Abstract  In this chapter, Dorothy Walsh argues that any ethical theory requires an underlying speculative metaphysics.

What is the relation of dependence of ethics upon metaphysics? This question cannot be asked of those who deny the reality of such a subject matter as metaphysics. If, however, metaphysics be accepted as that synthesis of doctrine which expresses what is ontologically prior in any philosophical system, then it will be readily admitted that not only ethics but every field of investigation has its metaphysical presuppositions. The question initially raised, however, intends to ask more than this. It intends to inquire concerning the degree of dependence of ethics upon metaphysics. Is the position of ethics similar, for example, to that of mathematics or physics or logic, fields of inquiry which, although involving metaphysical assumptions, are nevertheless relatively autonomous and internally intelligible; or is the relation of dependence in the case of ethics so complete that none of the fundamental ethical problems can be solved without prior solution of metaphysical issues and that ethics, as a subject matter, is not even intelligible except as delineated against the background of a metaphysic?

A survey of the historical material seems to support this latter view. Ethical systems have usually been formulated in relation to acknowledged metaphysical postulates. Such systems are the practical application of some view of the nature of reality to the field of human conduct. It is for this reason that the historical material of ethics is fairly
readily organized into types or schools and that this classification receives general
accord. But it is also for this reason that the advocates of the different schools are
divided from one another so radically by the nature of their pre-ethical postulates that
it seems impossible, within the field of ethics, to arbitrate their differences. Consider,
for example, the difficulty of formulating precisely and arbitrating effectively the
diversity of opinion between David Hume and Nicolai Hartmann.

It is, however, generally admitted that arbitration of ethical diversity must
somehow be effected. Radical differences of opinion on ethical questions cannot
be simply asserted. For a solution of this difficulty two alternatives present them-
selves. First, it may be assumed that ethics is peculiarly dependent upon metaphysics
to the extent that its problems are not intelligible except in relation to metaphysical
issues. If this is the case, the fact should be candidly acknowledged and the task
of arbitrating ethical diversity, in terms of metaphysical doctrine, begun. Second, it
may be maintained that any apparent dependence of ethics upon metaphysics should
be interpreted as symptomatic of the fact that the real task of ethical analysis has
scarcely been attempted. According to this view ethics, when fully developed, could
be a relatively independent field of inquiry, internally intelligible and capable of
furnishing a ground within itself for the solution of its problems. If this is the case,
the task of formulating the basic concepts of such an independent ethic cannot be too
soon undertaken. In other words, there seems to be a definite need for the delineation
either of a metaphysics of ethics or of an autonomous ethics.

Since the dependence of ethics upon metaphysics can be shown to be a real
necessity and not merely a historical accident only if there are serious theoretical
difficulties in the way of an independent ethics, this latter possibility should be
discussed first. If, putting aside metaphysical systems, we ask where we should
seek material for the construction of an ethical theory, two possible sources present
themselves. These might be exploited independently or in conjunction. There is, first,
what may be called the general moral experience of mankind. This might provide the
basis for a naturalistic empirical theory. There are, second, the basic ethical concepts
of the good and the ought. These, accepted as undefined or as indefinable, might
provide the primitive ideas for an autonomous field of ethical inquiry.

The initial difficulty of employing the moral experience of mankind for the
purposes of ethical theory is, of course, that of knowing where to look for its expres-
son. This is followed by the problem of interpreting that expression without recourse
to metaphysical notions. One might examine social custom and moral practice, partic-
ularly as it is embodied in institutions, or one might look directly to the empirical
nature of man as such for the determination of norms. Reliable information regarding
moral behavior can be obtained. Ethics, however, is not the report of moral behavior,
but the theory of morality, which theory, as philosophy, must have universality. The
material of anthropological or sociological study, in order to serve as the basis of an
ethics, must yield one of two results. Either it must show a substantial unanimity of
moral idea and practice of all races and cultures, or it must show an unmistakable
development dominated throughout by the same teleological principle. To exhibit
either of these results, however, the empirical data of the social sciences must be
“edited” by some philosopher who seeks, in historical process, exemplification of a
preconceived idea. This preconceived idea is a metaphysical idea. If, on the other
hand, one attempts the more direct procedure of seeking the data of ethical theory
in the nature of man as such, the situation is also difficult. The man to be examined
cannot be an active intellect or a windowless monad or a transcendental self or even
a child of God, for these interpretations are all the outcome of metaphysical theo-
ries. He must be the empirical man of daily experience or of psychological science.
Of course a great deal can be discovered about this man—for example, that he is
social and that he has certain desires and needs. But can one deduce an ethical theory
from this? Ethical literature is full of attempts to list the goods of life in scales of
ascending value and, upon such a basis, to work out social rules which will permit
greatest satisfaction for all. But what is involved in the construction of such a scale?
Such a scale is never the simple report of majority evaluation. It is supposed to reflect
the accumulated wisdom of mankind or of those who know best. In other words, a
scale of values which can be of use to an ethical theory must be legislative. It seems
clear that a legislative scale of values must be based on some theory which includes
a reference to what man can be as well as to what he empirically is. In reply to this
it may be urged that the knowledge of what man can be may be derived exclusively
from a knowledge of what he is by considering the possibility of the full develop-
ment of his potentialities. This does not meet the difficulty, since, on purely empirical
grounds, we have no basis for the selection of certain potentialities as superior. The
selection, for example, of man’s social nature as his most significant trait might
provide the concept of an integrated social order as a criterion of moral value. Such
emphasis, however, is arbitrary and leaves unsolved all the ethical problems of social
philosophy concerning the rights of individuals as such. All this has, of course, been
frequently mentioned and needs no further emphasis.

It is chiefly a consideration of the difficulties of naturalism which has led many
philosophers to believe that ethical theory cannot be constructed out of simple amoral
factual material but must begin with notions which are essentially of moral import.
It has frequently been assumed, however, that ideas such as “good” and “ought”
may be treated in isolation from any metaphysical system and accepted as primitive
notions for the construction of an autonomous ethics. This is not the case. Quite
apart from the question of whether good and ought are actually simple indefinable
notions, the attempt to treat them as such for the purposes of ethical inquiry must
be unsuccessful. No intelligible and consistent ethical theory can be constructed on
such a basis. The acceptance of good or ought, or both, as primitive ideas provides
no ground for systematic development. Such ideas, since they are assumed to have
no internal complexity, are atomic units subject only to such relationships as may
be imposed externally. The occurrence of good as an atomic term in such a system
does not mean that the notion of good is clarified since the uniform substitution of
any other term for good leaves the system of relationships unaltered.

In the *Principia ethica*, G. E. Moore insists that there are three questions on this
subject which must be differentiated. What is the nature of the term “good”? What
things are good? How is the good to be achieved in conduct? Moore places great
emphasis upon the importance of determining the nature of good apart from the
ascription of good to things. Nevertheless he is not successful in this. Ultimately, he
cannot give meaning to good except in terms of those things which are good. Moore’s initial attempt is to present the notion of good as an absolutely indefinable simple. But a judgment which predicates good of something in this sense cannot be taken as increasing in any way our knowledge of that thing. Such a judgment is either an act of pure denotation, “lo good,” or an act of ascription, “this is that.” The latter may claim to express an observed difference. But what does such a judgment mean? At the very utmost such a judgment expresses the fact of simple and inexplicable conjunction of diverse entities in the experience of a particular individual.

Since the notion of good, taken as indefinable, has no internal meaning, the possibility of elaborating an ethical theory depends upon the importation of content by the formulation of a doctrine concerning what sort of things are good. This involves the integration of the idea of good in relation to some general theory of the concrete nature of reality. The manner in which Moore and his disciples achieve this is by reliance upon unacknowledged empirical data. It is the method of empirical naturalism which is surreptitiously employed to obtain meaning for the good. This explains the curious fact that agreement regarding the indefinable and simple nature of good does not ensure agreement as to the sort of things which have this character. Moore mentions aesthetic enjoyment and personal affection. Ross finds that the only intrinsic goods are virtue, pleasure, and insight. Since the relation between goodness and aesthetic experience, for example, is external, the ground for the relationship cannot be determined by a consideration of the meaning of either term. Belief in the association must, therefore, rest on the empirical evidence of customary conjunction.

Since, however, the empirical basis for such generalization is not acknowledged, this theory is inferior to a candid naturalism in two important respects. First, no necessity is felt to furnish evidence for the occurrence of events. If, however, the only ground for belief that a thing is good is that it has been experienced as such, some evidence for the occurrence of that constant conjunction of character and thing must be provided. Failing this we have no general theory and are committed to solipsism. Second, no regard is shown for the conditions under which empirical generalization is meaningful. There can be no generalization regarding a character which is particular. Even granting the complete validity of Moore’s insight on each occurrence of his contact with good, we are able to conclude nothing because we do not have here a kind of good, which might be identified on a later occasion, but a unique non-repeatable simple. Without either rational ground or empirical evidence it is impossible to provide for any general connection between character and thing or between two exemplifications or instances of a character. Equally it is impossible to provide for relationship between concepts. It is difficult to see how “good,” as a simple idea, can be related in any meaningful way to the notion of “ought.”

The impossibility of passing from the simple idea of good to other ideas, notably the idea of obligation in connection with this good, has been recognized by realists who are in sympathy with Moore’s point of view. But this difficulty cannot be met by accepting ought as a second primitive idea and attempting to construct an ethical theory on these two. It has been suggested by Laird that the basic moral intuition is the perception of a synthetic relation between maximum possible good and obligation to
achieve it. How is this synthetic relation to be interpreted? Does it mean that perception of such a good does always, as a matter of fact, arouse the idea of obligation?

If so, the claim that certain natural events occur must be substantiated by evidence. Even if substantiated, such a conjunction of ideas must be interpreted as symptomatic of some deeper reality before it can be of value to an ethical theory. Perhaps what is intended is that the idea of such a good ought to arouse the sense of obligation. But on what is this obligation to the notion of obligation grounded? The only possible answer seems to be either that there is a relation of genuine entailment between good and ought or that the synthetic relationship of these terms must be acknowledged as a necessary presupposition of moral experience. In the first event, good and ought cannot be treated as simple notions but must have internal content and meaning. In the second event, the metaphysical basis for ethics is already acknowledged. Either of these views necessitates the explanation of ethical concepts in relation to the general theory of reality.

The argument may be summarized as follows. The development of an ethical theory which is to furnish ethical knowledge necessitates that one be able to predicate good or any other ethical notion, such as ought, of reality in a meaningful fashion. There are only two methods by which to effect the integration of ethical concepts in relation to the concrete nature of the real. One is the method of empirical naturalism, the other is the method of metaphysics. The good is either that which has, as a matter of fact, been valued as such, or that which, because of its intrinsic nature, is related in meaning to good whether this relationship has always been recognized or not. The difficulties of naturalism have been indicated above. Metaphysical synthesis remains as the only alternative.

It is necessary to discuss one further point in this connection. It might be held that a rejection both of naturalism and of the atomic treatment of ethical notions, such as good and ought, as indefinable simples need not necessitate recourse to metaphysics. Perhaps it might still prove possible to develop a significant ethical theory independently of the prior determination of metaphysical problems. Such a theory would accept as basic the ethical notions of good and ought, regarding them not as indefinable simples but as undefined ideas. Such ideas would supposedly require no definition for two reasons. First, because their nature would be in some sense already known to everyone. Second, because the ethical discourse developed on their basis would be, indirectly, explanatory of them. Nothing is more characteristic of philosophy than this method of dealing with ideas. Such an idea as that of “being,” for example, must ultimately be explained and understood in terms of its context. It is, however, extremely doubtful if the ethical notions of good and ought are sufficiently ultimate to permit of clarification by such a procedure. The evidence for this is to be found in a consideration of the history of ethical speculation itself. The literature of ethics reveals a sharp contradiction and opposition between those theories which have accepted the idea of good as basic and those which maintain that what is fundamental is the notion of obligation, or the ought. In all controversy on this matter, the final impasse is reached when it is asked, on the one hand, “What is the good of doing what is right?” and, on the other, “Why ought one to pursue the good?” Anyone genuinely desirous of ethical knowledge must insist on an answer to
both questions. An examination of the ethical theories involved reveals the mutually
implicative character of the good and the ought. Every ethical theory based upon one
of these concepts contains also an unacknowledged dependence upon the other. The
interrelation of good and ought should be the very heart of ethical theory, but it is not
discussed in most ethical speculation for the reason that its intelligible discussion
takes one out of the field of ethics to the consideration of the metaphysical problem
of the ontological status of the moral agent. It is not the purpose of this paper to
develop a metaphysics of ethics but rather to suggest its necessity. I shall, therefore,
attempt merely to indicate briefly, through a discussion of ethical theory, the point at
which such theory, if it is to contribute to ethical knowledge, requires metaphysical
completion.

The ethics of duty maintains that a moral agent is one who is capable of feeling a
direct and unconditional obligation to behave or to will in a certain fashion as soon
as he understands the situation in which he finds himself. He may behave or judge
in an unfortunate manner through a misunderstanding of the social situation, but he
can do wrong only by refusing to meet the obligatory claim of duty or to obey the
voice of conscience. Hence this type of ethical theory develops obligation upon two
levels: first, a moral agent ought to do his duty, which is to follow the dictates of
his conscience; second, a moral agent ought to make every effort to improve the
accuracy and delicacy of his moral perception. Virtue implies a conscientiousness
both in the cultivation of conscience and in the obedience to conscience.

The advocates of this type of ethical theory have vigorously resisted any attempt
to reduce the notion of ought to that of good. The whole force of moral obligation is
that it makes a direct and unconditional demand upon the agent quite independently
of any consideration of good which may result to himself or to another because of
the action. It is regarded as unnecessary to ask, “What is the good involved in doing
what is right?” Yet, if the matter be urged, the answer will have to be that man ought
to fulfill duty because only so can he be a moral agent and because there is some
intrinsic good attached to the being of a moral agent as such. A moral situation
makes a direct claim on some element in man which he has by virtue of his moral
activity. The rejection of this claim violates the self in its most valuable aspect. Thus
the ethics of duty necessarily contains a dependence on the concept of the good. This
concept is present in the form of a theory of value to the effect that the integrity of
man, considered as a moral agent, is the only intrinsic good. Such a good, therefore,
takes precedence over all others and hence is independent of any consideration of
good relating to the social consequences of moral action.

The case is similar with regard to ethical theories constructed on the basis of the
concept of the good. All such theories contain an implicit reliance on the notion of
ought. It is true that man naturally pursues the good or, at least, something taken to
be good. However, one must insist that knowledge of the comparative value of goods
is essential to the moral life and that the moral agent is, as such, under obligation
to pursue the greater or the greatest good. The moral life may be oriented toward
one ultimate and intrinsic good such as happiness or pleasure or beatitude. On the
other hand, the task of ethical reflection may be to effect the most harmonious and
inclusive arrangement of relatively independent but composable goods within the
framework of a given actual world. In either case there is an obligation upon man to undertake this task of knowledge and pursuit of the greatest good. It is highly doubtful if this obligation can be explained away or reduced to anything else. It expresses the unconditional duty to be a wise man rather than a fool, and furnishes the basis for that paradoxical obligation to happiness which is inherent in all hedonistic theories.

Since good and ought are thus interdependent, ethical theory must not only recognize the fact but must explain it. As is evident from our discussion, no intelligible synthesis can result from the attempt to treat these concepts as simple ideas, externally related. Such ethical concepts must be connected in some meaningful way to the nature of the moral agent. The good, if it is to be obligatory, cannot be regarded as an isolated quality or simple occurrence but must be integral to the being of the self which experiences obligation. Moral obligation, on the other hand, if it be valuable or a good, must be related to the other values of the self. Ethics, then, must explain the moral agent. But the moral agent cannot be explained without raising the question of his ontological status and his metaphysical reality. The necessity for this lies in the fact that the moral agent, considered merely as such, is a paradoxical and contradictory being. Such a being is in actuality less than he ought to be, yet in possibility he must already be everything that he ought to be. His nature cannot be made intelligible without raising, at the very least, the question of possibility and actuality in relation to reality. This leads one to the heart of metaphysical discourse. Furthermore, there is a fact concerning the moral agent, generally admitted by all ethical theories, which requires the consideration of this abstracted aspect of the self in relation to the complete concrete self. The moral role is a requirement. Man, for example, may be a musician but man must be a moral agent. Yet the ground for such necessity cannot be exhibited within an ethical theory which remains merely an ethical theory. It is because man is what he is that he must assume the role of moral agent. His significance in that role can be evident only in the light of his total ontological nature. This is so even though one’s knowledge of man as moral agent is contributory to one’s theory of him as metaphysical entity.

I shall conclude by attempting to meet two objections which naturally arise. The first is partly the result of a misunderstanding. It protests that an ethical theory is not constructed from metaphysical doctrines. It asks from whence one derives one’s metaphysical doctrines if not from common-sense experience, and further suggests that not only ethical theory but metaphysical theory, doctrines of the nature of reality or the being of man, are dependent on the knowledge revealed in moral intuition. It is not the intention of the view here advocated to deny this. All philosophical knowledge is dependent upon common-sense experience of which the experience of the moral life is among the most significant. What is here maintained is that an ethical theory, at the philosophical level, is not derived directly from the data of the moral life but, rather, indirectly from metaphysical doctrines which themselves depend on the general material of experience, including the moral experience. This indirect procedure is necessary because man, as a moral agent, cannot be understood except as a consequence of some view of man in his total ontological setting. In maintaining that ethical theories must be thus indirectly achieved, it is, of course, freely admitted that such theories, along with the metaphysical doctrines from which
they are derived, must be such as to save the phenomena of the moral life and to illuminate common-sense experience.

The second objection protests that ethical problems can be solved independently of metaphysical problems. One is reminded of the uncertain character of metaphysics and the fact that its dearest preoccupation is with so-called insoluble problems. It is felt that if ethical wisdom must wait upon metaphysics then we shall never achieve such wisdom. Surely, it is urged, we are not to be condemned to the embarrassment of the early skeptics, who, holding to the Socratic principle that action depends on knowledge and despairing of knowledge, were obliged to counsel an impossible passivity. The point of view here maintained makes no such preposterous claim as that the individual actually first determines his metaphysics, from this develops his ethics, and, on the basis of this, decides his moral problems. The fact, of course, is that action goes on because it must, making the best of whatever understanding is present. Moral practice may show all degrees of ethical insight, and ethical theory all degrees of metaphysical illumination. What is here maintained is that, ultimately, no ethical theory can be adequate without the explicit statement of its metaphysical beliefs.