

# Chapter 4

## Ethics and Metaphysics



Dorothy Walsh

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

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

17 A survey of the historical material seems to support this latter view. Ethical systems  
18 have usually been formulated in relation to acknowledged metaphysical postulates.  
19 Such systems are the practical application of some view of the nature of reality to the  
20 field of human conduct. It is for this reason that the historical material of ethics is fairly

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21 readily organized into types or schools and that this classification receives general  
 22 accord. But it is also for this reason that the advocates of the different schools are  
 23 divided from one another so radically by the nature of their pre-ethical postulates that  
 24 it seems impossible, within the field of ethics, to arbitrate their differences. Consider,  
 25 for example, the difficulty of formulating precisely and arbitrating effectively the  
 26 diversity of opinion between David Hume and Nicolai Hartmann.

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

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

52 The initial difficulty of employing the moral experience of mankind for the  
 53 purposes of ethical theory is, of course, that of knowing where to look for its expres-  
 54 sion. This is followed by the problem of interpreting that expression without recourse  
 55 to metaphysical notions. One might examine social custom and moral practice, partic-  
 56 ularly as it is embodied in institutions, or one might look directly to the empirical  
 57 nature of man as such for the determination of norms. Reliable information regarding  
 58 moral behavior can be obtained. Ethics, however, is not the report of moral behavior,  
 59 but the theory of morality, which theory, as philosophy, must have universality. The  
 60 material of anthropological or sociological study, in order to serve as the basis of an  
 61 ethics, must yield one of two results. Either it must show a substantial unanimity of  
 62 moral idea and practice of all races and cultures, or it must show an unmistakable  
 63 development dominated throughout by the same teleological principle. To exhibit  
 64 either of these results, however, the empirical data of the social sciences must be  
 65 "edited" by some philosopher who seeks, in historical process, exemplification of a

66 preconceived idea. This preconceived idea is a metaphysical idea. If, on the other  
 67 hand, one attempts the more direct procedure of seeking the data of ethical theory  
 68 in the nature of man as such, the situation is also difficult. The man to be examined  
 69 cannot be an active intellect or a windowless monad or a transcendental self or even  
 70 a child of God, for these interpretations are all the outcome of metaphysical theo-  
 71 ries. He must be the empirical man of daily experience or of psychological science.  
 72 Of course a great deal can be discovered about this man—for example, that he is  
 73 social and that he has certain desires and needs. But can one deduce an ethical theory  
 74 from this? Ethical literature is full of attempts to list the goods of life in scales of  
 75 ascending value and, upon such a basis, to work out social rules which will permit  
 76 greatest satisfaction for all. But what is involved in the construction of such a scale?  
 77 Such a scale is never the simple report of majority evaluation. It is supposed to reflect  
 78 the accumulated wisdom of mankind or of those who know best. In other words, a  
 79 scale of values which can be of use to an ethical theory must be legislative. It seems  
 80 clear that a legislative scale of values must be based on some theory which includes  
 81 a reference to what man can be as well as to what he empirically is. In reply to this  
 82 it may be urged that the knowledge of what man can be may be derived exclusively  
 83 from a knowledge of what he is by considering the possibility of the full develop-  
 84 ment of his potentialities. This does not meet the difficulty, since, on purely empirical  
 85 grounds, we have no basis for the selection of certain potentialities as superior. The  
 86 selection, for example, of man's social nature as his most significant trait might  
 87 provide the concept of an integrated social order as a criterion of moral value. Such  
 88 emphasis, however, is arbitrary and leaves unsolved all the ethical problems of social  
 89 philosophy concerning the rights of individuals as such. All this has, of course, been  
 90 frequently mentioned and needs no further emphasis.

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

106 In the *Principia ethica*, G. E. Moore insists that there are three questions on this  
 107 subject which must be differentiated. What is the nature of the term “good”? What  
 108 things are good? How is the good to be achieved in conduct? Moore places great  
 109 emphasis upon the importance of determining the nature of good apart from the  
 110 ascription of good to things. Nevertheless he is not successful in this. Ultimately, he

111 cannot give meaning to good except in terms of those things which are good. Moore's  
 112 initial attempt is to present the notion of good as an absolutely indefinable simple.  
 113 But a judgment which predicates good of something in this sense cannot be taken  
 114 as increasing in any way our knowledge of that thing. Such a judgment is either an  
 115 act of pure denotation, "lo good," or an act of ascription, "this is that." The latter  
 116 may claim to express an observed difference. But what does such a judgment mean?  
 117 At the very utmost such a judgment expresses the fact of simple and inexplicable  
 118 conjunction of diverse entities in the experience of a particular individual.

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

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

149 The impossibility of passing from the simple idea of good to other ideas, notably  
 150 the idea of obligation in connection with this good, has been recognized by realists  
 151 who are in sympathy with Moore's point of view. But this difficulty cannot be met  
 152 by accepting ought as a second primitive idea and attempting to construct an ethical  
 153 theory on these two. It has been suggested by Laird that the basic moral intuition is the  
 154 perception of a synthetic relation between maximum possible good and obligation to

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

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

179 It is necessary to discuss one further point in this connection. It might be held  
 180 that a rejection both of naturalism and of the atomic treatment of ethical notions,  
 181 such as good and ought, as indefinable simples need not necessitate recourse to  
 182 metaphysics. Perhaps it might still prove possible to develop a significant ethical  
 183 theory independently of the prior determination of metaphysical problems. Such a  
 184 theory would accept as basic the ethical notions of good and ought, regarding them  
 185 not as indefinable simples but as undefined ideas. Such ideas would supposedly  
 186 require no definition for two reasons. First, because their nature would be in some  
 187 sense already known to everyone. Second, because the ethical discourse developed on  
 188 their basis would be, indirectly, explanatory of them. Nothing is more characteristic  
 189 of philosophy than this method of dealing with ideas. Such an idea as that of "being,"  
 190 for example, must ultimately be explained and understood in terms of its context. It is,  
 191 however, extremely doubtful if the ethical notions of good and ought are sufficiently  
 192 ultimate to permit of clarification by such a procedure. The evidence for this is to  
 193 be found in a consideration of the history of ethical speculation itself. The literature  
 194 of ethics reveals a sharp contradiction and opposition between those theories which  
 195 have accepted the idea of good as basic and those which maintain that what is  
 196 fundamental is the notion of obligation, or the ought. In all controversy on this  
 197 matter, the final *impasse* is reached when it is asked, on the one hand, "What is  
 198 the good of doing what is right?" and, on the other, "Why ought one to pursue the  
 199 good?" Anyone genuinely desirous of ethical knowledge must insist on an answer to

200 both questions. An examination of the ethical theories involved reveals the mutually  
 201 implicative character of the good and the ought. Every ethical theory based upon one  
 202 of these concepts contains also an unacknowledged dependence upon the other. The  
 203 interrelation of good and ought should be the very heart of ethical theory, but it is not  
 204 discussed in most ethical speculation for the reason that its intelligible discussion  
 205 takes one out of the field of ethics to the consideration of the metaphysical problem  
 206 of the ontological status of the moral agent. It is not the purpose of this paper to  
 207 develop a metaphysics of ethics but rather to suggest its necessity. I shall, therefore,  
 208 attempt merely to indicate briefly, through a discussion of ethical theory, the point at  
 209 which such theory, if it is to contribute to ethical knowledge, requires metaphysical  
 210 completion.

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

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

236 The case is similar with regard to ethical theories constructed on the basis of the  
 237 concept of the good. All such theories contain an implicit reliance on the notion of  
 238 ought. It is true that man naturally pursues the good or, at least, something taken to  
 239 be good. However, one must insist that knowledge of the comparative value of goods  
 240 is essential to the moral life and that the moral agent is, as such, under obligation  
 241 to pursue the greater or the greatest good. The moral life may be oriented toward  
 242 one ultimate and intrinsic good such as happiness or pleasure or beatitude. On the  
 243 other hand, the task of ethical reflection may be to effect the most harmonious and  
 244 inclusive arrangement of relatively independent but compossible goods within the

245 framework of a given actual world. In either case there is an obligation upon man to  
 246 undertake this task of knowledge and pursuit of the greatest good. It is highly doubtful  
 247 if this obligation can be explained away or reduced to anything else. It expresses the  
 248 unconditional duty to be a wise man rather than a fool, and furnishes the basis for  
 249 that paradoxical obligation to happiness which is inherent in all hedonistic theories.

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

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

290 they are derived, must be such as to save the phenomena of the moral life and to  
291 illuminate common-sense experience.

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