by being blind to danger, but by responding to it appropriately. It is already true that what it is to be fearless varies between different dangers and, thus, can no more be captured by a

single criterion than can what it is to be brave. Yet it is a further requirement of a brave response that it achieve the point of courage. This point will be a distinctive ethical value, achieved by responding to danger in a way that evinces a proper appreciation of how it befits a human being to behave in the face of danger. Yet, if the fitting response is that which we prefer, then to call one of an agent's options brave is already to recommend it and so entails that it is right. But if the application of a thick term for a virtue entails the application of a thin term, we must be able to identify how it is good or right to respond to danger before we can assess an option as brave. And then, a quietism about thick terms may be undermined by uncertainties about thin ones.

There is a real issue here that connects with the classical doctrine, familiar from Plato and Aristotle, of the unity of the virtues. Might an act be brave and yet not recommendable, since it was also unwise or unjust? Or can an act only be brave or just if it is recommendable? This latter would permit an act to be brave without being just, since the circumstances may be dangerous without raising any considerations of justice, but not to be brave though unjust. Plato and Aristotle held this position, but it may well strike us as counterintuitive, at least as a description of our ordinary ways of talking. We may rather distinguish cases in this kind of way: a criminal who robs a bank in broad daylight with a dummy pistol certainly has nerves of steel, and yet he does not count as brave; yet an old friend, called to give evidence in a corruption scandal, who would rather go to prison than breach a confidence, may thereby count as acting bravely even if, in our view, she is acting unwisely.

Courage, as a virtue, clearly comes in degrees. The agent or spectator who assesses an act as brave may be judging it all things considered, with a situationally sensitive attention both to its place within the agent's life and to its contribution to the

lives of others. When the term is so applied, there may be no logical space between an act's being brave, and its being right. But we often adopt a narrower perspective and assess the act in a partial way that identifies a distinct ethical value but does not purport to take everything relevant into account. Aristotle's description of the hero in battle illustrates the point:

It is true of the good man that he does many acts for the sake of his friends and his country, and if necessary dies for them; for he will throw away both wealth and honours and in general the goods that are objects of competition, gaining for himself nobility. . . . Those who die for others doubtless attain this result; it is therefore a great prize that they choose for themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Action in battle that turns out fatal to the agent is liable to be a kind of failure if it fails even to delay the enemy's advance. And yet it remains, on a traditional view, a kind of triumph: it eminently displays the right kind of loyalty to comrades and country. Material success, as we may call it, is elusive: it depends much on chance and on the decisions of others (friend or foe). Ethical success is more in the individual's hands and is a matter of degree—and yet it is not achieved at all by action that is positively reckless. We can be certain that a soldier has died bravely (in a sense) and nobly, even though we are far from sure that he might not have been better advised to act otherwise. Courage excludes folly but need not entail perfect prudence, let alone tactical expertise. “That was brave” need not entail “That was best,” though it must entail “That was good.” An action would not count as brave at all if it did not achieve

an ethical purpose; yet it may fail to achieve that purpose in the best way—that is, in a way that achieves other purposes, ethical or material.

Often, therefore, “That would be brave” is used in a sense in which it does not imply “That would be right” (or “best”). So certain doubts about the application of thin terms need not carry over to the application of thick terms. However, I consciously made a connection when I spoke of “a proper appreciation of how it befits a human being to behave in the face of danger.” Was I there appealing to some relation of fittingness no less problematic than one of rightness? One may think of Samuel Clarke, for whom morality was a matter of relations of fittingness that could be discerned and demonstrated, like geometrical relations, through reason. (I shall quote him later.) Hume famously rejected that approach, writing of the related term ought as follows:

As this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.<sup>4</sup>

If to use the term ought is to purport to speak about a relation that relates an act to a set of circumstances, then one indeed looks subject to two kinds of complaint: first, that it is obscure how such a relation is to be detected; secondly, that it seems a bizarre kind of relation. As I shall use the terms, an act, which itself is an option and so a possibility, may or not be enacted within an action, which is an actuality. Yet, even when we have an action, Hume may be puzzled how it could relate to its

circumstances not only in some spatiotemporal relation, but in a relation of fittingness. How could such a relation exist in the world? If it does not exist in the world, how are we to identify it? By demonstration? But the inference of an ought from an is is not, on the fact of it, a deduction: so long as the premises just describe the way things are, it should not be self-contradictory to deny an ought that is supposed to follow as a conclusion. At least about our use of the term ought we ought, it may seem, to be disquieted.

Yet I think that we can be reassured, once we attend to oughts in all their variety.

### **A Variety of Oughts**

It should be noted that Hume's observation has, as it stands, no special bearing on the ethical or even on the practical.<sup>5</sup> I am thinking not just of degenerate oughts that are neither practical nor theoretical (such as, "It ought never to have happened," said of some natural disaster), but also of theoretical oughts (such as, "He ought to have gotten home by now," which does not entail that he has gotten home by now. To yield the latter result, we would need the stronger claim, "He must have gotten home by now.") A theoretical ought conveys what is to be expected, though often on the basis of limited information. There can even be an apparent conflict between such an ought and an is: "He ought to be here," I may say as I look around, expecting to discover a friend in a habitual haunt, "but he isn't." Evidently the apparent conflict does not signify the co-occurrence, within a single perspective, of an ought and an isn't; rather, the ought relates to general background information, whereas the isn't reports a datum of perception. How such an ought should be established, relative to a set of data, is an issue of methodology. Doubtless we would most often appeal to probability, which is



relative to a body of evidence. But our ordinary, nontechnical conception of probability rarely allows any plain deductions of probabilities, even relativized to sets of data. Long before it was infallibly defined, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary used to be commended to the belief of the faithful on the ground that such an honor befitted her status as Mother of God; it was never a statistical probability.<sup>6</sup> And the inferences of historians, where direct evidence is lacking, to what ought to have happened may be well-grounded, though there is no way of supporting them by a deduction of probabilities.

Fifty years ago, R. M. Hare represented Hume's contrast between is and ought as one between indicatives and imperatives. He took practical oughts to be akin to imperatives and held that no imperative can be derived from premises that are all indicative—thus allowing the following inference:

Go to the largest grocer in Oxford.

Grimbly Hughes is the largest grocer in Oxford.

∴ Go to Grimbly Hughes.<sup>7</sup>

Taking the second premise on its own, we should be able to infer a new conclusion that asserts the old conclusion conditionally upon the first premise. Hare proposes the following expression:

Grimbly Hughes is the largest grocer in Oxford.

∴ If you want to go to the largest grocer in Oxford, go to Grimbly Hughes.

(In Hare's view, the phrase "if you want" gets around a grammatical obstacle to placing an imperative sentence within an if-clause.) Does this inference breach the principle that no indicative can entail an imperative? Not evidently, since it is unclear how we should classify the new conclusion. Hare concedes that "it would [**be probably be??**] misleading to say that hypothetical imperatives are 'really indicatives'," but comes as close to saying that as he dares: "The imperatives in the two parts, so to say, cancel one another out. It is an imperative, but, qua imperative, has no content; the content which it has is that of the indicative minor premiss from which it is derived."<sup>8</sup>

Hare's assimilation of practical ought-judgments to prescriptions is in certain ways illuminating. Notably, just as a command is usually issued to an addressee who is also the putative agent, practical oughts usually identify an agent who is at once the putative agent and the owner of the ought (in a phrase of John Broome's). Thus, if I say, "Come here," I give the addressee to understand that it is of him that I demand that he approach. If I say, "You ought to come here," I present coming here as fitting for, or owing from, the agent whose coming is in question. However, we need to detach any insights from the imperatival framework, for that is surely out of place. Hare was not a man of fragile convictions, but I did once trouble him by making this analogy: just as "He ought to have gotten home by now" does certainly not entail "He has gotten home by now," so surely "You ought to come here" does not entail "Do come here." Perhaps this difference is clearest in the first person: if you ask me to meet you at the station, and I reply, "I ought to do so," this is surely less committal than a simple "I shall be there," even if this last is understood to express an intention but not to make a promise.

Kant, to whom Hare is in many ways obviously indebted, talks of “imperatives,” but in a looser sense. He famously distinguishes hypothetical from categorical imperatives as follows:

All imperatives command either hypothetically or categorically. The former represent the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to achieving something else that one wills (or that it is at least possible for one to will). The categorical imperative would be that which represented an action as objectively necessary of itself, without reference to another end. Hence the hypothetical imperative says only that the action is good for some possible or actual purpose. In the first case it is a **problematically** practical principle, in the second an **assertorically** practical principle. The categorical imperative, which declares the action to be of itself objectively necessary without reference to some purpose, that is, even apart from any other end, holds as an **apodictically** practical principle.<sup>9</sup>

Best known here is the distinction between hypothetical and categorical or “apodictic” principles. This not the place for a discussion of Kant’s conception of categorical principles. (Yet I hope to illustrate how we can make all the ought-judgements we want without intending any of them as applications of his categorical imperative.) What interests me here is Kant’s further distinction, within what he counts as hypothetical principles, between the “problematic” and the “assertoric.” We can illustrate this difference by an example imagined by Hare.<sup>10</sup> A rich uncle, John, is alone with James, his greedy nephew and sole heir, in a small boat out of sight and

reach of land. John is quickly forced to concede to James the truth of the conditional (1), “If you want my money now, you should push me out of the boat.” When John further admits the truth of the antecedent, “You (do) want my money now,” he has also, apparently, to concede the truth of the consequent (2), “You ought to push me out of the boat.” James then acts upon the judgment that he has extracted.

I have already anticipated Hare’s response. If sentences of the form, “If you want to  $\varphi$ , you ought to  $\psi$ ,” really present one imperative hypothetically upon another. What one requires to release the consequent, “You ought to  $\psi$ ,” is not the statement of fact, “You want to  $\varphi$ ,” but rather “You ought to  $\varphi$ ,” which Hare interprets as telling you to  $\varphi$ . So the nephew is being told to push his uncle out of the boat only if John first instructs James to get his money now—which Uncle John has no cause to do.

Kant’s response is interestingly different. He would allow John equally to say (1), linking the act explicitly to a possible purpose, and (2), linking it implicitly to an actual purpose.<sup>11</sup> In neither case would he suppose that John commits himself to (2) interpreted as a categorical judgement. Hence John can say (2) without thereby advising James to act accordingly. If James responds to what his uncle says by indeed pushing him out of the boat, this is James’s own doing, for which John shares no responsibility.

What, then, when the judgement is hypothetical but assertoric, does John mean when he utters (2)? Something like the following, I propose: “It is fitting for you to push me out of the boat, relative to your goal of getting my money now.” What was explicit but possible in (1)—that James aims to get John’s money now—has become actual but implicit in (2). In either case, John’s admission is restricted. He is passing no judgment upon James’s goal. He need not suppose that it is a good goal for James

to have; nor need John suppose that James's having this goal gives him any reason to pursue it by some means or other. It is even possible that, by saying that it fits James's greedy goal to act really badly, John simply intends to convey what a dim view he takes of that goal. A wicked means may befit a vicious goal: the one is, as we say, made for the other. Indeed, John might express his disapproval by a different conditional that says nothing about means: he might have said, more openly, "If you want my money now, you should jump in the water yourself."

Admittedly, that utterance would hardly invite serious assessment as true or false. What might make (1) or (2) count as true? Perhaps this: if James's pushing John out of the boat is the only means by which he can get his money now. This circumstance would present the offloading as a necessary means to James's end. If it counts as a means at all, it is sufficient in context, either in itself or in conjunction with other possible acts or conditions. However, this condition is very restricted, for few means to ends are actually necessary: there are usually alternative routes to any given goal, though not always eligible ones. Further, it is not very idiomatic: where a means is actually necessary, it is less apt to say "You ought" than "You must." When one is talking of means to a given end, actual or possible, "You must  $\psi$ " excludes there being alternatives, whereas "You ought to  $\psi$ " conveys that there are alternative ways of achieving the end but that they are in some way less satisfactory. As Bernard Williams wrote succinctly, "Ought is related to must as best is related to only."<sup>12</sup> More finely, Alan White distinguishes the best mode of doing a thing from the right or proper mode: "Depending on the situation, what ought to be may either be what is best or what is right or what is both. 'How should one address an archbishop?' asks for the right mode, whereas 'How should one address a lecture class?' asks for the best mode."<sup>13</sup>

Even behind what look to be quite straightforward hypothetical oughts, there is often a complex and implicit network of goals and constraints. In a rough way, one may distinguish two kinds of subsidiary end. There are standing ends, which are not presently the focus of the agent but which he is concerned to achieve and which lend point and purpose to his present life. Then there are quasi-ends: these are background considerations, not necessarily moral, that do not themselves lend point to action but tell for or against certain ways of behaving, and so, with varying stringency, direct or constrain the choice of means. It is such subsidiary ends that privilege one means over others as the one that the agent ought to select. Yet I should stress, first, that few of these are imperative or mandatory. One speaker may properly have one of them in mind when he says how an agent ought to act, though another speaker may neglect it without impropriety. In some cases, the nature of the end may itself suggest attention to such subsidiary ends or neglect of them. In Hare's case, it is the shamelessness of the end that suggests that how we say the agent ought to act need not be limited by constraints on the acceptability of the means. (I hope I have now clarified what I meant when saying that a wicked means may fit a vicious end.)

In one way, Kant's singling out of hypothetical imperatives has been unfortunate. The form, "If you want to  $\phi$ , you ought to  $\psi$ ," is restrictive in that it focuses upon a possible end of the agent's, and it often arises when an ought-judgment is offered in a context of offering advice, especially when the advice is solicited. An agent seldom asks what he should do in vacuo. (Even if he is at a loss, "What should I do to occupy the next five minutes?" posits a goal, even if only that of filling a hiatus.) Usually, the agent has in mind some particular goal and wonders how best to achieve it. However, it should not be supposed that there is any exclusive connection between how it may be said an agent ought to act and his own goals,

standing ends, and quasi-ends. A speaker is free to relativize the oughts he offers to whatever ends he likes—at the risk, of course, of being misunderstood or of wasting his breath. He may choose to press upon the agent actual goals of his own; or he may select any goals that are in some way apt or salient, so that proposing what fits them is not an idle exercise. There is likely to be little point in citing undesirable goals that are not—as yet, anyway—anyone’s actual or likely goals. Yet what is required if a speaker is to speak truly is that the means he proposes fit the ends he is supposing: it is not a precondition of  $\psi$ ’ing’s fitting the end of  $\varphi$ ’ing that  $\varphi$ ’ing itself fit some further end or be in some way desirable.

It should now be clear why I asserted earlier that a claim that—in some way, or relative to some things—“A ought to  $\psi$ ” need not imply that A has any reason to  $\psi$ . I have said enough to ground this assertion without needing to give any account, myself, of the difficult and disputed concept having a reason. So much would have to be granted even by a philosopher who claimed that desiring to  $\varphi$ , at least as an end, automatically gives a person a reason to  $\psi$ , if  $\psi$ ’ing is indeed an effective means to  $\varphi$ ’ing. For I have said that the speaker is free to relativize his ought-statement to whatever ends or quasi-ends he chooses—and these do not have to include any ends of the agent’s. In any case, it is far more plausible to admit that an agent’s desiring to achieve an end may give him no reason at all for realizing a means; indeed, it may rather give him a reason to act in a way that frustrates his end. Take a pair of contrasted, but not really conflicting, ought-statements:

- (a) If you want to get drunk every night, you ought to work in a pub.
- (b) If you want to get drunk every night, you ought not to work in a pub.

Within (a), the fittingness is between the end of getting drunk every night and the means of working in a pub. If the agent has no good reason to get drunk every night, he may well—for all (a) says—have no reason whatever to work in a pub. If, on the other hand, he had good reason to get drunk every night, then (a) may imply—if, in context, it is presenting a means toward that end—that he has a reason to work in a pub. In this way, hypothetical imperatives can transmit a reason from an end to a means; they cannot create reasons ex nihilo. In the case of (b), the fittingness is not explicit but is likely to link several things: an agent, a hypothetical end (getting drunk every night), actual ends unspecified (say, good health), and a means to achieving those actual ends, supposing that he has the hypothetical end (not working in a pub). If (b) implicitly invokes an actual end that the agent already has good reason to achieve, that reason carries through to a means toward achieving that end—the means being his avoidance, by not working in a pub, of getting drunk every night. So long as they are differently relativized, (a) and (b) are simultaneously assertible. Supposing that the antecedent holds and you do want to get drunk every night, it is also possible to assert simultaneously, “You ought to work in a pub” and “You ought not to work in a pub”—though it would be confusing to conjoin them.

How variably oughts relate to reasons can also be brought out much more generally. While the exact relation between predictions and expressions of intention is debated and debatable, they show a contrast in direction of fit or onus of match: as G. E. M. Anscombe put it, if there is a mismatch between what I say and what happens—a mismatch that constitutes a mistake—then in the one case it is the prediction that is mistaken, while in the other case it is the action.<sup>14</sup> Hence we can say that, if it is the case that p, a speaker ought to believe that p rather than not p, whereas,



if an agent intends to  $\varphi$ , he ought rather to  $\varphi$  than not to  $\varphi$ . Of course, both oughts are only pro tanto: they hold relative to the little I have said; given the limits of the agent's knowledge, or his true interests, it may be that he would be better justified in not believing that  $p$ , or in not  $\varphi$ 'ing. Possibly, its being the case that  $p$  always constitutes a reason for believing that  $p$ , if (as is plausible) truth is an inherent goal of belief; but we have no ground to grant that intending to  $\varphi$  is often a reason to  $\varphi$  or even evidences that the agent has a reason to  $\varphi$ . Hence it may be that he ought to  $\varphi$ , in the weak sense that it is in a way fitting for him to  $\varphi$ , though he has no reason to  $\varphi$  (say, for the simple reason that no good would come of it).

I have already noted that we should not be misled (by too narrow a range of examples) into overlooking that oughts may be relativized to ends ad lib.: there is no requirement that the ends be those of the speaker. Further, there are many ways in which an act may fit the circumstances other than that of constituting a means to an actually or hypothetically desired end. Sergio Tenenbaum provides a charming example:

Suppose a millionaire is asked why she takes such good care of an old beaten-up quarter and she says, "This is the first coin I ever earned through my labor; my dad gave it to me for helping him herd the sheep." No doubt these actions are made intelligible by the relation of the coin to other goods, perhaps the good of self-reliance and the good of one's relationship with one's parents. . . . [Yet] the commitment to the coin does not make the millionaire more self-reliant and, arguably, in no way a better daughter. The coin simply stands for these goods; it is a merely "symbolic" relation.<sup>15</sup>

Tenenbaum does not use the word ought; but a thought that we can evidently ascribe to the daughter is that she ought to treasure the coin just as a symbol of labor and piety, but not, in any obvious way, as a means to any end.

Many other examples fall within a range that Anthony Kenny has sketched as follows:

As with revenge, so with friendship, obedience, admiration, and gratitude; actions done out of these motives seem to produce no good for, and remove no evil from, the agent. Here the usual order is reversed; instead of an action with a certain intention exemplifying a pattern [as happens with hunger, lust, ambition, benevolence], we have an action done with the intention of exemplifying a pattern. It is significant that in these cases we can talk of an action being done to show gratitude, or obedience, or friendship.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, we can apply a structure of ways or means serving an end within such cases of backward-looking or significant behavior: Kenny's italicized intention is to achieve an end by acting in a certain way. But the agent's thought that the pattern identifies a way in which it is fitting to act, or in which he ought to act, is not itself a thought about means to ends.

### **Misplaced Doubts**

I have spent time illustrating the wide variety of ways in which the word ought can be used in practical contexts, often ways that have no ethical significance. In particular,

the relation between oughts and reasons for action is variable: it may be fitting to some end or circumstance for an agent to act in a way in which he nonetheless has no reason to act. What is to be said, more generally, about our ability to make use of the terms ought and fitting? First, we should recall Bernard Williams's broad distinction between thin and thick terms. Though that distinction turned out to be not unproblematic, one lesson seems to apply here: it is not plausible to suppose that terms as abstract as ought or fitting have a meaning, such as is grasped within a mastery of English, that suffices to determine their application. Of course, we can keep with a richer conception of sense and retain the Fregean picture of a sense that, in conjunction with the way things are, fixes an extension. Our question then becomes: what enriches the meaning of ought so that it acquires a sense determinate enough to yield an extension?

I have supplied part of an answer in relativizing practical oughts to such factors as agents, ends, and circumstances. We can further speak of intuitions about how to apply the term—"intuitions of fittingness" as my title calls them. However, the connotations of intuition are negative rather than positive. It is not helpful to impute to ourselves a faculty of intuition by which relations of fittingness are to be detected. Nor is it plausible in many of the cases that I have adduced: is it by such a faculty that we detect that  $\psi$ 'ing fits an intention to  $\varphi$ , supposing that it is a way of  $\varphi$ 'ing? Rather, what the term intuition aptly conveys is that we are often prompted to make certain ought-judgments by agents or circumstances or ends to which they are relative, without inferring them from any universal principles.

Take a richer case: considering your options in the situation, against the background of what I know about your ends and values, I suggest that, all things considered, you ought to  $\varphi$ , thereby offering you advice as a friend, on your behalf

and at least primarily from your own point of view. In so doing, unless the case is exceedingly straightforward, I am likely to have to balance a multiplicity of considerations. Some of these may be formulable in what Aristotle identified as practical principles that hold “for the most part”; others are not negligible, and yet one cannot say of them that, in general, they ought to prevail. Further, the values, positive or negative, that I take into account are likely to attach to ways of acting in a manner that varies according to the context. (For example, the value of enjoyment is not independent of what one is enjoying. And even a pleasure that is innocent in its object may take on a negative value, which may outweigh or even cancel any positive value, if indulging in it shows the agent to be selfish or greedy.) Any reflection about generalities, such as principles holding for the most part, must largely take judgments in concrete situations as data. There may well be a two-way traffic between generalities and particularities, as particular perceptions feed into generalizations, and generalizations color perceptions. There will perpetually be exercises of judgment that are reflective but not deductive. (Deduction, by contrast, demands intelligence but not judgment.)

How does one learn to make situationally-sensitive ought-judgments? By being gradually initiated into a new mode of speaking and thinking, and so learning—by trial and error, give and take—to intuit relations of fittingness in ways that others can enter into and refine or endorse. Learning and testing are skills essentially social, depending inescapably upon others who teach one, correct one, accept things from one, and ultimately (if all goes well) give one confidence. It must be remembered that most variations in ought-judgments, within and between communities, arise from considering acts in relation to different sets of relata (notably, different ends and quasi-ends but also different types of agent and circumstance) and not from differing

intuitions about what way of acting fits the same set of relata. The question whether quite different acts might really fit the same relata, so that all or most of our intuitions of what fits what are distorted, does not and cannot arise: relations of fittingness hold within a perspective that is constituted by a large degree of consensus and by such further possibilities of consensus as are opened up by what we already agree on. Fittingness is a paradigm of an anthropocentric relation, a relation—to adapt what Wiggins has asserted of the category of color—that corresponds to an interest that can only take root in creatures with something approaching our own practical sensibilities.<sup>17</sup> Intuitions of fittingness must strive to be more than fickle or idiosyncratic; yet they should not aspire to realize what Richard Wollheim has called “the phantasy that morality marks the spot where human beings discard human nature.”<sup>18</sup> The relations of fittingness that we try to get right are the matches that do or can exist for us. They hold between actualia and possibilia, actualities and possibilities—for achievable ends and possible acts exist only in a world of possibility. In the case of these relations, there is no conceptual space for a global mismatch between what we take ourselves to see and what is there to be seen.

Even so lightly sketched, such reflections may prepare us to confront a very different point of view upon normative judgments, of which ought-judgments are one (itself varied) variety. Opposite to a quietist view of a class of judgments is one that supports a global error theory, according to which judgments of the class inherently rest upon a false presumption that condemns them all to count, strictly, as false. (If, for different purposes, we commonly distinguish some from others as true and not false, this must be to mark the presence or absence of extra errors. Error theorists can take on board such discriminations without really conceding that any such judgment can unqualifiedly be true.) An error theory about all normative judgments was

championed by J. L. Mackie. What is the underlying presumption that he detects and rejects? One indication is a passage that he quotes from Samuel Clarke:

These eternal and necessary differences of things make it fit and reasonable for creatures so to act . . . even separate from the consideration of these rules being the positive will or command of God; and also antecedent to any respect or regard, expectation or apprehension, of any particular private and personal advantage or disadvantage, reward or punishment, either present or future.<sup>19</sup>

Mackie understands that, on such a conception, “a situation would have a demand for such-and-such an action somehow built into it.”<sup>20</sup> Such a demand would be a prescriptive feature that the world possesses independently, in principle, of our ability to detect it; the demand would be, as Mackie puts it, “part of the fabric of the world.”<sup>21</sup> In this it would resemble a causal relation (on a realist and non-Kantian conception of causality), but with an added oddity: outcomes that are causally necessitated do in time occur, but acts that are ethically required may never materialize. In his “argument from queerness,” Mackie objects that this view “involves the postulating of value-entities or value-features of quite a different order from anything else with which we are acquainted, and of a corresponding faculty with which to detect them.”<sup>22</sup>

I hope that it is now clear what strategy I am pursuing in resisting any inflation of Hume’s observation of a gap between is and ought into an allegation that a whole category of judgments, including or linked to ought-judgements, inherently have false pretensions. Fittingness is a distinctive relation that we perceive as holding in various

ways between agents, acts, ends, and circumstances—some actual, some only possible. Does this perception involve a fundamental delusion to the effect that the world contains relations of a decidedly peculiar kind, relations that we could only detect if we possessed a strange and *sui generis* perceptual capacity? Apart from taking over an appeal to anthropocentricity, I have tried to undermine the motivation for supposing so by emphasizing the end-relatedness of practical ought-judgments, as well their variegatedness and frequent triviality. I have noted, or conceded, two features common to our perceptions of fittingness: they are often sensitive to ethical considerations and, notably, to what I called “quasi-ends,” even when their focus and emphasis are not ethical; and, in interesting cases, they require the exercise of judgment. It is often not straightforward to assess their truth, even when they are not intended to raise any profound issues. But any suggestion that they purport to capture some demand that the world places upon us would often be quite out of place; they may even fail to connect with any reason for action. Our capacity for intuitions of fittingness, and our capacity often to agree about them, at least once the relativities have been made transparent, needs further scrutiny; yet it evidently rests upon a training that it would be fantastic to interpret as that of a peculiar faculty. In learning to distinguish what is fitting, in one relation or another, we learn, one may say, to perceive things distinctively; we do not have to acquire a sixth sense for a *sui generis* feature inherent in the very nature of things. What would such a feature have to do with such an example as: “If you want to get drunk every night, you ought to work in a pub”?

Of course, if there are oughts and there are oughts; some may be more pretentious, or profound, than others. In this respect, there is much to be explored. I have said that speakers are free to relativize their oughts, whether in application to

their own options or to another's, as they choose. A pervasive source of variation is the set of ends (primary, standing, or quasi) relative to which the ought is asserted. An end may be adduced because it is the agent's, and the speaker is either the agent himself or an adviser speaking on his behalf. Such an end may be adopted by the agent as an option; or it may be respected by him as something that he feels he cannot disregard.<sup>23</sup> Or the speaker may adduce an end that he puts to the agent. This last may be done with any degree of insistence or insouciance: the speaker may be imposing it, or proposing it, or just mooting it. Such variations are significant, but there is no need to suppose that they affect the truth of what is actually being said. It can be equally true that A ought to  $\varphi$ , relative to some end E, whether that end is his or another's, and whether it is pressing, optional, frivolous, or even mischievous. Another speaker may reject the judgment, or summarily replace it by another one differently relativized; yet he may be unable to deny its truth as it is meant, which is relative to a certain end. We should not suppose that the inability to deny its truth approves the original judgment, which may have been hatefully meant. "That is false" may indeed, on occasion, be a severe verdict; but so may "That is a vile thing to say." Even if to speak truly is to speak, in a way, successfully, it may not be to speak well.

In any case, there is no need to suppose that earnest oughts are used in a special sense that, unlike the senses I have explored, imports unrealizable epistemological or metaphysical pretensions. Elevated ends or peremptory quasi-ends may lend a special status to certain practical ought-judgments; but their oughts still connote the same fittingness that may also relate an effective means to an ineligible end or (in Tenenbaum's example) relate an apt but optional piece of symbolism to an aspect of the agent's personal history. Precisely in order to bring out the frequent frivolity of oughts, I have written here confidently of goods and ills, or values and



disvalues, that may attach to realizing our ends. Mackie's skepticism was directed at ethics as a whole rather than at any particular aspect of it (though no doubt his skepticism extended also to such matters as I have written about here).<sup>24</sup> My defense of quietism is conducted on a narrower front; or rather, I am defending us from any special disquiet attaching to our use of ought. There is much that may disquiet us in how we and others judge and act. Let us not be distracted from real ethical anxieties by unreal metaphysical apprehensions that come of an inattention to the actual ways in which we think and speak.

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (London: Fontana, 1985), 129.

<sup>2</sup> David Wiggins, "Ayer's Ethical Theory: Emotivism or Subjectivism?," in A. J. Ayer: Memorial Essays, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 180.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, trans. William David Ross, ix 8, 1169a18–26.

<sup>4</sup> David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, III.i.1.

<sup>5</sup> In my discussion of oughts, I shall draw liberally upon a recently published book of mine, Contextuality in Practical Reason (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

However, I do not touch there upon metaphysical matters or on the issue of quietism.

<sup>6</sup> Such a theoretical ought actually derives from a quasipractical one: Mary merited bodily assumption; so she was assumed bodily. Such an inference is intelligible given faith in divine providence; but providence is not a subject for science.

<sup>7</sup> R. M. Hare, The Language of Morals (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 35.

<sup>8</sup> Hare, Language of Morals, 36–7.

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<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5:414–15.

<sup>10</sup> R. M. Hare, “Wanting: Some Pitfalls,” in Practical Inferences (London: Macmillan, 1971), 44–45.

<sup>11</sup> Note that John might replace (2) by the explicit, “In that you want my money now, you ought to push me out of the boat.”

<sup>12</sup> Bernard Williams, “Practical Necessity,” in Moral Luck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 125.

<sup>13</sup> Alan R. White, Modal Thinking (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), 142–43.

<sup>14</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, Intention, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), 56.

<sup>15</sup> Sergio Tenenbaum, Appearances of the Good (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 89.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony Kenny, Action, Emotion, and Will (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 97.

<sup>17</sup> David Wiggins, “Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life,” in Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 107.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Wollheim, “The Sheep and the Ceremony,” in The Mind and Its Depths (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 21.

<sup>19</sup> J. L. Mackie, Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong (London: Penguin, 1977), 31.

<sup>20</sup> Mackie, Ethics, 40.

<sup>21</sup> Mackie, Ethics, 24.

<sup>22</sup> Mackie, Ethics, 40.

<sup>23</sup> On such ends viewed as integral to the agent’s integrity, which may fuel not an ought but a must, see Bernard Williams, “Moral Incapacity,” in Making Sense of

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Humanity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and “Practical Necessity,” in his Moral Luck.

<sup>24</sup> For further discussion along these lines, see A. W. Price, “On Criticising Values,” in Philosophy, the Good, the True and the Beautiful, ed. Anthony O’Hear (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 141–58.