1

SOCRATES' QUESTION

It is not a trivial question, Socrates said: what we are talking about is how one should live. Or so Plato reports him, in one of the first books written about this subject.[1] Plato thought that philosophy could answer the question. Like Socrates, he hoped that one could direct one's life, if necessary redirect it, through an understanding that was distinctively philosophical—that is to say, general and abstract, rationally reflective, and concerned with what can be known through different kinds of inquiry.

The aims of moral philosophy, and any hopes it may have of being worth serious attention, are bound up with the fate of Socrates' question, even if it is not true that philosophy, itself, can reasonably hope to answer it. With regard to that hope, there are two things to be mentioned here at the outset. One is particularly to be remembered by the writer—how large a claim he is making if he says that a particular kind of abstract, argumentative writing should be worth serious attention when these large questions are at issue. There are other books that bear on the question—almost all books, come to that, which are any good

and which are concerned with human life at all. That is a point for the philosophical writer even if he does not think his relation to Socrates' question lies in trying to answer it.

The other initial point is one for the reader. It would be a serious thing if philosophy could answer the question. How could it be that a *subject*, something studied in universities (but not only there), something for which there is a large technical literature, could deliver what one might recognize as an answer to the basic questions of life? It is hard to see how this could be so, unless, as Socrates believed, the answer were one that the reader would recognize as one he might have given himself. But how could this be? And how would this be related to the existence of the subject? For Socrates, there was no such subject; he just talked with his friends in a plain way, and the writers he referred to (at least with any respect) were the poets. But within one generation Plato had linked the study of moral philosophy to difficult mathematical disciplines, and after two generations there were treatises on the subject—in particular, Aristotle's *Ethics*, still one of the most illuminating.[2]

Some philosophers would like to be able to go back now to Socrates' position and to start again, reflectively questioning common sense and our moral or ethical concerns, without the weight of texts and a tradition of philosophical study. There is something to be said for this, and in this book I shall try to follow it to the extent of pursuing an inquiry and hoping to involve the reader in it. At another level, however, it is baseless to suppose that one can or should try to get away from the practices of the subject. What makes an inquiry a philosophical one is reflective generality and a style of argument that claims to be rationally persuasive. It would be silly to forget that many acute and reflective people have already labored at formulating and discussing these questions. Moral philosophy has the problems it has because of its history and its present practices. Moreover, it is important that there is a tradition of activity, some of it technical,

in other parts of philosophy, such as logic, the theory of meaning, and the philosophy of mind. While few of them outside mathematical logic provide "results," there is certainly a lot to be known about the state of the subject, and some of it bears significantly on moral philosophy.

There is another reason for not forgetting that we exist now and not in Socrates' condition. For him and for Plato it was a special feature of philosophy that it was reflective and stood back from ordinary practice and argument to define and criticize the attitudes involved in them. But modern life is so pervasively reflective, and a high degree of self-consciousness is so basic to its institutions, that these qualities cannot be what mainly distinguishes philosophy from other activities—from law, for instance, which is increasingly conscious of itself as a social creation; or medicine, forced to understand itself as at once care, business, and applied science; to say nothing of fiction, which even in its more popular forms needs to be conscious of its fictionality. Philosophy in the modern world cannot make any special claim to reflectiveness, though it may be able to make a special use of it.

This book will try to give some idea of the most important developments in moral philosophy, but it will proceed by way of an inquiry into its problems, in those directions that seem to me most interesting. I hope that the accounts of other people's work will be accurate, but they will assuredly be selective. It is not merely that my account of the subject will be different from one given by someone else (that must presumably be so if the book is worth reading at all), nor is it a question of how representative it will be, but rather that I shall not be concerned all the time to say how representative it is. There is one respect, at least, in which this book is not representative of ways in which the subject is for the most part now conducted, at least in the English-speaking world. It is more skeptical than much of that philosophy about what the powers of philosophy are, and it is also more skeptical about morality.

What the aims of moral philosophy should be depends on its own results. Because its inquiries are indeed reflective and general, and concerned with what can be known, they must try to give an account of what would have to go into answering Socrates' question: what part might be played by knowledge of the sciences; how far purely rational inquiry can take us; how far the answer to the question might be expected to be different if it is asked in one society rather than another; how much, at the end of all that, must be left to personal decision. Philosophical reflection thus has to consider what is involved in answering this, or any other less general, practical question, and to ask what powers of the mind and what forms of knowledge might be called upon by it. One thing that has to be considered in this process is the place of philosophy itself.

There might seem to be a circle in this: philosophy, in asking how Socrates' question might be answered, determines its own place in answering it. It is not a circle but a progression. Philosophy starts from questions that, on any view of it, it can and should ask, about the chances we have of finding out how best to live; in the course of that, it comes to see how much it itself may help, with discursive methods of analysis and argument, critical discontent, and an imaginative comparison of possibilities, which are what it most characteristically tries to add to our ordinary resources of historical and personal knowledge.

Socrates' question is the best place for moral philosophy to start. It is better than "what is our duty?" or "how may we be good?" or even "how can we be happy?" Each of these questions takes too much for granted, although not everyone will agree about what that is. In the case of the last question, some people, such as those who want to start with the first question, will think that it starts in the wrong place, by ignoring the distinctive issues of morality; others may simply find it rather optimistic. Socrates' question is neutral on those issues, and on many others. It would be wrong, however, to think that it takes nothing for granted. The first thing we should do is to ask what is involved in Socrates'

question, and how much we are presupposing if we assume that it can be usefully asked at all.

"How should one live?"—the generality of *one* already stakes a claim. The Greek language does not even give us *one*: the formula is impersonal. The implication is that something relevant or useful can be said to anyone, in general, and this implies that something general can be said, something that embraces or shapes the individual ambitions each person may bring to the question "how should I live?" (A larger implication can easily be found in this generality: that the question naturally leads us out of the concerns of the ego altogether. We shall come back to this later.) This is one way in which Socrates' question goes beyond the everyday "what shall I do?" Another is that it is not immediate; it is not about what I should do now, or next. It is about a manner of life. The Greeks themselves were much impressed by the idea that such a question must, consequently, be about a whole life and that a good way of living had to issue in what, at its end, would be seen to have been a good life. Impressed by the power of fortune to wreck what looked like the best-shaped life, some of them, Socrates one of the first, sought a rational design of life which would reduce the power of fortune and would be to the greatest possible extent luck-free.[3] This has been, in different forms, an aim of later thought as well. The idea that one must think, at this very general level, about *a whole life* may seem less compelling to some of us than it did to Socrates. But his question still does press a demand for reflection on one's life *as a whole*, from every aspect and all the way down, even if we do not place as much weight as the Greeks did on how it may end.

The impersonal Greek phrase translated as *one should* is not only silent about the person whose life is in question. It is also entirely noncommittal, and very fruitfully so, about the kinds of consideration to be applied to the question. "How should I live?" does not mean "what life morally ought I to live?", this is why

Socrates' question is a starting point different from those other questions I mentioned, about duty or about a life in which one would be good. It may be the same as a question about the good life, a life worth living, but that notion in itself does not bring in any distinctively moral claims. It may turn out, as Socrates believed and most of us still hope, that a good life is also the life of a good person (*must be* is what Socrates believed; *can be* is what most of us hope). But, if so, that will come out later. *Should* is simply *should* and, in itself, is no different in this very general question from what it is in any casual question, "what should I do now?"

Some philosophers have supposed that we cannot start from this general or indeterminate kind of practical question, because questions such as "what should I do?", "what is the best way for me to live?", and so on, are *ambiguous* and sustain both a moral and a nonmoral sense. On this view, the first thing one would have to do with the question is to decide which of these two different kinds of thing it meant, and until then one could not even start to answer it. That is a mistake. The analysis of meanings does not require "moral" and "nonmoral" as categories of meaning. Of course, if someone says of another "he is a good man," we can ask whether the speaker means that he is morally good, as contrasted, for instance, with meaning that he is a good man to take on a military sortie—but the fact that one can give these various interpretations no more yields a moral sense of "good" or of "good man" than it does a military sense (or a football sense, etc.).

One can of course ask, on a given occasion, "what should I do from an ethical point of view?" or "what should I do from a self-interested point of view?" These ask for the results of subdeliberations, and invite one to review a particular type of consideration among those that bear on the question and to think what the considerations of that type, taken by themselves, support. In the same way, I can ask what I should do taking only economic or political or family considerations into account. At the end of

all that, there is the question "what should I do, all things considered?" There is only one kind of question to be asked about what to do, of which Socrates' is a very general example, and moral considerations are one kind of consideration that bear on answering it.[4]

Here and earlier I have mentioned "moral" considerations, using that word in a general way, which corresponds to what is, irremovably, one name for the subject: moral philosophy. But there is another name for the subject, "ethics," and corresponding to that is the notion of an ethical consideration. By origin, the difference between the two terms is that between Latin and Greek, each relating to a word meaning *disposition* or *custom*. One difference is that the Latin term from which "moral" comes emphasizes rather more the sense of social expectation, while the Greek favors that of individual character. But the word "morality" has by now taken on a more distinctive content, and I am going to suggest that morality should be understood as a particular development of the ethical, one that has a special significance in modern Western culture. It peculiarly emphasizes certain ethical notions rather than others, developing in particular a special notion of obligation, and it has some peculiar presuppositions. In view of these features it is also, I believe, something we should treat with a special skepticism. From now on, therefore, I shall for the most part use "ethical" as the broad term to stand for what this subject is certainly about, and "moral" and "morality" for the narrower system, the peculiarities of which will concern us later on.

I shall not try to define what exactly counts as an ethical consideration, but I shall say something about what goes into the notion of the ethical. It does no harm that the notion is vague. It is in fact *morality*, the special system, that demands a sharp boundary for itself (in demanding "moral" and "nonmoral" senses for words, for instance). This is a function of its special presuppositions. Without them, we can admit that there is a

range of considerations that falls under the notion of the ethical, and we can also see why the range is not clearly delimited.

One thing that falls within its range is the notion of an obligation. A rather varied set of considerations is ordinarily counted as obligations, and I shall take up later (in Chapter 10) the question of why this should be so. One familiar kind is the obligation that one can put oneself under, in particular by making a promise. There is also the idea of a duty. The most familiar use of that word nowadays may be in narrow institutional connections, as when there is a list or roster of duties. Going beyond that, duties have characteristically been connected with a role, position, or relationship, such as those that follow from one's "station," as Bradley called it in the title of a famous essay.[5] In a case such as the duties of a job, the job may have been acquired voluntarily, but in general duties, and most obligations other than those of promises, are not acquired voluntarily.

In the thought of Kant and of others influenced by him, all genuinely moral considerations rest, ultimately and at a deep level, in the agent's will. I cannot simply be *required* by my position in a social structure—by the fact that I am a particular person's child, for instance—to act in a certain way, if that *required* is to be of the moral kind, and does not simply reflect a psychological compulsion or social and legal sanctions. To act morally is to act autonomously, not as the result of social pressure. This mirrors some of the characteristic concerns of the subsystem morality. As against that, it has been in every society a recognizable ethical thought, and remains so in ours, that one can be under a requirement of this kind simply because of who one is and of one's social situation. It may be a kind of consideration that some people in Western societies now would not want to accept, but it has been accepted by almost everyone in the past, and there is no necessity in the demand that every requirement of this kind must, under rational scrutiny, be either abandoned or converted into a voluntary commitment. Such a demand is,

like other distinctive features of morality, closely related to processes of modernization: it represents an understanding in ethical terms of the process that in the world of legal relations Maine called the change from status to contract. It corresponds also to a changing conception of the self that enters into ethical relations.[6]

Obligation and duty look backwards, or at least sideways. The acts they require, supposing that one is deliberating about what to do, lie in the future, but the reasons for those acts lie in the fact that I have already promised, the job I have undertaken, the position I am already in. Another kind of ethical consideration looks forward, to the outcomes of the acts open to me. "It will be for the best" may be taken as the general form of this kind of consideration. In one way of taking this, specially important in philosophical theory, *the best* is measured by the degree to which people get what they want, are made happy, or some similar consideration. This is the area of welfarism or utilitarianism (I shall discuss such theories in Chapters 5 and 6). But that is only one version. G.E. Moore also thought that the forward-looking type of consideration was fundamental, but he allowed things other than satisfaction—such as friendship and the awareness of beauty—to count among the good consequences. It was because of this that his theory was so attractive to the Bloomsbury group: it managed to reject at once the stuffiness of duty and the vulgarity of utilitarianism.

There is another kind of ethical consideration, which presents an action as being of some ethically relevant kind. There is a wide range of ethical characteristics of actions under which they may be chosen or, again, refused. A particular action may be refused because it would be theft or murder, for instance, or deceitful or dishonorable, or, less dramatically, because it would let someone down. These descriptions—and there are many of them—operate at different levels; thus an action can be dishonorable because it is deceitful.

Closely connected with these descriptions, under which actions may be chosen or rejected, are various virtues, a virtue being a disposition of character to choose or reject actions because they are of a certain ethically relevant kind. The word "virtue" has for the most part acquired comic or otherwise undesirable associations, and few now use it except philosophers, but there is no other word that serves as well, and it has to be used in moral philosophy. One might hope that, with its proper meaning reestablished, it will come back into respectable use. In that proper use, meaning an ethically admirable disposition of character, it covers a broad class of characteristics, and, as so often in these subjects, the boundary of that class is not sharp and does not need to be made sharp. Some desirable personal characteristics certainly do not count as virtues, such as being sexually attractive. That can be a matter of character (some people have a sexually attractive character), but it does not have to be and it does not rate as a virtue, any more than having perfect pitch does. Again, virtues are always more than mere skills, since they involve characteristic patterns of desire and motivation. One can be a good pianist and have no desire to play, but if one is generous or fair-minded, those qualities themselves help to determine, in the right contexts, what one will want to do.

This is not to say that virtues can never be misused. One kind of virtue that can evidently be misused is the so-called executive virtues, which do not so much involve objectives of their own as assist in realizing other objectives—courage, for instance, or self-control. These are nevertheless virtues, being traits of character, and they are not related to pursuing other objectives as the mere possession of a skill is. According to Socrates, the virtues cannot be misused, and indeed he held something even stronger, that it is impossible for people, because they have a certain virtue, to act worse than if they did not have it. This led him, consistently, to believe that there is basically only one virtue, the power of right judgment. We need not follow him in that. More important, we

should not follow him in what motivates those ideas, which is the search for something in an individual's life that can be *unqualifiedly* good, good under all possible circumstances. That search has its modern expressions as well, and we shall encounter one of them in the special preoccupations of morality.

The notion of a virtue is a traditional one in moral philosophy, but it fell out of discussion for some time. In recent work, several writers have rightly emphasised its importance.[7] If one has a certain virtue, then that affects how one deliberates. We need to be clear, however, about the ways in which it can affect the deliberation. An important point is that the virtue-term itself usually does not occur in the content of the deliberation. Someone who has a particular virtue does actions because they fall under certain descriptions and avoids others because they fall under other descriptions. That person is described in terms of the virtue, and so are his or her actions: thus he or she is a just or courageous person who does just or courageous things. But—and this is the point—it is rarely the case that the description that applies to the agent and to the action is the same as that in terms of which the agent chooses the action. "Just" is indeed such a case, one of the few, and a just or fair person is one who chooses actions because they are just and rejects others because they are unjust or unfair. But a courageous person does not typically choose acts as being courageous, and it is a notorious truth that a modest person does not act under the title of modesty. The benevolent or kind-hearted person does benevolent things, but does them under other descriptions, such as "she needs it," "it will cheer him up," "it will stop the pain." The description of the virtue is not itself the description that appears in the consideration. Moreover, there is typically no one ethical concept that characterizes the deliberations of a person who has a particular virtue. Rather, if an agent has a particular virtue, then certain ranges of fact become ethical considerations for that agent because he or she has that virtue. The road from the ethical considerations that weigh with a virtuous

person to the description of the virtue itself is a tortuous one, and it is both defined and pitted by the impact of self-consciousness.

That same impact, in fact, may have contributed to making the virtues unpopular as an ethical conception. Their discussion used to make much of the *cultivation* of the virtues. In third-personal form, that exercise, if not under that title, is very familiar: it forms a good part of socialization or moral education or, come to that, education. As a first-personal exercise, however, the cultivation of the virtues has something suspect about it, of priggishness or self-deception. It is not simply that to think in this way is to think about oneself rather than about the world and other people. Some ethical thought, particularly if it is self-critical, will of course do that. More than one writer has recently stressed the importance of our capacity to have second-order desires—desires to have certain desires[8]—and its significance for ethical reflection and the practical consciousness. Deliberation toward satisfying those second-order desires must be in a special degree directed toward the self. The trouble with cultivating the virtues, if it is seen as a first-personal and deliberative exercise, is rather that your thought is not self-directed enough. Thinking about your possible states in terms of the virtues is not so much to think about your actions, and it is not distinctively to think about the terms in which you could or should think about your actions: it is rather to think about the way in which others might describe or comment on the way in which you think about your actions, and if that represents the essential content of your deliberations, it really does seem a misdirection of the ethical attention. The lesson of all this, however, is not that the virtues are not an important ethical concept. It is rather that the importance of an ethical concept need not lie in its being itself an element of first-personal deliberation. The deliberations of people who are generous or brave, and also the deliberations of people who are trying to be more generous or braver, are different from the deliberations of those who are not like that, but the difference

does not mainly lie in their thinking about themselves in terms of generosity or courage.

These, then, are some kinds of ethical concepts and considerations. What sorts of considerations bear on action but are *not* ethical considerations? There is one very obvious candidate, the considerations of egoism, those that relate merely to the comfort, excitement, self-esteem, power, or other advantage of the agent. The contrast between these considerations and the ethical is a platitude, and is grounded in obviously reasonable ideas about what ethical practices are for, the role they play in human societies. Yet even here distinctions need to be made. One is only a verbal point. We are concerned with Socrates' question "how should one live?" and egoism, in the unvarnished and baldly self-interested sense, is at any rate an intelligible answer to that, even though most of us may be disposed to reject it. It is possible to use the word "ethical" of any scheme for living that would provide an intelligible answer to Socrates' question. In that sense, even the baldest egoism would be an ethical option. I do not think we should follow that use. However vague it may initially be, we have a conception of the ethical that understandably relates to us and our actions the demands, needs, claims, desires, and, generally, the lives of other people, and it is helpful to preserve this conception in what we are prepared to call an ethical consideration.

Egoism can, however, take a step farther than it takes in its baldest form. There is a theory of how we should act which has been called, confusingly enough, *ethical egoism*. This claims that each person ought to pursue his or her own self-interest. This differs from bald egoism because it is a reflective position and takes a general view about people's interests. Whether we call it an ethical system, as it calls itself, does not really matter very much. The important question is how it contributes to the idea of an ethical *consideration*. At first sight it seems to make no contribution to that, since it says that each of us ought to act on

nonethical considerations. If it simply says that, it merely seems dogmatic: if people in fact act on considerations other than self-interest, what shows that they are irrational to do so? What this view is more likely to do, in fact, is to *leave open* the role of ethical considerations, and to ask how a life that involves acting on those considerations is related to self-interest.

There is another view, which looks much the same as the last but is different. It also claims something general, saying that *what ought to happen* is that everyone pursue his or her own interest. This view is likely to have an unstable effect on the considerations that one takes into account in acting. It may introduce a consideration that is ethical in the ordinary sense. If I believe that what ought to happen is that people pursue their own interest, then one thing I may have reason to do is to promote that state of affairs, and this may involve my giving a helping hand to others in adopting that policy. Such a line of action may well conflict with my simply pursuing my own self-interest.

In fact, it is quite difficult to sustain the bare belief that what ought to happen is that people pursue their own interest. It is more natural to support this with another consideration, that it is *for the best* if everyone does that. This may take the form of saying such things as that attempts to be kind to others merely confuse the issue. Someone who argues like this (and believes it) actually accepts some other ethical considerations as well, for instance that it is a good thing if people get what they want, and believes in addition that the best way for as many people as possible to get as much as possible of what they want is that each person should pursue what he or she wants. This is, of course, what advocates of laissez-faire capitalism used to claim in the early nineteenth century. Some even claim it in the late twentieth century, in the face of the obvious fact that all economic systems depend on people in society having dispositions that extend beyond self-interest. Perhaps this contradiction helps to explain why some advocates of laissez-faire tend to give moralizing

lectures, not only to people who are failing to pursue their own interest but to people who are.

We are contrasting ethical and egoistic considerations. But might not somebody want someone else's happiness? Of course. Then would not egoism, my pursuit of what I want, coincide with what is supposed to be an ethical type of consideration, the concern for someone else's happiness? Again yes, but it is not very interesting unless in some more general and systematic way egoistic and ethical considerations come together. That is a question we shall come to when we consider foundations in Chapter 3.

From all this it will be seen that the idea of the ethical, even though it is vague, has some content to it; it is not a purely formal notion. One illustration of this lies in a different kind of nonethical consideration, which might be called the *counterethical*. Counterethical motivations, a significant human phenomenon, come in various forms, shaped by their positive counterparts in the ethical. Malevolence, the most familiar motive of this kind, is often associated with the agent's pleasure, and that is usually believed to be its natural state; but there exists a pure and selfless malevolence as well, a malice transcending even the agent's need to be around to enjoy the harm that it wills. It differs from counterjustice, a whimsical delight in unfairness. That is heavily parasitic on its ethical counterpart, in the sense that a careful determination of the just is needed first, to give it direction. With malevolence it is not quite like that. It is not that benevolence has to do its work before malevolence has anything to go on, but rather that each uses the same perceptions and moves from them in different directions. (This is why, as Nietzsche remarked, cruelty needs to share the sensibility of the sympathetic, while brutality needs not to.) Other counterethical motivations, again, are parasitic on the reputation or emotional self-image of the ethical rather than on its conclusions. This, as one would expect, can particularly involve the virtues. That an action would be cowardly is not often found by an agent to be a consideration in

its favor, but it could be, and in a counterethical way, ministering to a masochism of shame.

I have touched on considerations of egoism and on considerations that go outside the self—of benevolence, for instance, or fairness. But there is a question that has proved very important to ethics of how far outside the self such considerations should range. Will it count as an ethical consideration if you consider the interests and needs only of your family or of your community or of the nation? Certainly such local loyalties have provided the fabric of people's lives and the forum, it seems right to say, of ethical life. However, there are some ethical demands that seem to be satisfied only by a universal concern, one that extends to all human beings and perhaps beyond the human race. This concern is particularly cultivated by the subsystem morality, to the extent that it is often thought that no concern is truly moral unless it is marked by this universality.

For morality, the ethical constituency is always the same: the universal constituency. An allegiance to a smaller group, the loyalties to family or country, would have to be justified from the outside inward, by an argument that explained how it was a good thing that people should have allegiances that were less than universal. (I shall consider in Chapters 5 and 6 the motives and perils of this kind of approach; and also different accounts that have been given of what the universal constituency is.) At a more everyday level (a less reflective one, the moral critic would say), the location of the ethical can move from one side to another of a given contrast. Relative to my personal interest, the interests of the town or the nation can represent an ethical demand, but the interests of the town can count as self-interested if the demand comes from some larger identification. This is simply because the requirements of benevolence or fairness may always stake a claim against self-interest; *we* can represent a self-interest as much as *I*; and who *we* are depends on the extent of identification in a particular case, and on the boundaries of contrast.

I have mentioned several sorts of ethical consideration, and more than one kind of nonethical. Philosophy has traditionally shown a desire to reduce this diversity, on both sides of the divide. It has tended, first of all, to see all nonethical considerations as reducible to egoism, the narrowest form of self-interest. Indeed some philosophers have wanted to reduce that to one special kind of egoistic concern, the pursuit of pleasure. Kant, in particular, believed that every action not done from moral principle was done for the agent's pleasure. This needs to be distinguished from another idea, that all actions, including those done for ethical reasons, are equally motivated by the pursuit of pleasure. This theory, psychological hedonism, finds it hard to avoid being either obviously false or else trivially vacuous, as it becomes if it simply identifies with the agent's expected pleasure anything that the agent intentionally does. But in any case this theory makes no special contribution to a distinction between the ethical and the nonethical. If there were any true and interesting version of psychological hedonism, those actions that had nonethical motivations would not necessarily form any special class of pleasure-seeking activity. Kant's view, on the other hand, does contribute to the question, by holding that moral action is uniquely exempted from psychological hedonism; that view is certainly wrong.[9] If we are not influenced by such a theory, we can accept the obvious truth that there are different sorts of nonethical motivation—and, moreover, that there is more than one kind of motivation acting against ethical considerations.[10]

The desire to reduce all nonethical considerations to one type is less strong in philosophy now than it was when moral philosophy chiefly concentrated not so much on questions of what is the right thing to do and what is the good life (the answers to such questions were thought to be obvious), but rather on how one was to be motivated to pursue those things, against the motivations of selfishness and pleasure. The desire to reduce all *ethical* considerations to one pattern is, on the other hand, as

strong as ever, and various theories try to show that one or another type of ethical consideration is basic, with other types to be explained in terms of it. Some take as basic a notion of obligation or duty, and the fact that we count it as an ethical consideration, for instance, that a certain act will probably lead to the best consequences is explained in terms of our having one duty, among others, to bring about the best consequences. Theories of this kind are called "deontological." (This term is sometimes said to come from the ancient Greek word for duty. There is no ancient Greek word for duty: it comes from the Greek for what one *must* do.)

Contrasted with these are theories that take as primary the idea of producing the best possible state of affairs. Theories of this kind are often called "teleological." The most important example is that which identifies the goodness of outcomes in terms of people's happiness or their getting what they want or prefer. This, as I have already said, is called utilitarianism, though that term has also been used, for instance by Moore, for the more general notion of a teleological system.[11] Some of these reductive theories merely tell us what is rational, or again most true to our ethical experience, to treat as the fundamental notion. Others are bolder and claim that these relations are to be discovered in the meanings of what we say. Thus Moore claimed that "right" simply meant "productive of the greatest good."[12] Moore's philosophy is marked by an affectation of modest caution, which clogged his prose with qualifications but rarely restrained him from wild error, and this, as a claim about what the words mean, is simply untrue. More generally, if theories of this kind are offered descriptively, as accounts of what we actually take to be equivalent, they are all equally misguided. We use a variety of different ethical considerations, which are genuinely different from one another, and this is what one would expect to find, if only because we are heirs to a long and complex ethical tradition, with many different religious and other social strands.

As an enterprise that intends to be descriptive, like anthropology, the reductive undertaking is merely wrongheaded. It may have other aims, however. It may, at some deeper level, seek to give us a theory of the subject matter of ethics. But it is not clear why that aim, either, must encourage us to reduce our basic ethical conceptions. If there is such a thing as the truth about the subject matter of ethics—the truth, we might say, about the ethical—why is there any expectation that it should be simple? In particular, why should it be conceptually simple, using only one or two ethical concepts, such as *duty* or *good state of affairs*, rather than many? Perhaps we need as many concepts to describe it as we find we need, and no fewer.

The point of trying to reduce our ethical concepts must be found in a different aim of ethical theory, which is not just to describe how we think about the ethical but to tell us how we should think about it. Later I shall argue that philosophy should not try to produce ethical theory, though this does not mean that philosophy cannot offer any critique of ethical beliefs and ideas. I shall claim that in ethics the reductive enterprise has no justification and should disappear. My point here, however, is merely to stress that the enterprise needs justifying. A good deal of moral philosophy engages unblinkingly in this activity, for no obvious reason except that it has been going on for a long time.

There is one motive for reductivism that does not operate simply on the ethical, or on the nonethical, but tends to reduce every consideration to one basic kind. This rests on an assumption about rationality, to the effect that two considerations cannot be rationally weighed against each other unless there is a common consideration in terms of which they can be compared. This assumption is at once very powerful and utterly baseless. Quite apart from the ethical, aesthetic considerations can be weighed against economic ones (for instance) without being an application of them, and without their both being an example of a third kind of consideration. Politicians know that political

considerations are not all made out of the same material as considerations against which they are weighed; even different political considerations can be made out of different material. If one compares one job, holiday, or companion with another, judgment does not need a particular set of weights.

This is not merely a matter of intellectual error. If it were that, it could not survive the fact that people's experience contradicts it, that they regularly arrive at conclusions they regard as rational, or at least as reasonable, without using one currency of comparison. The drive toward a *rationalistic conception of rationality* comes instead from social features of the modern world, which impose on personal deliberation and on the idea of practical reason itself a model drawn from a particular understanding of public rationality. This understanding requires in principle every decision to be based on grounds that can be discursively explained. The requirement is not in fact met, and it probably does little for the aim that authority should be genuinely answerable. But it is an influential ideal and, by a reversal of the order of causes, it can look as if it were the result of applying to the public world an independent ideal of rationality. As an ideal, we shall see more of it later.[13]

Let us go back to Socrates' question. It is a particularly ambitious example of a personal practical question. The most immediate and uncomplicated question of that sort, by contrast, is "what am I to do?" or "what shall I do?" The various ethical and nonethical considerations we have been discussing contribute to answering such a question. Its answer, the conclusion of the deliberation, is of the form "I shall do …" or "what I am going to do is …"—and that is an expression of intention, an intention I have formed as a result of my deliberation. When it comes to the moment of action, it may be that I shall fail to carry it out, but then that will have to be because I have forgotten it, or been prevented, or have changed my mind, or because (as I may come to see) I never really meant it—it was not the real conclusion of

my deliberation, or it was not a real deliberation. When the time for action is immediate, there is less room for these alternatives, so it is paradoxical if I come out with an answer of this kind and immediately fail to do what I said I was immediately going to do.

The question "what should I do?" allows rather more space between thought and action. Here the appropriate conclusion is "I should do …" and there are several intelligible ways of adding here "… but I am not going to." *Should* draws attention to the reasons I have for acting in one way rather than another. The usual function of "I should … but I am not going to" is to draw attention to some special class of reasons, such as ethical or prudential reasons, which are particularly good as reasons to declare to others—because they serve to justify my conduct, for instance by fitting it into someone's plan of action—but which are not, as it turns out, the strongest reasons for me, now; the strongest reason is that I desire very much to do something else. Desiring to do something is of course a reason for doing it.[14] (It can even be a reason that justifies my conduct to others, though there are some tasks of justification, those particularly connected with justice, which by itself it cannot do.) So, in this sort of case, what I think I have most reason to do, taking all things together, is the thing I very much desire to do, and if *I should* is taken to refer to what I have most reason to do, this is what I should do. There is a further and deeper question, whether I can intentionally and without compulsion fail to do even what I think I have most reason to do; this, from Aristotle's name for the phenomenon, is known as the problem of *akrasia*.[15]

Socrates' question, then, means "how has one most reason to live?" In saying earlier that the force of *should* in the question was just *should*, I meant that no prior advantage is built into the question for one kind of reason over another. In particular, there is no special consideration for respectable justifying reasons. If ethical reasons, for instance, emerge importantly in the answer, that will not be because they have simply been selected for/by the question.

Nevertheless, there is a peculiar emphasis given to Socrates' question in that it stands at a distance from any actual and particular occasion of considering what to do. It is a general question about what to do, because it asks how to live, and it is also in a sense a timeless question, since it invites me to think about my life from no particular point in it. These two facts make it a reflective question. That does not determine the answer, but it does affect it. Answering a practical question at a particular time, in a particular situation, I shall be particularly concerned with what I want *then*. Socrates' question I ask at no particular time—or, rather, the time when I no doubt ask it has no particular relation to the question. So I am bound by the question itself to take a more general, indeed a longer-term, perspective on life. This does not determine that I give the answers of long-term prudence. The answer to the question might be: the best way for me to live is to do at any given time what I most want to do at that time. But if I have a weakness for prudence, the nature of Socrates' question is likely to bring it out.

It is, moreover, *anybody's* question. This does not mean, of course, that when asked by some particular person, it is a question about anybody: it is a question about that particular person. But when the question is put before me in the Socratic way, to invite reflection, it is going to be part of the reflection, because it is part of the knowledge constituting it, that the question can be put to anybody. Once constituted in that way, it very naturally moves from the question, asked by anybody, "how should I live?" to the question "how should anybody live?" That seems to ask for the reasons we all share for living in one way rather than another. It seems to ask for the conditions of *the good life*—the right life, perhaps, for human beings as such.

How far must the very business of Socratic reflection carry the question in that direction, and with what effects on the answer? The timelessness of the reflection does not determine that the answer should favor prudence. Similarly, the fact that the

reflective question can be asked by anyone should allow its answer to be egoistic. But if it is egoistic, it will be egoism of one kind rather than another—the general egoism, distinguished earlier, which says that all people should favor their own interests. This naturally invites the thought that, if so, then it must be a better human life that is lived in such a way. But if so (it is tempting to go on), then it must be better, in some impersonal or interpersonal sense, that people should live in such a way. Having been led to this impersonal standpoint, perhaps we can be required to look back from it, make our journey in the reverse direction, and even revise our starting point. For if it is not better from an impersonal standpoint that each person should live in an egoistic way, perhaps we have a reason for saying that each of us should not live in such a way, and we must, after all, give a nonegoistic answer to Socrates' question. If all that does indeed follow, then the mere asking of Socrates' reflective question will take us a very long way into the ethical world. But does it follow?

Practical thought is radically first-personal. It must ask and answer the question "what shall *I* do?"[16] Yet under Socratic reflection we seem to be driven to generalize the *I* and even to adopt, from the force of reflection alone, an ethical perspective. In Chapter 4, we shall see whether reflection can take us that far. But even if it cannot, Socratic reflection certainly takes us somewhere. Reflection involves some commitment, it seems, and certainly philosophy is committed to reflection. So the very existence of this book must raise the double question of how far reflection commits us and why we should be committed to reflection. Socrates thought that his reflection was inescapable. What he meant was not that everyone would engage in it, for he knew that not everyone would; nor that anyone who started reflecting on his life would, even against his will, be forced by inner compulsion to continue. His thought was rather that the good life must have reflection as part of its goodness: *the unexamined life*, as he put it, *is not worth living*.

This requires a very special answer to his question, which, for him, gives the final justification for raising it in the first place. If my book is committed to raising the question, is it committed to answering it in such a way? Must any philosophical inquiry into the ethical and into the good life require the value of philosophy itself and of a reflective intellectual stance to be part of the answer?