THE FUNCTIONS OF MORAL DISCOURSE[1]

The purpose of this paper is to develop and defend a certain conception of the characteristic functions of morality. I intend to do this by an analysis of the uses or functions of moral language. It is my conviction that the nature of moral evaluation can most readily be understood if the purposes or jobs of moral utterances are clearly understood.

I

Moral language is obviously a part of ordinary language. It is not a technical language like the language of physics or the language of art criticism. It is not a language for which we must have a special *expertise* in order to understand it, though indeed to talk *about* it and make generalizations about it does require a special *expertise*. Moral language is the language we use in verbalizing a choice or a decision ; it is the language we use in appraising human conduct and in giving advice about courses of action ; it is the language we use in ascribing or excusing responsibility ; and finally, it is the language we use in committing ourselves to a principle of action.[2] Moral language is a *practical* kind of discourse that is concerned to answer the questions : ' What should be done ? ' or ' What attitude should be taken toward what has been done, is being done, or will be done ? ' Moral language is most particularly concerned with guiding choices as to what to do when we are faced with alternative courses of action.

As a form of practical discourse, morality functions to *guide* conduct and *alter* behaviour or attitudes. As Hume, who was quite aware of this practical function of moral discourse remarks, moral language serves to " excite the passions ".[3] Taking this remark from its eighteenth century idiom we might say that the language of morals serves to motivate action and to alter volitions.

There is, however, a crucial ambiguity in the above characterization. As Falk and Hare have made us aware, there is at least a *prima facie* distinction between *telling* someone what to do and *getting* him to do it. That is, there is a distinction between *guiding* action and *altering* behaviour or " exciting the passions ". A person in the capacity of a moral adviser may tell someone what he ought to do. He may show him what is the best

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[1] Earlier versions of this paper were presented to *The Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology*, Asheville, N.C., and *The Creighton Club*, Casanovia, N.Y., on 30th March 1956 and 18th April 1956 respectively.

[2] P. H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics*, Chapter I. And Nowell-Smith, " Psycho-analysis and Moral Language," *The Rationalist Annual*, 1954, p. 36.

[3] David Hume, *Treatise*, Book III, Part I, Section I.

course of action to follow in a given circumstance. But, he may do all these things and still *not* succeed in getting him to do the act.

Nonetheless, it is important to note the close *link* in practical discourse between *telling* and *getting* or between *guiding* and *goading*. If I, as a moral adviser, tell A this is the best course of action and A agrees that this is the best course of action then I need not ask A if he is going to *try* to do it or *set* himself to doing it. We can say that in a quite *ordinary* sense of ' implies ',[4] A's saying that it is the best course of action implies that A will *try* to do it, everything else being equal. Principles of guidance or moral advice characteristically function to alter dispositions and to prod us to certain courses of action. A principle of guidance which never did this would be a very curious principle indeed.

Moral advice serves directly to guide action ; that is, it serves to tell us which of several alternative courses of action we *should* choose. But principles which could not serve to alter behaviour or redirect attitudes towards certain types of behaviour could hardly count as ' principles of guidance '. (This is not just a practical matter but follows from the *use* of ' principles of guidance '.)

A somewhat stronger point can be made. Only those ' principles of guidance ' that *generally* function to alter behaviour are genuine principles of guidance. If a ' principle of guidance ' never served to alter behaviour or dispositions to action it would not be regarded as a ' principle of guidance ' in the fullest sense but merely as a maxim which could serve, but did not in fact serve, as a principle of guidance. It is part of the role of moral discourse to alter behaviour and alter dispositions to action. Any principles which do not do this, but only logically could do this, are not regarded as moral principles in the fullest sense of the word.

Without denying the distinction between *guiding* and *goading*, I shall say that the characteristic functions of morality are to guide conduct *and* to alter attitudes or dispositions to action.

II

This description of the characteristic functions of the language of morality is not sufficient. Let us further examine the functions of moral discourse. Not all practical discourse is moral discourse. Not all conduct is moral conduct and not all advice or appraisal of conduct is moral advice or moral appraisal. Nor are all attitudes or dispositions to action moral attitudes or moral dispositions to action. To say that moral discourse functions to guide conduct and alter behaviour is very much like saying that swear words are used to express anger or that the language of cheerleading is designed to make people yell. Swear words do express anger and cheerleading language usually does prod people to yell, but these are hardly adequate descriptions of the functions of the language of swearing or the

[4]See P. H. Nowell-Smith on ' contextual implication ' in his *Ethics,* Chapter 6.

language of cheerleading. Similarly the above description of morality is hardly a sufficient description of the functions of morality.

In further describing the characteristic functions of the language of morality I am going to develop the descriptions of the function of morality given by Toulmin and Baier. While I am not in complete agreement with the way that either Toulmin or Baier have developed these notions, I believe their basic characterization of the functions of morality is correct. I shall state their basic characterization of the functions of morality and then try to explicate it by answering anticipated objections.

Toulmin and Baier speak boldly of the " function of morality ". Some may be disturbed by this and think that Toulmin and Baier have shifted away from linguistic or conceptual analysis altogether and have started talking about the referent of the sign rather than about the sign itself. For many reasons, more or less irrelevant to my argument in this essay, I feel that making this semantic distinction in contexts of this sort is more confusing than enlightening. However, I have consistently, I trust, spoken of the ' language of morals ' rather than of morals. Toulmin and Baier, however, speak quite directly of the function of morality. However, I believe they are ' getting at ' the same considerations that I seek to explain by talking of the uses or meanings of the phrase ' the functions of moral discourse '. Keeping in mind the above-mentioned semantical distinction, I shall present Toulmin's and Baier's claims in their own mode and then, when returning to my own development of their argument, I shall speak of the uses or the functions of moral language.

I shall turn now, for a moment, to Toulmin's and Baier's own analyses. In his *Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics* Professor S. Toulmin makes several statements of the characteristic functions of morality or (as he calls it) of ethics.

1. The function of ethics (provisionally defined) is " to correlate our feelings and behaviour in such a way as to make the fulfilment of everyone's aims and desires as far as possible, compatible " (p. 137).
2. " Ethics is concerned with the harmonious satisfaction of desires and interests " (p. 223).
3. ". . . we can fairly characterize ethics as a part of the process whereby the desires and actions of the members of a community are harmonized " (p. 136).
4. " The function of ethics is to reconcile the independent aims and wills of a community of people . . ." (p. 170).
5. " What makes us call a judgment ' ethical ' is the fact that it is used to harmonize people's actions " (p. 145).

Kurt Baier, whose position is very like Toulmin's, also conceives of the functions of morality in the same general way. To take the moral point of view is to " regard the rules belonging to the morality of the group as designed to regulate the behaviour of people all of whom are to be treated

as equally important ' centres ' of cravings, impulses, desires, needs, aims, and aspirations ; as people with ends of their own, all of which are entitled, *prima facie*, to be attained ".[5] A " genuine moral rule must be *for the good* of human beings ".[6] But all our desires are to count alike and all " centres " of desire, excepting definitely recognized and *universalisable* exceptions, are to be treated alike.[7]

The primary reference of moral concepts is not some sort of mysterious, non-natural property ; rather, while remaining gerundive concepts, they also refer to variable human dispositions, feelings, interests, desires and the like.[8] Moral discourse is concerned with altering feelings and with guiding actions so that people can live together in harmony. Like the mythical ' social contract ' of the English and French philosophers of the seventeenth century, morals serve to bring man's independent desires and needs into some manageable ' peaceful coexistence '.

However, it must *not* be thought, from the above account, that Toulmin and Baier regard morality as an activity that seeks to attain social cohesion *at any price*. It is the characteristic function of morality to harmonize conflicting desires and interests in a *particular way*. Morality seeks to harmonize various interests in such a way that there will be no more suffering than is absolutely necessary for there to be social life. Moral rules are intended to allow as many people as possible to achieve as much as possible of whatever it is that they want. Morality adjudicates between these desires and interests only in the sense that it insists that we only seek to achieve those desires which are compatible with our other desires or with the desires of other people. Thus, morality is irreducibly *social*.[9] Toulmin contends that the concept of ' duty ' " is straightforwardly intelligible only in communal life ".[10] ' Duty ', ' obligation ', etc., in their basic uses, do a job only where we have a situation where a choice is involved that will affect the interests of another member of a community.

Toulmin's own development of the characteristic functions of morality leaves something to be desired. It *seems* to suggest that there could be no questions of international morality or any moral agreement between members of different communities.[11] I do not think that this is Toulmin's intent or a consequence of his analysis but I am not concerned with an exegesis of Toulmin here.[12] But *if* it is his point he is surely mistaken. In developing

[5]Kurt Baier, " The Point of View of Morality," *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. XXXII (August, 1954), p. 123.

[6]*Ibid.*, p. 126.

[7]*Ibid.*, pp. 123-6.

[8]Toulmin, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-9.

[9]*Ibid.*, Chapter 10.

[10]*Ibid.*, p. 136.

[11]Dykstra takes this to be Toulmin's point or a consequence of his theory. See V. H. Dykstra, " The Place of Reason in Ethics ", *The Review of Metaphysics* (March, 1955), pp. 458-67 and V.H. Dykstra, " An Examination of Stephen Toulmin's Theory of Morals ", unpublished Ph.D. Thesis (University of Wisconsin, 1953).

[12]For my arguments here see my doctoral dissertation, chapters 9 and 10. See K. E. Nielsen, " Justification and Morals ", unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Duke University, 1955).

the above conception of the characteristic functions of morality I shall contend that the very meaning of the word ' morality ' excludes the possibility of their being a Nazi morality or Hopi morality or American morality that is *just* an American, Hopi, or Nazi morality.   By this I mean (for example) that if A is blameable for a given act, he would be blameable *whoever* he is, unless his being that particular person or a member of that particular group made some morally relevant difference.   And, what is to count as a ' morally relevant difference ' must in turn be universalisable. Moral utterances are objective in the sense that they do not apply exclusively to any given speaker or class of people but are meant to count for all people in like circumstances.   Moral utterances are universalisable ; they must be so if they are to count as ' moral utterances '.   In their most characteristic forms, moral judgments are utterances in which the " rational element predominates "[13] ; full-fledged moral judgments are to be contrasted, as are full-fledged judgments of perception, with an immediate report or an unconsidered exclamation.[14]   Like Hume and Westermark, Toulmin emphasizes that :

> In ethics, as in science, incorrigible but conflicting reports of personal experience (sensible or emotional) are replaced by judgments aiming at universality and impartiality—about the ' real value ', the ' real colour ', ' the real shape ' of an object, rather than the shape, colour or value one would ascribe to it on the basis of immediate experience alone (p. 125).

The above conception of the characteristic functions of morality might be stated rather generally, though pedantically, in the following manner. I shall refer to this general statement of the characteristic functions of morality, or moral discourse, as (W). It reads as follows :

> (W) The characteristic functions of moral discourse are to guide conduct and alter behaviour so as to achieve the harmonious satisfaction of as many independent desires and wants as possible.

It is important to note that this is a descriptive statement saying what sort of activity moral discourse is and what sort of functions it has. (However, it is crucial to note just what sort of descriptive statement it is.   More on this in IV.) It is not intended to exhort anyone to be moral or to take the point of view of morality or anything of that nature. It is not prescriptive or normative at all.   It only points out that moral discourse serves to guide conduct and alter behaviour in the above fashion.   Whether behaviour *should* be altered in that fashion or conduct *ought* to be guided in that fashion is something which cannot be determined just by examining the functions of moral discourse. Because the word ' moral ' occurs in it and because we normally assume that people ought to be moral, there is, of course, upon reading (W), a normal tendency to think that it is something we ought to do.

[13]Toulmin, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

[14]*Ibid.*, p. 123.

But it is intended here as a completely non-normative statement. Further, when I speak of the characteristic functions of moral discourse I mean to be using the words ' moral ' and ' functions ' quite descriptively and not also as *grading labels* that would suggest the functions of moral discourse are ends we ought to seek. This also applies to my use of ' harmonious ' in (W).

III

Let me now turn to some possible criticisms of (W). It is natural to suggest that with ' naturalistic ' or egalitarian universalistic leanings I have *persuasively defined* ' moral discourse '. It might be said that such a conception of the functions of moral discourse may very well characterize the conception of the characteristic functions of moral discourse in secular ' internationally minded ' Western circles, but it does not adequately characterize what some of our ancestors and what some of our Western neighbours regard as the functions of moral discourse. And it certainly does not adequately characterize the conceptions of the functions of moral discourse in tribes radically different from our own.

This kind of criticism can be particularized and extended. It is *probably* true that the ' plain man ' would be shocked, if not just amused, at being told that he uses moral discourse in the way I have said he uses it. He might even add : " This is monstrous. When I say something is moral, I mean it is the *right* thing to do. Morality pertains to *right conduct*. It's the activity that is concerned with advising and counselling us in what we *ought* to do and how we *ought* to live. It has nothing to do with all your fiddlefaddle about interests, harmonious satisfactions of desires and the like. Morality deals with what is *right* ".

Such a reaction, though quite natural, misses my point about the characteristic functions of moral discourse. The following two considerations are crucial here.

First, ' morality ' itself, like ' good ', ' right ', ' beautiful ', ' nice ', ' neat ' and ' honest ', is normally a *hurrah word*. Taking a moral point of view is the thing we *ought* to do ; if something is moral it is commendatory, something that ought to be done. Thus, assuming the point about the *naturalistic fallacy* is well taken, we can never *define* ' morality ', any more than any other evaluative term, in completely naturalistic or empirical terms. The plain man upon seeing our ' definitions ' misses precisely the normative element or the dynamic element in them that he rightly associates with moral and valuational predicates. He then wants to say : " Morals does not harmonize people's actions ; it tells them what they *ought* to do ". But his objection is not to the point. I am not trying to define ' morality ' or ' morals ' in the sense that R. B. Perry tries to define ' value '. Rather, I am concerned to characterize the functions of moral discourse. I am not trying to define what we mean by ' morality ' in a " purified empiricist language " or any other so-called " ideal language ". Rather, I am trying

to describe or characterize what sort of roles moral discourse has in life. This is *not*, however, an empirical sociological description of the morals and manners of the human animal. Rather any such study would have to presuppose just the conception I am trying to get clear about. That is, it would have to presuppose we clearly understood what the functions of moral discourse are. Rather, I am asking : How does moral discourse fit in with the other forms of discourse ? What sort of job or jobs does it do ? Concerned with this task I can speak, in terms of satisfactions and social harmony and the like and, without the slightest inconsistency, admit that a term like ' morality ' is not definable in wholly naturalistic terms.

Let us note a second consideration. Our plain man's ' definitions ' are unenlightening. To be told that morals pertains to right conduct doesn't help us out at all in understanding the functions of morality, for we only ask, " But, what is right conduct ? " I am trying to push aside that " surface grammar " in order to try to understand the style of functioning of moral utterances ; that is, I am trying to come to understand how moral utterances really operate. I am concerned to give what Toulmin has called a " functional analysis " of moral discourse as an activity. Toulmin makes the same general point about a " functional analysis " very explicitly when he is discussing : " What is Science ? ".[15] But I believe it is readily applicable to his remarks and to my remarks about the functions of moral discourse. Toulmin remarks that, in describing the function of science, he does not wish so much to contradict or to compete with the man who says " Science is systematic and formulated knowledge " or the man who says " Science is organized common sense " as to *elucidate* such enlightening remarks by an analysis of the function of science.[16] I think that he would say the same thing of the man who said that " Morals is concerned with right conduct " or that " Morals is a practical science that gives us the rational basis for our actions ". But these last characterizations of morality or moral discourse though correct are unenlightening. Having no explanation of the actual function of moral discourse we remain philosophically puzzled. We ask : " What conduct is right conduct ? And what do we mean by the rational basis for our actions ? " My method (and Toulmin's method) is radically different. I am—as I have said—simply trying to describe the role moral discourse plays in our lives. Though my manner of speech may at first be shocking to the ordinary man, I see nothing about it, once what I an trying to do is understood, which would allow us to say that the above view of the characteristic functions of moral discourse is plainly wrong as an *explication* of what we in ordinary life mean by the characteristic functions of morality.

IV

There is an additional problem for this kind of analysis. Let me bring this problem out by examining a question that might naturally be asked of

[15]Toulmin, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
[16]*Ibid.*, p. 103.

me at this juncture. The question is the following : "*Is (W) empirical or analytic ?*" This indeed is an embarrassing question. I candidly say " embarrassing question " because (1) I am troubled about just what to say about the rigidity and exclusiveness of the distinction between analytic and empirical statements, and (2) I do not want to say that (W) is either analytic or empirical in any straightforward sense. (But by this I certainly do not mean at all to suggest that I am worried about whether it might be a so-called synthetic *a priori*.) I feel uneasy about my analysis at this point, but I shall try to make clear why I do not feel that we can appropriately call (W) either analytic or synthetic. Note, by way of preliminary clarifica-tiod the following two considerations.

First let me make clear why I do not want to take an ' out ' that would allow me to skirt or avoid the whole problem. I could do this by pointing out that some of the constituent terms of (W), i.e. ' morality ' and ' har-monious ', have an irreducible emotive or expressive dimension and there-fore (W) can not be called either empirical or analytic. But I have in my above treatment " emotively neutralized " ' morality ' and ' harmonious satisfaction '. I have fastened exclusively on the criteriological aspects of (W). I can then (if I care to) add that the word ' moral ' or ' morality ' is a *commendatory* word or a pro-grading label. The word ' morality ' could be applied to a completely different class of actions and still—at least for a time—remain a commendatory word. But grading labels are never just emotive or just commendatory. They always refer to a given class of actions, objects or attitudes. They are representative as well as expressive. *If* the word ' morality ' were applied to a completely different class of actions from those we have been describing, then we would say that the same word had a new use or a new meaning and that, in a quite ordinary sense, we were not talking about the " same thing " at all. For the above reasons I think we can ignore the emotive or commendatory aspects of ' morals ' and ' morality ' in the *above context*.

Secondly, (W) could be made analytic by stipulative definition. But this would not help us, for what we want to know is whether in ordinary language (W) is analytic or not. Or, more precisely, when considering only the criteriological aspects in ordinary language, whether (W) is analytic or not.

With these two preliminary matters out of the way, I can best bring out my reasons for not wishing to classify (W) as being either analytic or empirical. Note first that (W) *seems* at first glance to be a straightforward empirical statement. But then ask what would count as a disconfirmation of (W) ?

I shall consider three characteristic functions of moral discourse that purport to be disconfirmation. I shall call them (S), (N), and (B). I shall seek to show that, depending on how they are understood, they are either improper descriptions of moral discourse or quite compatible with (W). I shall try to show that they are improper descriptions of moral discourse

by showing that they fail at some point to make literal sense or that they violate our use of moral language. In making this last claim I am not simply appealing to (W) and thus begging the question at the outset. Rather I will appeal to the fact that we all know how to *operate* with moral language and can recognize bits of moral language when we hear it or see it written. Appealing to this ability of ours, I will try to show how (S), (N), and (B) violate, in one way or another, our language sense. Because of this they cannot serve as functions of moral discourse if the phrase ' functions of moral discourse ' is to have its customary meaning. And in giving an analysis of ' the functions of moral discourse ' this is all that is at stake. I am not trying to answer what would be the functions of moral discourse if the phrase ' the functions of moral discourse ' were to have a different meaning from what it has.

Let us turn first to (S).

> (S) A characteristic function of moral discourse is to guide conduct and alter behaviour so as to develop an integrated self.

Now, would we accept this as a disconfirmation of (W) ? I think not. In justification of this, note the following line of reasoning. Some people might wish to contend that (S) too was a characteristic function of moral discourse. Since morality is an *open-textured* concept, it is quite possible that moral discourse could, *in some contexts*, function to develop an integrated self. However, to say that (S) is a function incompatible with *and* more basic than (W) would be to fail to understand that duty-words and obligation-words (paradigms of moral expressions) take their standard uses not from personal contexts but from inter-personal or social contexts.[17] Indeed we can speak of duties to ourselves, but this is a secondary use of ' duty ' that is parasitic for its meaning on a standard use of ' duty '. This standard use of ' duty ' is a use which functions to prescribe acts we must perform for other people quite apart from whether these acts would integrate our personalities or not. Thus anyone who offered the above function as a disconfirmation of (W) could be shown to be making a purely linguistic error ; that is, he would *not* be using duty-words or obligation-words correctly.

Suppose someone offered as another disconfirmation of (W) the following conception of the characteristic functions of morality. Let us call it (N).

> (N) The characteristic functions of moral discourse are to guide conduct and alter behaviour so as to develop a superior class of man for which the rest of mankind are to exist simply as a means. That is, the rest of mankind are not to be regarded as moral agents with a worth of their own.

Traditional philosophical ethicists would probably claim that here we have a conflict between two basic conceptions of moral discourse and the moral life. (N) describes the function of moral discourse in a Nietzschian or quasi-Nietzschian morality of the " superman ". I am making the more philosophically radical—though not, I trust, commonsensically radical—sug-

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[17]Nowell-Smith, *Ethics*, Chapter 16.

gestion that (N) is not, and cannot be, a characteristic function of moral discourse at all. This is so because of the meaning we attach to the word ' man '. To be a man is to be *by definition* a moral agent. Even the Greek with his slaves and the Germans with their treatment of the Jews are not exceptions to this. It was necessary for them to give some universalisable reasons for slavery or Jew-persecution. It was necessary for the Germans, for example, to conceive of the Jews as a lower class of man—a class of " men " hardly human at all—in order to rationalize their treatment of them.

To be a man is to be just the sort of animal to whom, in specified situations and at a specified stage of development (beyond infanthood and before utter senility), moral blame and praise attach. It is true that in certain contexts certain human beings have moral priority over other human beings. But this moral priority is always based on certain specifiable and *universalisable* reasons. Thus in our culture we have, in certain reasonably definite contexts (the sinking of a ship, etc.), the rule : " Women and children first ". We could readily envisage a culture with a morality in which *not* this moral rule but one incompatible with it obtained, but we cannot envisage a context—unless we change the use of ' moral consideration '—in which men were not treated as moral agents *at all*. Our Nietzschian with his (N) is asking us to do just that and because of that he is not describing a possible function of moral discourse at all. Again our arguments do not turn on any empirical considerations but merely on implicatory relations between standard uses of ' man ' and ' moral '. And, in virtue of the uses of these words (N) could not possibly count as a disconfirmation of (W).

Let us consider another claim which might serve to disconfirm (W). Let us call it (B).

> (B) The characteristic functions of moral discourse are to guide conduct and alter behaviour so as to develop a superior class of men who do not seek the ordinary mundane desires of ordinary men but who attempt to " go beyond desire " altogether.

Assuming the validity of the rule that in morals " ' ought ' implies ' can ' ", I wish to contend that (B) sets up a logically absurd " ideal " that cannot even *in theory* be obtained. It would only be possible for the " superior class of men " *to attempt* to go beyond desire ; they could not *possibly* go " beyond desire ". And, as I shall argue below, *if* the word ' attempt ' has its usual logical force they cannot even *attempt* to go beyond desire. (B) is asking them to attempt to do something they cannot *in theory* do and it therefore violates the " ' ought ' implies ' can ' " restriction.

But to establish the above point clearly I must show *why* a man cannot possibly do what he is asked to do in (B) and why it could not possibly serve the function it purports to serve.

To see this point consider the following question. How could a morality based on (B) alter behaviour ? It is analytic that man only *does* what he

is *motivated* to do.[18] Moral exhortations from any norm based on (B) could only take place on the absurd condition that men were men without desires. (Consider . . . could we call a being a *man* if he were totally without desires ? What would it be like for a *man* or a sentient creature to be without desires ?) But, if men were without desires then exhortation could not possibly have any function. The word ' exhortation ' could not have any meaning or use. If the conditions which (B)—on one interpretation—states were fulfillable ; that is, if men could possibly become desireless then it would be nonsensical to speak of altering behaviour or, for that matter, of guiding conduct, for it is only possible to guide conduct if behaviour *can be* altered. (B)—if taken literally—sets up conditions which make it theoretically (logically) impossible to alter conduct. This is so because man can only do those acts that he is motivated to do. And a " *desireless man* " could not possibly have any motivation. When people state something like (B) they seem to mean to say that they *desire* to go " beyond desire ". And this makes no literal sense. What they mean *literally* is that they desire to go beyond a certain *class* or range of desires which they desire not to desire. Their problem is of the same logical order as that of the drunk who desires not to desire alcohol. In other words we have a conflict of desires. But here we are clearly not attaching any *literal* sense to the phrase ' to go beyond desire altogether '. Men like Gandhi and Epictetus are recommending that we have as few desires as possible. Viewed soberly their requests amount to asking us to only want or desire a certain very limited group of activities. But they cannot be telling us to go beyond desire altogether.

There is still one further quite distinct consideration about (B). It might be claimed that I have in the above interpretations misread (B). (B)—the argument might continue—does not violate the " ' ought ' implies ' can ' " requirement. It does *not* say that a function of moral discourse is to guide conduct so that some superior men can go beyond desire but only that moral discourse functions to guide conduct so that these superior men will *attempt* to go beyond desire. If (B) stated a characteristic function of moral discourse, a person making a " moral appraisal " in accordance with it would be advocating *attempting* to go beyond desire and *not*—the impossible—going beyond desire. It might be said that again my analysis has indicated an egalitarian bias this time with a rather " Deweyite " twist. It would be claimed I am simply *assuming* the *moral principle* that it is *wrong* to set for men goals which they cannot attain but which they can only attempt to attain.

But the above argument will hardly do for it does not make logical

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[18]This is true even when, in one sense, man does what he doesn't want to do, i.e., acts from a *sense* of duty ; for, even then he acts so because the *sense* or *feeling* of duty *motivates* him to act in such a manner. And thus in *another* perfectly intelligible sense he does what he wants to do. This would, of course, only include what are ordinarily called voluntary acts (eating, going to the movies, buying a new hat, keeping a promise, etc., etc.) and not involuntary acts (breathing, seeing when one opens one's eyes, dying, being born, etc.).

sense to ask someone to *attempt* what cannot *possibly* be attained. The word ' attempt ' means to make an effort at, to try, to attack. But one cannot make an effort at or try to attain what is altogether impossible any more than one can find or even look for the colour of heat. We do have a *secondary use* of language in which we say : " But you must try the impossible ". But we don't mean this *literally*, we mean it *figuratively*. The secondary use is used characteristically in contexts in which we want, for some reason or another, to exhort a person to do something that is *very hard* and in which his chances of success are slim indeed. A coach might say this to his team when it was far, far behind, a soldier to his comrade when they were trying to make it back to their own lines, or a doctor to a patient. But if something is *logically* impossible, we cannot sensibly ask anyone to attempt the impossible. This would not be a genuine attempt but only a caricature of an attempt. The word ' attempt ' could not have its standard meaning here. Thus (B) does stumble over the " ' ought ' implies ' can ' " requirement and thus stumbles into absurdity.

All these above examples seem to militate against treating (W) as an empirical claim. Any alleged disconfirming statements are ruled out on purely linguistic grounds. At this point it is entirely natural to ask of me : " *What would you take as a disconfirmation of* (W) ? " My answer is that I cannot honestly conceive what would count as a disconfirmation of (W) or for that matter as a confirmation of it. This is why I do not want to call it an empirical statement. In other words I do not think its truth or falsity is an empirical issue in any usual sense of ' empirical issue '. But then it is natural to ask : " Is not (W) analytic ? " And, I do not want to say that it is analytic either. Let me now give my reasons for not calling it analytic.

First, the contradictory of (W) does not seem to me self-contradictory though it does seem absurd and pointless. That is, I can not conceive of any possible application in morals for its contradictory.

Second, morality seems to me to be an *open-textured* concept. Like ' gold ', ' man ', ' game ', etc., and unlike ' triangle ', ' square ', ' rhomboid ', etc., ' morality ' does *not* seem to have any defining conditions that are both necessary *and* sufficient. I can define a triangle as a three-sided figure and this definition will include all possible triangles. I cannot conceive how the term ' morality ' or the phrase ' a moral consideration ' could be so exhaustively defined apart from some linguistic stipulation on our part. Thus, as there are in ordinary discourse no necessary and sufficient conditions to define ' morality ', we cannot treat (W) as analytic. I repeat we can *make* (W) analytic but it is not so in ordinary language.

As long as we try to fit everything in natural languages into the corset of analytic or empirical we are bound to be unsatisfied. But I see no need so to force our conceptual categories. (W) is just a statement descriptive of or characterizing the function of morality ; it states the *characteristic* functions of the activity or form of life we call ' moral discourse '.

(On this level it *might* be called an empirical statement about the linguistic usage of the word ' morality ' and the ' functions of moral discourse '. But this would have the paradoxical conclusion of reducing philosophy, or at least this kind of philosophy, to a bit of rather *a priori*—and therefore (by definition) bad—empirical linguistics. I was not trying to develop a generalization of the kind made in empirical linguistics. Further, (W) does not seem to me to be that kind of generalization. To use Ryle's way of putting it, I have sought to explicate the *use* and not just the *usage* of ' the functions of moral discourse '. But it is both difficult to *say* and difficult to *know* just when one is talking about usage and when one is talking about the uses of language. To get at the uses of language we must examine usage and it is hard to say or to know just when one has " got behind " the maze of usage to the *uses* of language or the style of functioning of our various areas of discourse. It is perhaps here that we can properly speak of " insight ", though here this means nothing more mysterious than a cultivated sensitivity to the operations of language.[19])

V

Leaving the above puzzling aside and even leaving aside the question of whether it is analytic, empirical, or something else altogether, it still seems clear that (W) does set the *limits of moral reasoning*. This much seems established no matter what is said about its logical status. On this point I am entirely in agreement with Toulmin's analysis.

However, the ground and the type of assent we need to give to (W) would vary depending on just what kind of a logical status it has. Thus the question asked in the preceding section is not without importance.

Lastly, it might be objected that I have not demonstrated the truth of (W). This is perfectly true. I must only remind you that all proof and all reasoning is not demonstration. I have attempted to give some *reasons* why it seems to me to be true. This reasoning does not amount to a demonstration and I do not see how, from the very nature of the case, a demonstration is possible. Yet I have given what seems to be conclusive reasons for its truth. I could, of course, attempt to examine more so-called disconfirming examples like (S), (N), and (B). But that would still not give us a demonstration. At this point the most reasonable procedure seems to me to be to turn to the *method of challenge* and ask : if these reasons are not conclusive what reasons would count as conclusive reasons in this context ? If (W) is not a statement of the basic and characteristic functions of moral discourse, what is ?

[19]G. Ryle, " Ordinary Language ", *Philosophical Review*, April 1953. See also Rossi-Landi's discussion of this in his introduction to Oxford philosophy prefacing his translation of *The Concept of Mind*.   Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, *Lo spirito come Comportamento* (Turin, 1956).

KAI NIELSEN

Hamilton College.