



Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer

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ETHICAL ABSOLUTISM AND THE IDEAL OBSERVER

The moral philosophy of the first half of the twentieth century, at least in the English-speaking part of the world, has been largely devoted to problems concerning the analysis of ethical statements, and to correlative problems of an ontological or epistemological nature. This concentration of effort by many acute analytical minds has not produced any general agreement with respect to the solution of these problems; it seems likely, on the contrary, that the wealth of proposed solutions, each making some claim to plausibility, has resulted in greater disagreement than ever before, and in some cases disagreement about issues so fundamental that certain schools of thought now find it unrewarding, if not impossible, to communicate with one another. Moral philosophers of almost all schools seem to agree, however, that no major possibility has been neglected during this period, and that every proposed solution which can be adjudged at all plausible has been examined with considerable thoroughness. It is now common practice, for example, for the authors of books on moral philosophy to introduce their own theories by what purports to be a classification and review of all *possible* solutions to the basic problems of analysis; and in many cases, indeed, the primary defense of the author's own position seems to consist in the negative argument that his own position cannot fail to be correct because none of the others which he has mentioned is satisfactory.

There is one kind of analysis of ethical statements, however, which has certainly not been examined with the thoroughness that it deserves—the kind of analysis, namely, which construes ethical statements to be both absolutist and dispositional. In a paper entitled “Some Reflections on Moral-Sense Theories of Ethics,”¹ Broad has discussed a number of the most important features of this kind of analysis, and has even said that most competent persons would now agree that there are only two other theories about the meaning of ethical terms which are worth as much serious consideration. Yet there are many moral philosophers who leave no place for this kind of analysis in their classification of ethical theories, and many others who treat it unfairly by classifying it with less plausible proposals which are superficially similar. And what makes such carelessness especially unfortunate, is the fact that this kind of analysis seems to be capable of satisfying the major demands of certain schools of ethical thought which

¹ C. D. Broad, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, N.S. Vol. XLV, pp. 131-166.

are ordinarily supposed to be diametrically opposed to one another. It is a kind of analysis, moreover, which may have been proposed and defended by several classical moralists;² and this is perhaps one good reason for giving it at least a small share of the attention which is now lavished on positions which are no more plausible.

The following discussion of absolutist dispositional analyses of ethical statements, is divided into two parts. In the first part I have discussed some of the important characteristics which are common to all analyses of this general form. In the second part I have discussed some of the problems which would have to be solved in working out a concrete analysis of this kind, and I have made certain proposals about the manner in which such an analysis can best be formulated.³

PART ONE: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ANALYSIS

1. *It is absolutist.*

To explain the precise sense in which a dispositional analysis of ethical statements may be absolutist rather than relativist, it is helpful to begin by defining the two terms "relative statement" and "relativist analysis."

Speaking first about statements, we may say that any statement is relative if its meaning cannot be expressed without using a word or other expression which is egocentric. And egocentric expressions may be described as expressions of which the meaning varies systematically with the speaker. They are expressions which are ambiguous in abstraction from their relation to a speaker, but their ambiguity is conventional and systematic. They include the personal pronouns ("I," "you," etc.), the corresponding possessive adjectives ("my," "your," etc.), words which refer directly but relatively to spatial and temporal location ("this," "that," "here," "there," "now," "then," "past," "present," "future"), reflexive expressions such as "the person who is speaking," and the various linguistic devices which are used to indicate the tense of verbs. All of these egocentric expressions can apparently be defined in terms of the word "this."⁴

² Adam Smith comes immediately to mind, but Hume can likewise be interpreted as accepting an absolutist dispositional analysis of "right." (*Vide*, e.g., F. C. Sharp, "Hume's Ethical Theory," *Mind*, N.S. Vol. XXX, pp. 53-56. But for a different interpretation of Hume, *vide* Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, pp. 84-93.) It is even possible to make out a case for including Kant in this list. (*Vide* Part II of this paper on the subject of ethical impartiality.) Sidgwick, although he denied that "right" is analyzable, seems not unwilling to accept an absolutist dispositional analysis of "good." (*Methods of Ethics*, 4th ed., p. 112, last sentence.)

³ In this connection I am much indebted to Professor R. B. Brandt, with whom I have discussed the problems of moral philosophy at great length. He is not, of course, responsible for my errors.

⁴ *Vide* Bertrand Russell, *An Enquiry Into Meaning and Truth*, p. 134, and *Human Knowledge, Its Scope and Its Limits*, p. 92.

A moral philosopher is commonly called a relativist, and his analysis of ethical statements is said to be a relativist analysis, if he construes ethical statements to be relative. We may thus say, derivatively, that an analysis of ethical statements is relativist if it includes an egocentric expression, and if it is incompatible with any alternative analysis which does not include an egocentric expression.

It follows, therefore, that relativist analyses, no matter how much they may differ from one another, can always be conveniently and positively identified by direct inspection of their constituent expressions. Thus, to give a few examples, a philosopher is an ethical relativist if he believes that the meaning of ethical statements of the form "Such and such a particular act (x) is right" can be expressed by other statements which have any of the following forms: "*I* like x as much as any alternative to it," "*I* should (in fact) feel ashamed of myself if *I* did not feel approval towards x, and *I* wish that *other people* would too," "Most people *now* living would feel approval towards x if they knew what they really wanted," "If *I* should perceive or think about x and its alternatives, x would seem to *me* to be demanding to be performed," "x is compatible with the mores of the social group to which *the speaker* gives his primary allegiance," and "x will satisfy a maximum of the interests of people *now* living or who *will* live *in the future*." Each one of these possible analyses contains an egocentric expression (which I have italicized). And it is evident that if any of these analyses were correct, it would be possible for one person to say that a certain act is right, and for another person (provided, in some cases, that he is not a member of the same social group, nor living at the same time) to say that that very same act is not right, without logically contradicting each other. This familiar characteristic of all relativist analyses is not *definitive* of relativism; it is, however, a necessary *consequence* of the fact that relativist analyses contain egocentric expressions.

We may now define an absolutist analysis of ethical statements as one which is not relativist.⁵ The kind of analysis which I propose to discuss in this paper, therefore, is one which does not include an egocentric expression. It is a kind of analysis, I suspect, which is closely associated with relativism in the minds of many philosophers, but it is unquestionably absolutist and implies that ethical statements are true or false, and consistent or inconsistent with one another, without special reference to the people who happen to be asserting them.

⁵ It will be observed that according to these definitions a pure emotive theory of ethics is neither absolutist nor relativist. For absolutism and relativism are theories about the meaning of ethical *statements*, whereas a pure emotive theory denies, in effect, that there are any ethical statements (as contrasted with ethical exclamations, exhortations, etc.).

2. *It is dispositional.*

I shall say that a proposed analysis of ethical statements is dispositional if it construes ethical statements to assert that a certain being (or beings), either actual or hypothetical, is (or are) disposed to react to something in a certain way. To say that a certain being is disposed to react in a certain way is to say that the being in question would react in that way under certain specifiable conditions. Thus a dispositional analysis of an ethical statement may always be formulated as a hypothetical statement of the kind which is commonly called a "contrary-to-fact conditional." A dispositional analysis of statements of the form "x is right," for example, might have the form: "Such and such a being, if it existed, would react to x in such and such a way if such and such conditions were realized."

During the past fifty years moral philosophers have given a good deal of attention to the evaluation of dispositional analyses which are *relativist*, and a comprehensive defense of one such relativist analysis can be found in the writings of Westermarck.⁶ Westermarck believes, if I understand him, that the meaning of statements of the form "x is wrong," can be expressed by other statements of the form "The speaker tends to feel towards x (i.e., *would* feel in the absence of specifiable inhibiting factors), an emotion of disinterested moral disapproval which would be experienced by him as a quality or dynamic tendency in x." Although this analysis is considerably more sophisticated than many of the analyses which relativists have proposed, it is typical of a position to which absolutists have raised a number of closely-related, and by now very familiar, objections.

A dispositional analysis of ethical statements which was *absolutist* would not, of course, be open to the same objections. It would construe ethical statements in one of the following three ways: (1) as assertions about the dispositions of all *actual* (past, present, and future) beings of a certain kind; (2) as assertions about the dispositions of all *possible* beings of a certain kind (of which there might in fact exist only one or none at all), or (3) as assertions about the dispositions of a majority (or other fraction) of a number of beings (actual or possible) of a certain kind. It is evident that an analysis of any of these three types would include no egocentric expression, and would therefore construe ethical statements in such a way that they would be true or false, and consistent or inconsistent with one another, without special reference to the people who happen to be asserting them.

It is only the second of these three kinds of analysis which I propose to examine in this paper, for analyses of the other two types, it seems to me, are open to obvious and yet insuperable objections. An analysis of the first

⁶ *Vide* especially *Ethical Relativity*, Ch. V. An equally interesting relativist dispositional analysis has been proposed by F. C. Sharp, *Ethics*, Appleton-Century, N. Y., 1928, Ch. VII.

type would construe ethical statements to entail that there actually exists a being (perhaps God) whose dispositions are definitive of certain ethical terms. But this would mean that all ethical statements containing these ethical terms are necessarily false if such a being does *not* exist—a consequence which seems to be incompatible with what we intend to assert when we use ethical terms. And in my opinion an analysis of the third type would be even less plausible, because it would imply that ethical statements express judgments which can only be verified or refuted, at least theoretically, by statistical procedures. I shall not amplify these familiar arguments, however, since much of what I shall say about ethical analyses of the second type can be equally well applied to analyses of the other two types, and anyone who so wishes may easily make the necessary translations in reading the second part of this paper.

It will be convenient, throughout the following pages, to use the term "ideal observer" in speaking about a possible being of the kind referred to in an absolutist dispositional analysis. The adjective "ideal" is used here in approximately the same sense in which we speak of a perfect vacuum or a frictionless machine as ideal things; it is not intended to suggest that an ideal observer is necessarily *virtuous*, but merely that he is conceivable and that he has certain characteristics to an extreme degree. Perhaps it would seem more natural to call such a being an ideal *judge*, but this term could be quite misleading if it suggested that the function of an ideal observer is to pass judgment on ethical issues. As an ideal observer, of course, it is sufficient that he be capable of reacting in a manner which will determine by definition whether an ethical judgment is true or false. And it is even conceivable, indeed, that an ideal observer, according to some analyses, should lack some of the characteristics which would make it *possible* for him to pass judgment on ethical issues—which would mean, of course, simply that he would not be able to judge the nature of his own dispositions.

Using the term "ideal observer," then, the kind of analysis which I shall examine in this paper is the kind which would construe statements of the form "x is P," in which P is some particular ethical predicate, to be identical in meaning with statements of the form: "Any ideal observer would react to x in such and such a way under such and such conditions."⁷

⁷ Lewis has proposed that dispositional analyses of "objective statements" be formulated with a "probability qualification." (*Vide An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, pp. 235-243.) If such a qualification were introduced into the analysis of ethical statements, an absolutist dispositional analysis would have the form: "Under such and such conditions an ideal observer would *in all probability* react in such and such a way." For simplicity I shall not consider this alternative, but none of the conclusions reached in this paper will be incompatible with the introduction of such a probability qualification.

This formulation may draw attention to the fact that a dispositional analysis which is absolutist may nevertheless be extensionally equivalent to one that is relativist. For the egocentric expression in a relativist analysis is often qualified by reference to ideal conditions (described in *if*-clauses), and it is evident that each of these qualifications limits the respects in which one speaker could differ from another if the reactions of each were relevant to the truth of his own ethical statement. Westermarck, for example, analyzes ethical statements not by reference simply to the feeling which the speaker would actually have if confronted with a particular act or situation, but by reference to the feelings which he would have *if* he were impartial and *if* certain inhibiting factors (e.g., fatigue) were absent. And if a relativist were to continue to add such qualifications to his analysis, he might eventually reach a point at which *any* speaker who met all these qualifications would have all the characteristics which an absolutist might wish to attribute to an ideal observer. In that case ethical statements, when analyzed, would be contrary-to-fact conditionals of the form: "If I were an ideal observer I would react to x in such and such a way under such and such conditions." And if the specified characteristics of an ideal observer were sufficient to insure, in virtue of the laws of nature, that all ideal observers would react in the same way, it is evident that the truth value of ethical statements, so interpreted, would not differ from their truth value if interpreted absolutistically as statements about *any* ideal observer. Intensionally, however, the two analyses would still differ: the relativist, unlike the absolutist, would still maintain that the egocentric reference is essential, and by this he would imply, as we have seen, that two different speakers cannot make ethical assertions which are logically incompatible.

Let us now consider briefly some of the derivative characteristics of an analysis which is both absolutist and dispositional.

3. *It is objectivist.*

The adjectives "subjectivist" and "objectivist" are often used in a *logical* sense, and as synonyms, respectively, of the terms "relativist" and "absolutist"; in this sense, as we have seen, an analysis of the kind that we are discussing is objectivist. To avoid duplication of meaning, however, I shall use the terms "subjectivist" and "objectivist" in a traditional *ontological* sense—in the sense in which Berkeley's analysis of all physical statements is subjectivist, and Descartes's analysis of some physical statements is objectivist. We may say, in this sense, that a proposed analysis of ethical statements is subjectivist if it construes ethical statements in such a way that they would all be false by definition if there existed no experiencing subjects (past, present, or future). An analysis may be called "objectivist," on the other hand, if it is not subjectivist. Thus it

is evident that in this ontological sense, as well as in the logical sense, an analysis of the kind which we are discussing is objectivist: it construes ethical statements to be assertions about the reactions of an *ideal* observer—an observer who is conceivable but whose existence or non-existence is logically irrelevant to the truth or falsity of ethical statements.

This fact that a dispositional analysis is objectivist, is obviously a reflection of the fact that ethical statements, according to such an analysis, may always be formulated as conditional statements in the subjunctive mood; they may always be construed, in other words, as asserting that if such and such *were* the case, such and such *would* be the case. Hypothetical statements of this kind are commonly called "contrary-to-fact conditionals," but since they are sometimes used in such a way that they may be true even though they are not contrary to fact, they are perhaps more aptly referred to as "independent-of-fact conditionals." As used in an absolutist dispositional analysis, for example, such statements are not intended to imply *either* that there exists, *nor* that there does not exist, a being who satisfies the description of an ideal observer; they are intended to imply, on the contrary, that the existence or non-existence of such a being is *irrelevant* to the truth of the statement. Since the subjunctive conditional has exactly the same function whether the analysis is absolutist or relativist, it is evident that objectivism and absolutism are logically independent characteristics of an analysis of ethical statements; thus Westermarck's analysis is objectivist and relativist, whereas the one which we shall be examining is objectivist and absolutist.

The fact that an analysis of ethical statements is objectivist, moreover, is independent of all questions concerning the kinds of things to which ethical terms can be correctly applied. Thus it might in fact be true that the term "good" can be correctly applied only to conscious states, and hence that all ethical statements of the form "x is good" would in fact be false if there existed no experiencing subjects. And similarly, it might in fact always be false to say that a given act is wrong if neither that act, nor any of its alternatives, has any effect on the experience of conscious beings. But such facts would be entirely compatible with an objectivist *analysis* of ethical statements, for to say that an analysis is objectivist is to say merely that the existence of experiencing subjects is not essential *by definition* to the truth of ethical statements. This distinction is important because the term "subjectivist" is sometimes applied to hedonism and to certain forms of pluralistic utilitarianism, on the ground that these theories attribute value only to states of consciousness, or that they regard actual productivity of these valuable states as the sole determinant of the rightness or wrongness of an act. It is evident, however, that philosophers who support these theories should not be said to accept a subjectivist analysis of ethical

statements unless they believe—as some of them, of course, do not—that ethical terms must be *defined* by reference to the experience of actual beings.

4. *It is relational.*

An analysis of ethical statements is *relational* if it construes ethical terms in such a way that to apply an ethical term to a particular thing (e.g., an act), is to assert that that thing is related in a certain way to some other thing, either actual or hypothetical. There is no doubt that an absolutist dispositional analysis is relational, since it construes ethical statements as asserting that a lawful relationship exists between certain reactions of an ideal observer and the acts or other things to which an ethical term may correctly be applied. But to avoid misunderstanding, this fact must be interpreted in the light of certain qualifying observations.

It should not be overlooked, in the first place, that if an absolutist dispositional analysis were correct, ethical statements would have the same form that statements about secondary qualities are often supposed to have. Not only phenomenologists and subjectivists, but many epistemological dualists, would agree that to say that a daffodil is yellow is to say something about the way the daffodil would appear to a certain kind of observer under certain conditions; and the analysis of ethical statements which we are considering is exactly analogous to this. Thus the sense in which an absolutist dispositional analysis is relational, is the very sense in which a great many philosophers believe that yellow is a relational property of physical objects; and to say that a statement of the form “x is right” is relational, therefore, is not necessarily to deny that the terms “right” and “yellow” designate equally simple properties.

But the analogy can be carried still further if a distinction is drawn between a relational and a non-relational sense of “yellow.” Many philosophers believe that the adjective “yellow” has two meanings; they believe that it designates both a relational property of physical objects and a non-relational property of sense-data—a distinction corresponding roughly to the popular use of the terms “really yellow” and “apparently yellow.” And it is quite possible not only that the term “right” is similarly ambiguous, but also that in one of its senses it designates a characteristic of human experience (apparent rightness) which in some important respect is just as simple and unanalyzable as the property of apparent yellowness. And thus we might even decide by analogy with the case of “yellow,” that “really right” must be defined in terms of “apparently right”—i.e., that the experiencing of apparent rightness is an essential part of any ethically-significant reaction of an ideal observer.

And finally, it must be remembered that to call an absolutist analysis

"relational," is not to imply that it construes the ethical properties of one thing to be dependent by definition on the *existence* of any other thing, either natural or supernatural. Since an ideal observer is a *hypothetical* being, no changes in the relationships of existent things would require us, for logical reasons alone, to attribute new ethical properties to any object, nor to revise any ethical judgment which we have previously made. For this reason an absolutist dispositional analysis is not open to one of the most familiar objections to relational analyses, namely, that such analyses construe the ethical properties of an object to be dependent on facts which seem quite clearly to be *accidental*—on the fact, for example, that certain actual people happen to have a certain attitude toward the object.⁸

5. *It is empirical.*

If we define the term "empirical" liberally enough so that the dispositional concepts of the natural sciences may properly be called empirical, there is no doubt that an absolutist dispositional analysis of ethical statements *might* be empirical. Such an analysis would be empirical, for example, if the defining characteristics of an ideal observer were psychological traits, and if the ethically-significant reactions of an ideal observer were feelings of desire, or emotions of approval and disapproval, or some other experiences accessible to psychological observation.

It might be somewhat less evident, however, that an absolutist dispositional analysis *must* be empirical. For most of the philosophers who maintain that ethical properties are non-natural, and that ethical truths are known by rational intuition, have admitted that ethical intuitions may be erroneous under certain unfavorable conditions, or else, if this is regarded as self-contradictory, that under certain conditions we may appear to be intuiting an ethical truth although in fact we are not.⁹ And it might seem that to recognize the possibility of error in either of these two ways is to recognize a distinction between the property of apparent rightness and the property of real rightness—a distinction, as we have seen, which is sufficient to permit the formulation of an absolutist dispositional analysis.

On this issue, however, I think we must take the word of the rational intuitionists themselves, and if there is any one fact about which intui-

⁸ Since, according to an absolutist dispositional analysis, the truth or falsity of ethical statements is dependent on the laws of nature, ethical statements are not intuitively or logically necessary; they are necessary, however, in whatever sense the laws of nature are necessary.

⁹ A. C. Ewing, for example, is willing to say that intuitions are sometimes false. (*Vide The Definition of Good*, pp. 27-9.) But Hastings Rashdall, for example, preferred to say that it is difficult to distinguish intuitions from "mere feelings or aver-sions which may be only prejudices due to inheritance or environment or superstition." (*Vide The Theory of Good and Evil*, Vol. I, pp. 211-213.)

tionists agree, it is the fact that some ethical properties are neither introspectable nor analyzable. And from this fact it follows, necessarily, that their ethical theory is epistemologically dualist—i.e., that there is no formula, however complex, by which ethical statements can be translated into statements about experiences which confirm them. Intuitionists must admit, I believe, that they are able to assess the cognitive value of their ostensible intuitions by reference to the conditions under which these intuitions occur, and they must admit that they would not be able to do this unless they had some conception of an ideal observer. Thus Ewing lists¹⁰ four factors which are responsible for false intuitions: (1) lack of experience, (2) intellectual confusions, (3) failure to attend adequately to certain aspects of the situation, (4) psychological causes “such as those with which the psychoanalyst deals.” And the very fact that Ewing can compile such a list is proof that he has some conception of an ideal observer whose definition excludes these four factors. But this fact does not make intuitionism any less dualist, of course, for Ewing and other intuitionists will maintain that in formulating these ideal conditions they are merely formulating a *test* for the validity of an ethical statement, and not an analysis of the statement.¹¹

Even though we conclude that an absolutist dispositional analysis must be empirical, however, there is still considerable room for disagreement about the precise nature of the ethically-significant reactions of an ideal observer. It seems clear that these reactions, if the analysis is to be at all plausible, must be defined in terms of the kind of moral experience which we take to be evidence, under ideal conditions, for the truth of our ethical judgments. It is important to observe that experiences of this kind—which we may properly call “moral data”—cannot be states of moral *belief*. An absolutist dispositional analysis, like any other analysis which grants cognitive meaning to ethical sentences, would permit us to say that we *do* have moral beliefs, and even that moral consciousness is *ordinarily* a state of belief. But if the ethically-significant reaction of an ideal observer were the belief (or judgment) that a certain act is right or wrong, it is evident that an absolutist dispositional analysis would be circular: it would contain the very ethical terms which it is intended to define.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 26.

¹¹ An empiricist could be expected to ask how the intuitionist can *know* that one particular set of conditions is preferable to another; for, if the intuitionist's position is correct, it is surely not inconceivable that any given pathological condition (e.g., any of “those with which the psychoanalyst deals”) is especially conducive to, or even absolutely necessary for, correct intuiting. (Cf. Brandt, “The Significance of Differences of Ethical Opinion for Ethical Rationalism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. IV, No. 4, pp. 488–490.) If this creates a problem for the intuitionist, however, it is a kind of problem which he shares with epistemological dualists in general.

In order to define an absolutist dispositional analysis, therefore, it is necessary to maintain that moral data are the moral experiences to which we appeal when *in doubt* about the correct solution of a moral problem, or when attempting to *justify* a moral belief. For the epistemic function of moral data, when defined in this way, will correspond to the function of color sensations in determining or justifying the belief that a certain material object is "really yellow." And in that case moral data could play the same role in the analysis of "right" that color sensations play in the analysis of "really yellow."

Now there are many debatable questions concerning the nature of moral data, and until these questions are answered it will not be possible to explain precisely what is meant by the "ethically-significant reactions" of an ideal observer. These questions are primarily psychological, however, and can easily be separated from other questions concerning the content of an absolutist dispositional analysis. And if it is possible to provide a satisfactory formulation of the other components of an absolutist dispositional analysis (especially the definition of "ideal observer") this formulation will be compatible with *any* phenomenological description of moral data.

One of the most salient differences of opinion, for example, concerning the nature of moral data, is the difference of opinion concerning what we may call their "phenomenal location." There are many philosophers, on the one hand, who maintain that moral data are primarily feelings, or emotions, or other elements of experience which appear in the deliberative consciousness of the moral judge as ostensible states of the judge himself. There seems to be a growing number of philosophers, on the other hand, who are equally empirical in their epistemology, but who maintain that the typical moral datum is an obligatoriness or "demand quality" which appears in the deliberative consciousness of the moral judge as an ostensible property of an envisaged act or goal.¹² But however important this difference of opinion may be, it is a difference of opinion about the nature of moral data and not about the logical or epistemological relationships between moral data and ethical statements; both of these positions are compatible, therefore, with the theory that ethical statements are statements about the dispositions of an ideal observer to experience moral data (whatever they may be) under certain specifiable conditions.

Whatever conclusion we might reach concerning the phenomenal location of moral data, it will still be necessary to distinguish very carefully between moral data themselves, which, under ideal conditions, are the

¹² *Vide, e. g.*, W. Köhler, *The Place of Value in a World of Facts*, Ch. III. Elsewhere ("Sense-data and the Percept Theory," *Mind*, Vol. LVIII, N.S., No. 232, and Vol. LIX, N.S., No. 233.) I have discussed in some detail the general philosophical significance of the view that such ostensible properties may be "objectively localized."

evidence for moral beliefs, and the very similar experiences which may be the *consequences* of moral beliefs. This distinction would not be difficult to make if we were content to say that moral data are simply feelings of desire (or, correlatively, that moral data are "demand qualities" of *all* kinds). For there seems to be little reason to doubt that feelings of desire may occur in the absence of moral beliefs. But if we should wish to maintain, as many philosophers have done, that moral data are the emotions of moral approval and disapproval, it would be much harder to make the necessary distinction. As Broad has pointed out, those emotions of approval and disapproval which we think of as specifically *moral* emotions, are the very ones "which appear *prima facie* to be felt towards persons or actions in respect of certain moral characteristics which they are believed to have."¹³ So if these emotions are said to be the evidence for moral beliefs, there appears to be a vicious circle in the process by which moral beliefs are justified. And there appears to be a similar vicious circle in an absolutist dispositional analysis. For if moral emotions are experienced only as a consequence of moral beliefs or judgments, and if we refuse to attribute moral beliefs to an ideal observer in our analysis, then there is no reason to think that an ideal observer would experience any moral emotions at all. But if, on the other hand, we do attribute moral beliefs to an ideal observer, we should have to employ the very ethical terms (e.g., "right") which we are attempting to analyze. This fact, in one form or another, has provided the basis for many arguments in support of non-naturalist ethics.

But the difficulty, I believe, has been highly exaggerated. It cannot plausibly be denied that moral emotions are often (perhaps usually) felt as a consequence of moral beliefs—that we often feel approval, for example, toward those acts which we believe to be right. But this is merely to say, if an absolutist dispositional analysis is valid, that we often feel approval toward those acts which we think would produce approval in an ideal observer. The crucial question is whether it is possible to feel an emotion of moral approval toward an act when we are *in doubt* about whether it is right or wrong. And surely this *is* possible.¹⁴ It is not uncommon, for example, to find ourselves feeling moral approval toward an act, and then to begin to wonder whether our reaction is *justified*: we might wonder, for example, whether we are sufficiently familiar with "the facts of the case" or whether our emotions are being unduly influenced by some selfish consideration. At such times we may continue to experience the emotion of moral approval although in doubt about the rightness of the act. We may

¹³ "Some of the Main Problems of Ethics," *Philosophy*, Vol. XXI, No. 79, p. 115.

¹⁴ I am assuming, of course, that an emotion of moral approval is not *defined* as an emotion of approval produced by a moral belief.

even attempt to rationalize our emotion by persuading ourselves that the act is right. In rare cases, indeed, we may even continue to experience the emotion although convinced that our reaction is *not* justified. (This is sometimes the case, for example, when people feel approval toward an act of retribution.) Consequently, unless apparent facts of this kind can be discounted by subtle phenomenological analysis, there is no epistemological objection to defining the ethically significant reactions of an ideal observer in terms of moral emotions.

Whether or not this is the correct way to define these reactions, however, is a psychological question which I shall not consider in this paper. There are other, more fundamental, questions concerning the content of an absolutist dispositional analysis, and it is these to which the remaining part of this paper will be devoted.

PART TWO: THE CONTENT OF THE ANALYSIS

If it is possible to formulate a satisfactory absolutist and dispositional analysis of ethical statements, it must be possible, as we have seen, to express the meaning of statements of the form "x is right" in terms of other statements which have the form: "Any ideal observer would react to x in such and such a way under such and such conditions." Thus even if we are not to discuss the nature of the ethically-significant reactions of an ideal observer in this paper, it might seem that we are nevertheless faced with two distinct questions: (1) What are the defining characteristics of an ideal observer? and (2) Under what conditions do the reactions of an ideal observer determine the truth or falsity of ethical statements? I believe, however, that the second of these questions can be treated as part of the first. For it is evident that the conditions under which the ethically-significant reactions of an ideal observer might occur, could be relevant to the meaning of ethical statements only if they could affect an ideal observer in such a way as to influence his ethically-significant reactions. And since the influence of any such relevant conditions must therefore be *indirect*, it would always be possible to insure precisely the same reactions by attributing suitable characteristics directly to the ideal observer. If, for example, the absence of certain emotional stimuli is thought to be a relevant and favorable condition, this fact could be taken into account simply by specifying that the ideal observer is by definition unresponsive to such emotional stimuli. I think it will soon become clear, moreover, that this procedure yields a type of analysis which comes closer to expressing what we actually intend to assert when we utter ethical statements. But even if I am mistaken about this, it will not be prejudicial to any basic problem if we assume, for simplicity, that the second question may be reduced to the first, namely, What are the defining characteristics of an ideal observer?

Before attempting to answer this question, however, there are a few remarks which I think should be made about the implications and methodology of any such attempt to define an ideal observer.

It is important, in the first place, to view any attempt of this kind in proper perspective. It would undoubtedly be difficult to arrive at a rational conclusion concerning the plausibility of absolutist dispositional analyses in general, without first experimenting with various concrete formulations. At the present stage in the history of moral philosophy, however, it would be especially unfortunate if the inadequacies of some particular formulation were to prejudice philosophers against absolutist dispositional analyses in general. Any plausible formulation is certain to be very complex, and there is no reason to suppose that philosophers could ever reach complete agreement concerning all the details of an adequate analysis. But this in itself should not prevent philosophers from agreeing that this general *form* of analysis is valid. Nor would it necessarily be irrational for a philosopher to decide that this general form is valid, although he is dissatisfied even with *his own* attempts to formulate a concrete analysis.¹⁵

Ethical words, moreover, like all other words, are probably used by different people, even in similar contexts, to express somewhat different meanings; and a correct analysis of one particular ethical statement, therefore, may not be a correct analysis of another statement which is symbolized in exactly the same way but asserted by a different person. This kind of ambiguity is a familiar obstacle to all philosophical analysis, but it causes unusual difficulties when we attempt to evaluate a proposed dispositional analysis of ethical statements. Any such analysis, if it is at all plausible, is certain to assign a number of complex characteristics to an ideal observer, and to refer to complex psychological phenomena in describing the nature of his ethically-significant reactions. And assuming that ethical statements *can* be analyzed in this manner, there is no good reason to believe that all human beings, no matter what the extent of their individual development, and no matter what their past social environment, could analyze their ethical statements correctly by reference to precisely the same kind of ideal observer and precisely the same psychological phenomena. If there *are* any irreducible differences in the intended meaning of ethical statements, some of these differences might not be discoverable, and most of them might be so slight that they could not be held responsible for differences of opinion concerning the proper analysis of ethical statements. Some of these differences in meaning, on the other hand, might be sufficiently large to be reflected in the formulation of philosophical analyses

¹⁵ Cf. A. C. Ewing's statement (*The Definition of Good*, p. 43) that he can "see" in advance that nobody will ever be able to produce a satisfactory empirical analysis of ethical statements. Similarly a philosopher might "see" that *only* an empirical analysis which is absolutist and dispositional could be satisfactory.

of ethical statements. And there is consequently a clear sense in which philosophers may appear to disagree about the analysis of ethical statements, although in fact, because ethical words are somewhat ambiguous, they are analyzing different statements and hence not disagreeing at all.

It would be a serious mistake, however, to confuse the kind of ambiguity to which I have just referred with the kind of ambiguity which is definitive of a relativist analysis. The ambiguity which is definitive of relativism, as we have seen, is conventional, systematic, and characteristic only of statements which contain an egocentric expression. The kind of ambiguity which we have just been discussing, on the other hand, is accidental, unsystematic, and characteristic in some degree of all symbols. Thus it is not ordinarily the intention of an ethical absolutist to maintain that the words which we use to express ethical statements have a unique semiotical capacity—the capacity, namely, to express exactly the same meaning no matter who utters them; in fact even those absolutists who believe that ethical words express simple, unanalyzable, concepts, could scarcely maintain that there is any conclusive evidence to show that an ethical word, no matter who employs it, always expresses the *same* unanalyzable concept. The thesis maintained by the absolutist as such, is simply that ethical statements are not *conventionally* ambiguous in a manner which would require them to be analyzed by means of an egocentric expression; and this thesis is quite consistent, of course, with the proposition that ethical statements are *accidentally* ambiguous—perhaps even more ambiguous, indeed, than most other statements.

In the light of this distinction, then, it seems clear that if two philosophers believe that they are in perfect agreement concerning the meaning of ethical statements—i.e., if they believe that their ability to communicate is not limited by accidental ambiguity—they may still be either relativists or absolutists. If they are relativists, and related to one another spatially, temporally, and socially in certain ways, they will believe that neither of them could assert an ethical statement which is logically inconsistent with any ethical statement asserted by the other. If they are absolutists, however, they will believe that they *can* contradict each other in their ethical statements. Thus the absolutist, unlike the relativist, believes that nothing stands in the way of the expression of cognitive disagreement about ethical matters except the accidental ambiguity which is characteristic of all symbols. And since the absolutist can consistently admit that this accidental ambiguity may be sufficiently great to prevent philosophers from agreeing on a concrete analysis of ethical statements, the apparent inadequacy of any particular analysis, such as the one which I shall propose, should not be considered as proof that the general form of an absolutist dispositional analysis is unsatisfactory.

It should also be kept in mind that the kind of analysis which we are

seeking is one which would be an analysis of ethical statements in the sense (and probably only in the sense) in which hypothetical statements about the way a daffodil would appear to a "normal" observer are said to constitute an analysis of the material object statement "This daffodil is yellow." To attempt an analysis of this sense of the word "analysis" would lead to difficult problems far beyond the scope of this paper. But two points may be mentioned. First, an analysis in this sense of the word is not required to be *prima facie* or "intuitively" equivalent to the analyzandum, and for this reason the surprising complexity of a proposed analysis is not a sufficient reason for rejecting it: thus the fact that a proposed analysis of "This daffodil is yellow" happens to refer to white light, a transparent medium, a neutral background, and a variety of physiological conditions of an observer, is not ordinarily thought to make the analysis unsatisfactory. And second, an analysis in this sense of the word is an analysis of the so-called "cognitive meaning" of ethical statements, and thus is not required to have the same emotive meaning as the analyzandum. Even if we should find a satisfactory analysis of ethical statements, therefore, we should still have to supplement this analysis by a theory of emotive meaning if we wished to take account of all the functions of ethical statements in actual discourse.

The method employed in formulating dispositional analyses—whether of "soluble" or "yellow" or "right"—is the method most aptly described as "pragmatic." In analyzing ethical statements, for example, we must try to determine the characteristics of an ideal observer by examining the procedures which we actually regard, implicitly or explicitly, as the rational ones for *deciding* ethical questions. These procedures, to mention just a few, might include religious exercises, the acquisition of certain kinds of factual information, appeals to a moral authority, and attempts to suppress one's emotions if they are thought to be prejudicial. Each of these procedures will suggest certain characteristics of an ideal observer, and there is reason to believe that the characteristics suggested by these various procedures will not be incompatible with one another: some of the characteristics which are likely to be attributed to a moral authority, for example, seem to be the very ones which we try to produce or to approximate in ourselves when we engage in religious exercises, or seek for factual information, or attempt to suppress emotions which we think are prejudicial.

This appeal to the procedures by which we judge or decide ethical questions, does not imply that the pragmatic method will force us to deny the important distinction, previously mentioned, between an ideal *observer* and an ideal *judge*: there is clearly no logical reason why a judge should have to *be* an ideal observer, or should even have to be closely similar to

an ideal observer, in order to make correct judgments about the ethically-significant reactions of such a being. On the other hand, there cannot be much doubt that the ethically-significant reactions of an ideal observer must be psychological in nature, and that some of the evidence for the occurrence of these reactions could be directly accessible only to an ideal observer himself. It is for this epistemic reason that in practice we are likely to rate moral judges by reference to their similarity to an ideal observer. And it is to be expected, consequently, that any plausible description of an ideal observer will be a partial description of God, if God is conceived to be an infallible moral judge. But of course an ideal observer need not possess such characteristics as the power to create physical objects or even the power to reward and punish, if these characteristics appear to be irrelevant to God's capacities as a moral judge.

CHARACTERISTICS OF AN IDEAL OBSERVER

1. *He is omniscient with respect to non-ethical facts.*

We sometimes disqualify ourselves as judges of a particular ethical question on the ground that we are not sufficiently familiar with the facts of the case, and we regard one person as a better moral judge than another if, other things being equal, the one has a larger amount of relevant factual knowledge than the other. This suggests that an ideal observer must be characterized in part by reference to his knowledge of non-ethical facts. I say "non-ethical" because, as we have seen, the characteristics of an ideal observer must be determined by examining the procedures which we actually take to be the rational ones for deciding ethical questions; and there are many ethical questions (*viz.*, questions about "ultimate ethical principles") which cannot be decided by inference from ethical premises. This does not mean, of course, that an ideal observer (e.g., God) *cannot* have knowledge of ethical facts (facts, that is to say, about his own dispositions); it means merely that such knowledge is not *essential* to an ideal observer.

A difficulty seems to arise from the fact that in practice we evaluate the factual knowledge of a moral judge by reference to some standard of relevance, and regard one judge as better than another if, other things being equal, the one has more complete knowledge of all the facts which are *relevant*. But it is evident that a concept of relevance cannot be employed in *defining* an ideal observer. To say that a certain body of factual knowledge is not relevant to the rightness or wrongness of a given act, is to say, assuming that an absolutist dispositional analysis is correct, that the dispositions of an ideal observer toward the given act would be the same *whether or not* he possessed that particular body of factual knowledge or any part of it. It follows, therefore, that in order to explain what we mean

by "relevant knowledge," we should have to employ the very concept of ideal observer which we are attempting to define.

Fortunately, however, we do not seem to think that a person is to any extent disqualified as a moral judge merely because he possesses factual information which we take to be *superfluous*. Our difficulty would be overcome, therefore, if we were simply to stipulate that an ideal observer is *omniscient* with respect to non-ethical facts, and so far as I can see the term "omniscient," when employed in this way, is neither extravagant nor mysterious. We apparently believe not only that the "facts of the case" are relevant to the objective rightness or wrongness of a particular act, but also that there is no point at which we could be logically certain that further information about matters of fact (e.g., further information about the consequences of the act), would be irrelevant. A satisfactory ethical analysis must be so formulated, therefore, that no facts are irrelevant *by definition* to the rightness or wrongness of any particular act. And this is the intent of the term "omniscient," for to say that an ideal observer is omniscient is to insure that no limits are put on the kinds or the quality of factual information which are available to influence his ethically-significant reactions.

Since omniscience implies complete knowledge of the *past* as well as the future, it might be wondered whether we are not being unnecessarily generous in attributing omniscience to the ideal observer. And it might seem that one's answer to this question will depend on one's views concerning the factors which determine whether an act is in fact right or wrong. Thus a philosopher whose position is not purely utilitarian (i.e., teleological), but to some extent deontological, might be expected to take one position; he might be expected to believe that certain events prior to the performance of an act (e.g., the making of contracts) are directly relevant to the objective rightness or wrongness of an act, in which case he would naturally wish to stipulate that the knowledge of an ideal observer extend to the past as well as the future. The typical utilitarian, on the other hand, believing that the past events are relevant only in so far as they affect the future, might be expected to deny that an ideal observer must have any knowledge about events occurring prior to the act which is being judged.

It seems clear, however, that this difference of opinion would exist only if the utilitarian wished to define rightness and wrongness in such a way that the thesis of utilitarianism followed analytically from his definitions, and most contemporary utilitarians maintain, I believe, that the thesis of utilitarianism is a synthetic proposition. What they would wish to say, therefore, if they accepted an absolutist dispositional analysis of ethical statements, is that an ideal observer, although he *is* by definition fully cognizant of all past events, would nevertheless have precisely the same

ethically-significant reactions to a present act if by definition he were *not* cognizant of past events. Thus there is no reason why the utilitarian and the deontologist must disagree at this point about the analysis of ethical statements.

2. *He is omnicapient.*

We sometimes disqualify ourselves as judges of certain ethical questions on the ground that we cannot satisfactorily imagine or visualize some of the relevant facts, and in general we regard one person as a better moral judge than another if, other things being equal, the one is better able to imagine or visualize the relevant facts. Practical moralists have often maintained that lack of imagination is responsible for many crimes, and some have suggested that our failure to treat strangers like brothers is in large part a result of our inability to imagine the joys and sorrows of strangers as vividly as those of our siblings. These facts seem to indicate that the ideal observer must be characterized by extraordinary powers of imagination.

The imaginal powers of the ideal observer, to be sure, are very closely related to his omniscience, and the word "omniscience" has sometimes been used to designate an unlimited imagination of perception. But however we may decide to use the word "omniscience," the important point is simply that it is not sufficient for an ideal observer to possess factual knowledge in a manner which will permit him to make true factual judgments. The ideal observer must be able, on the contrary, simultaneously to visualize all actual facts, and the consequences of all possible acts in any given situation, just as vividly as he would if he were actually perceiving them all. It is undoubtedly impossible for us to imagine the experience of a being capable of this kind of universal perception, but in making ethical decisions we sometimes attempt to visualize several alternative acts and their consequences in rapid succession, very much *as though* we wished our decision to be based on a simultaneous perception of the alternatives. And in view of this fact, and the others which I have mentioned, it seems necessary to attribute universal imagination to an ideal observer, thus guaranteeing that his ethically-significant reactions are forcefully and equitably stimulated.

3. *He is disinterested.*

We sometimes disqualify ourselves as judges of certain ethical questions on the ground that we cannot make ourselves impartial, and we regard one person as a better moral judge than another if, other things being equal, the one is more impartial than the other. This suggests that one of the defining characteristics of an ideal observer must be complete impartiality.

But it is difficult to define the term "impartial" in a manner which will not make our analysis circular or be otherwise inconsistent with our purpose.

It is important, in the first place, not to confuse the impartiality of an ideal observer with the *uniformity* of his ethically-significant reactions. We are likely to think of a judge who is impartial as a judge who arrives at similar decisions in similar cases, and we may be tempted, therefore, to define an ideal observer as an observer whose ethically-significant reactions to two acts would always be the same if the two acts were alike in all ethically-relevant respects. But this will not do. For even if we could find a way to avoid circularity in defining "ethically-relevant respects," the characteristic which we should have analyzed would be more appropriately called "consistency" than "impartiality." And the fact that it is not self-contradictory to say that a person (e.g., a magistrate) is consistently partial, indicates that consistency and impartiality are not identical characteristics. Consistency, as we shall later see, *is* one of the characteristics of an ideal observer. But to say that an ideal observer is consistent is to say something about the uniformity of his ethically-significant reactions, whereas to say that he is impartial is to say something about the factors which *influence* his reactions.

When we try, however, to specify the kinds of factors which do and do not influence the decisions of an impartial judge, it is difficult to avoid interpreting the term "impartial" too broadly. For impartiality is so closely associated with the capacity for correct moral judgment, that we are likely to conclude that a judge lacks impartiality only if we believe that his decisions have been influenced by factors which *pervert* them—by factors, that is to say, which cause them to be incorrect. And whatever the justification for such reasoning may be when we are evaluating a moral judge, our analysis would evidently be circular if the term "impartial," as applied to an ideal observer, involved some concealed reference to a standard of correct moral judgment. It is difficulties of this kind which may have led Broad to remark that a philosopher who attempts this kind of dispositional analysis "is on a very slippery slope, and scarcely ever manages to avoid inconsistency. In defining his ideal he nearly always unwittingly introduces some characteristic which is in fact ethical, and thus fails . . . to define ethical characteristics in completely non-ethical terms."¹⁶

It is also difficult, on the other hand, to avoid interpreting the term "impartial" too narrowly. There is a familiar sense of this term, for example, which seems to be well represented by Bentham's maxim that every man should count for one and none for more than one. In this sense of the

¹⁶ *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, p. 263.

term a man would be impartial, in making a decision about his duty in a given situation, if he gave equal consideration to the welfare of each person who could be affected by his acts, regardless of how the person happened to be related to him.¹⁷ And the maxim that we should treat all men as our brothers, has likewise been interpreted to imply a rule of impartiality in this sense—i.e., to imply that there are no special relationships which justify giving more consideration to one person than to another. But to analyze ethical statements by reference to this kind of impartiality, would rule out, by very definition of the words “right” and “wrong,” the moral theory (held by Ross and others) that the rightness or wrongness of an act is determined in part by irreducible obligations arising directly from certain personal relationships; such an analysis would entail, for example, that there is never any moral justification, other things (including the value of the consequences) being equal, for making a decision which favors one’s mother or friend or creditor at the expense of a greater benefit to someone else. Most philosophers would probably agree, however, that a correct analysis of ethical statements would not entail any particular conclusions concerning material questions of this sort. The solutions to such questions, they would agree, are synthetic and must not be prejudiced by our definitions.

Now it seems to me that a large part of what we mean when we say that an ideal judge is impartial, is that such a judge will not be influenced by interests of the kind which are commonly described as “particular”—interests, that is to say, which are directed toward a particular person or or thing but not toward other persons or things of the same kind; and in so far as this is what we mean by “impartiality,” we can define the term without falling into either of the errors which we have been considering. For to say that an ideal observer is not influenced by particular interests, is to attribute to him a certain psychological characteristic which does not refer, either explicitly or implicitly, to a moral standard. Nor does it logically entail, on the other hand, either that an ideal observer would react favorably, or that he would react unfavorably, to an act which benefits one person at the expense of a greater benefit to another.

The term “particular interest,” to be sure, is a difficult one to define, and raises problems about the nature of particularity which are beyond the scope of this paper; but I think that for present purposes it is not unreasonable to pass over these problems. Since ethical judgments are concerned, directly or indirectly, with acts, let us use “x” to denote the performance of a certain act by a certain agent. Let us first draw a distinction between the “essentially general properties” of x and the “essentially

¹⁷ Impartiality in this sense has sometimes been equated with distributive justice. Vide, e.g., Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil*, Vol. I, Ch. VIII.

particular properties" of *x*. The properties of *x* which are essentially particular are those properties which cannot be defined without the use of proper names (which we may understand, for present purposes, to include ego-centric particulars such as "I," "here," "now," and "this"); thus one of the essentially particular properties of *x* might be its tendency to increase the happiness of the citizens of the U.S.A. All other properties are essentially general; thus one of the essentially general properties of *x* might be its tendency to increase happiness. We may then say that a person has a positive particular interest in *x* if (1) he desires *x*, (2) he believes that *x* has a certain essentially particular property *P*, and (3) he would not desire *x*, or would desire it less intensely, if, his other beliefs remaining constant, he did not believe that *x* had this property *P*.

It may seem that this definition makes a variety of logical and ontological assumptions, some of which can be questioned. But I think that the intent of the definition is clear enough, and that the distinctions which it requires must be made, in one form or another, by any adequate logic and ontology. The definition is intended to represent the characteristic which we have in mind when we say that a moral judge who lacks impartiality is one who is tempted to "sacrifice principle"—i.e., to judge one act in a manner in which he would not wish to judge other acts which he thought to be of the same kind. And the definition proposes, in effect, that to say in this context that two acts are thought to be "of the same kind," is to say that they are thought to have the same essentially general properties. It is quite likely, of course, that we never actually believe that any two acts *do* have the same essentially general properties; it is for this reason, indeed, that we find it so easy to rationalize and "make exceptions" when judging acts which affect ourselves, our children, or our country. But this fact does not affect the usefulness of the definition, because part (3) is formulated hypothetically in the subjunctive mood: whether or not a person has a particular interest, is something to be decided by inferring, as best we can, how he *would* react *if* his beliefs were altered in certain ways.

It is important to observe that a person should not be said to have a particular interest in a certain act (*x*) merely because his interest in *x* is a result of his belief that *x* is related in a certain way to a *unique particular*. Let us suppose, for example, that Crito wanted Socrates to escape from prison because he thought that Socrates was the wisest man who would ever live. Let us suppose, for simplicity, that Crito did not want the wisest of men to be killed by his fellow human beings, and that this was his *sole* reason for wanting Socrates to escape. Now in this case it would surely be a mistake to maintain that Crito was necessarily influenced by a particular interest, for this would mean, if particular interests are excluded from an ideal observer, that the ethically-significant reactions of an ideal observer

could *never* be influenced by the fact that a particular person or thing has a certain distinguishing property. And it is evident, I assume, that the ethical relevance or irrelevance of a fact of this sort cannot be decided merely by analyzing the meaning of ethical terms.

The crucial question about Crito's interest, therefore, is not whether it is an interest in the fate of a unique particular (Socrates), but whether the properties of Socrates which arouse this interest are essentially particular, i.e., properties which cannot be analyzed without the use of proper names. Two of the essentially particular properties which Crito might have attributed to Socrates are (A) being the wisest friend of Crito, and (B) being the most effective gad-fly in Athens. In a terminology suggested by Broad (following McTaggart), we may say that each of these is an "exclusive description" of Socrates. But Crito's interest, we are supposing, is a result of his belief that Socrates has the essentially general property (C) being wiser than any other man. In Broad's terminology this third property might also be an exclusive description of Socrates. But unlike the other two, this property is a "sufficient description," i.e., one which "refers to no merely designated particulars, but consists wholly of universals."¹⁸ We may say, therefore, that Crito is interested in Socrates because of a certain sufficient description which he attributes to Socrates. For this reason his interest is not particular; it is an interest, so to speak, which he would have in *any* person whom he thought to be the wisest of all men. Interests of this kind, therefore, even though they are directed toward a particular person or thing, do not tend to make us impartial in our moral judgments.

Assuming now, that we have found a satisfactory definition of "particular interest," we must still decide how to use this term in our analysis. Shall we say that an ideal observer is completely lacking in particular interests? Or shall we say simply that his ethically-significant reactions are uninfluenced by such interests, leaving open the possibility, so far as our analysis is concerned, that such interests might be present but in some sense "suppressed"? At first thought the latter statement seems to be adequate to represent our concept of an impartial moral judge, for we often admire such a judge precisely because we believe that he does have particular interests but that his desire to be impartial has counteracted their influence. On further reflection it will be discovered, however, that we cannot explain what it means to say that a judge is uninfluenced by particular interests, except by reference, directly or indirectly, to the manner in which he *would* react if he had no particular interests. And this seems to imply that the first alternative is ultimately unavoidable if our analysis is to be complete. I think we must conclude, therefore, that an ideal observer is entirely lacking in particular interests—that he is, in this sense, *disinterested*.

¹⁸ Broad, *Examination of McTaggart's Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 178.

4. *He is dispassionate.*

The concept of impartiality cannot be exhaustively analyzed in terms of interests, for an impartial judge, as ordinarily conceived, is a judge whose decisions are unaffected not only by his interests, but also by his emotions. This suggests that an ideal observer must be defined as a person who is in some sense dispassionate as well as disinterested. It is possible, to be sure, that the supposed effects of an emotion on our ethically-significant reactions, are always the effects of an accompanying or constituent interest; and if this were proved to our satisfaction, our conception of an ideal observer might be somewhat simplified. For our present purpose, however, this is irrelevant so long as it is generally believed that moral nearsightedness or blindness can be caused by the typically passional features of an emotion. We are searching for an analysis of ordinary ethical statements, and it is not to be expected that such an analysis will reflect all those distinctions, or just those distinctions, which would be required for an adequate system of psychology.

It is possible to construct a definition of the term "dispassionate" which will correspond, point by point, with our definition of the term "disinterested." Thus we can define a "particular emotion" as one which is directed toward an object only because the object is thought to have one or more essentially particular properties. And we can say that an ideal observer is dispassionate in the sense that he is incapable of experiencing emotions of this kind—such emotions as jealousy, self-love, personal hatred, and others which are directed towards particular individuals as such. At present this seems to me to be the most satisfactory way of defining the term "dispassionate" as applied to an ideal observer.

It would also be possible, however, to go a good deal further and to say that an ideal observer is incapable of experiencing any emotions at all, thus bringing our conception of an ideal observer closer to Kant's conception of a "purely rational being." There is no corresponding alternative open to us for the definition of "disinterested," because it seems unlikely that an ideal observer who had no interests at all would ever have any ethically-significant reactions. But the issue is not so clear with respect to emotions, especially if the moral datum, and hence the ethically-significant reactions of an ideal observer, can be defined in terms of a non-emotional, ostensibly objective, "demand quality."¹⁹ And even those who believe that the moral datum is emotional, could maintain that an exception needs to be made only for moral approval and disapproval, or other emotions constituting the ethically-significant reactions of an ideal observer.

It might be maintained, to be sure, that there are certain emotions which

¹⁹ *Vide supra*, Part I, Section 5.

are essential to an ideal observer, not because they constitute his ethically-significant reactions, but because they will influence these reactions in certain ways. And it should be observed that if this is an error, it is not a *logical* error, for precisely how an ideal observer should be defined can be determined only by analyzing the meaning of ethical statements. In fact, provided that we base our analysis on a direct examination of the meaning of ethical statements, it would not even be a logical mistake to attribute *virtues* to an ideal observer—to say, for example, that he has love and compassion for all human beings. It is true that love and compassion, assuming that they are truly virtues, are virtues only because of their relationship to certain ethically-significant reactions of an ideal observer—to those reactions, namely, by reference to which the ethical term “virtue” is defined; but virtues may be attributed to an ideal observer without circularity, of course, provided that we do not have to justify their attribution by reference to the fact that they are virtues. If, for example, the Christian conception of God has influenced our conception of an ideal observer, then, if an absolutist dispositional analysis is correct, it has influenced the very meaning of ethical statements. And if philosophers from a non-Christian culture have a somewhat different conception of an ideal observer, this fact implies nothing more surprising than that ethical statements possess the kind of ambiguity which I have called “accidental.” Thus my reason for believing that it is not necessary to attribute such virtues as love and compassion to an ideal observer, is not that it would be a logical mistake to do so, but simply that I am not inclined to think that a man is necessarily a better moral judge, however superior as a person, merely because he possesses such virtues. The value of love and compassion to a judge, considered solely as a judge, seems to lie in the qualities of knowledge and disinterestedness which are so closely related to them; and these two qualities, as we have seen, can be independently attributed to an ideal observer.

5. *He is consistent.*

Consistency is ordinarily regarded as one of the characteristics of a good judge, and this fact suggests that an ideal observer must be described in part as a being whose ethically-significant reactions are perfectly consistent with one another. But there are obstacles, as we shall see, to defining the relevant kind of consistency in a manner which avoids circularity and yet makes consistency an independent characteristic of an ideal observer.

When we say that the ethical decisions of a judge in two different cases are consistent with one another—or, correspondingly, that in two different situations the ethically-significant reactions of an ideal observer are consistent—we are evidently not passing judgment on the logic of any actual

process of thought. There is an obvious sense, to be sure, in which a judge might accept consistent or inconsistent *premises* or use consistent or inconsistent *arguments* (either in reaching his decisions or in attempting to justify them); but when we assert that the two decisions of the judge are *themselves* consistent with one another, we intend to say something about a particular relationship between the two ethical statements which express the judge's final conclusions, and nothing, unless perhaps by insinuation, about the judge's processes of thought.

But it is also clear that we do not intend to say merely that these two ethical statements are *logically* consistent with one another. For since the two statements express ethical decisions about two different cases, they necessarily refer to different acts or events, and of course *any* two self-consistent statements are logically consistent with one another if they refer to different acts or events. Thus the kind of consistency which we have in mind must be "stronger" than logical consistency: we must mean to say that it is in some sense *possible* that the two statements are both true, but not merely that it is *logically* possible.

If this is so, however, the consistency or inconsistency of two ethical decisions must depend on the relationship of these decisions to certain general ethical principles which are conceived as restricting the "possible" combinations of ethical statements. And this conclusion is supported, I believe, by examination of the kind of reasoning which actually leads us to conclude that two decisions are consistent or inconsistent with one another. We might assert, for example, that a moral judge is inconsistent because in one case he decided in favor of act *x* rather than *x'*, whereas in another case he decided in favor of *y* rather than *y'*; and if we assert this, an analysis of our reasoning would probably show that we are assuming that it is possible for *x* to be the right act only if a certain ethical principle (*P*) is true, whereas it is possible for *y* to be the right act only if *P* is false.²⁰ Our judgment that the two decisions are inconsistent, therefore, is based on the assumption that there is no *other* valid ethical principle (a certain principle *Q*, for example) which could in some way take precedence over *P* in one of the two cases.²¹ We are not, to be sure, committing ourselves either to the belief that *P* is true or to the belief that *P* is false. But we *are* assuming that the facts of the two cases are not different in some

²⁰ We might reason, for example, that *x* could be right only if we have a special obligation toward those who have suffered for our sake, whereas *y* could be right only if we do *not* have such an obligation. In some cases, of course, the principle *P* might itself be a complex conjunction of ethical principles.

²¹ There are at least two kinds of cases in which a principle *Q* might be said to "take precedence over" a principle *P*: (1) Cases in which *P* and *Q* are conflicting principles, each representing a "claim" against the agent, and (2) cases in which *P* is simply an incomplete statement of a more completely qualified principle, *Q*.

respect which is ethically crucial. And to assume even this is to presuppose at least one ethical proposition, namely, that there is no valid ethical principle (e.g., *Q*) which, together with *P*, could be used to justify *both* decisions.

I think we must conclude, therefore, that whenever we assert that the decisions of a moral judge in two different cases are consistent with one another, we are presupposing a certain amount of ethical knowledge. And this implies that our analysis would be circular if we made consistency of this kind one of the defining characteristics of an ideal observer.

There is, however, a much more limited kind of consistency which we might wish to attribute to an ideal observer. For if we agree that his ethically-significant reactions are stimulated by his imagination of a possible act, then, since an act may be imagined at any number of different times, there is nothing in our analysis up to this point which would logically require that an ideal observer always react in the same way even when he imagines one *particular* act (i.e., an act occurring at a particular time and place and hence having a certain particular set of alternatives). And if this appears to be a deficiency in our analysis, we could easily correct it by attributing a limited consistency to an ideal observer: we could define him, in part, as a being whose ethically-significant reactions to any particular act would always be exactly similar.

If we decide to do this, however, it is important to notice that consistency, when interpreted in this way, has a status very different from that of omniscience, disinterestedness, and the other defining characteristics of an ideal observer which we have so far considered. For according to the kind of absolutist analysis which we have been examining, ethical statements, as we have previously observed, are statements which depend for their truth or falsity on the existence of certain psychological laws; and if ethical statements are ever true, they are true only because we have defined an ideal observer in such a way that, in virtue of the relevant psychological laws, *any* ideal observer would react in the same way to a particular act. Thus in attributing omniscience, disinterestedness, and other such characteristics to an ideal observer, we are doing something of crucial importance for the kind of analysis which we are considering: we are eliminating from the personality of the ideal observer, so to speak, various factors which actually cause certain people to differ in their ethically-significant reactions from other people—such factors, for example, as selfish desires and ignorance of the facts of the case. And assuming that ethical statements *are* sometimes true, and absolutist dispositional analysis can be adequate only if such factors are completely eliminated from the personality of an ideal observer.

The characteristic of consistency, however, unlike omniscience, disin-

terestedness, and the others which we have discussed, does not eliminate some particular source of disagreement in ethical reactions. It is, on the contrary, a *consequence* of eliminating such disagreement, since any factor which could cause two different ideal observers to react in different ways to a particular act, could also cause one and the same ideal observer to react in different ways at different times. And this means, to put the matter bluntly, that if it is necessary to attribute consistency to an ideal observer in order to insure that he is psychologically incapable of reacting to the same act in different ways at different times, then we have simply failed to find all the *other* characteristics of an ideal observer which are necessary for the formulation of an adequate analysis. Thus an ideal observer will indeed be consistent if an adequate dispositional analysis can be formulated; but his consistency will be a derivative characteristic—a consequence of his other characteristics together with certain psychological laws.

6. *In other respects he is normal.*

An examination of the procedures by which we attempt to decide moral questions, reveals that there are a great many conditions which we recognize, though not always explicitly, to be favorable or unfavorable for making valid moral judgments. Mild bodily exercise such as walking, the presence of other people trying to make similar decisions, and certain kinds of esthetic stimuli, have all been regarded by some people as favorable conditions, whereas mental fatigue, distracting sensory stimuli, and lack of experience, are generally regarded as unfavorable. It seems likely, however, that our analysis will take all these special conditions into account if we attribute such general characteristics as omniscience and disinterestedness to an ideal observer.

It seems fairly clear, on the other hand, that no analysis in terms solely of such general, and highly ideal, characteristics, could be fully adequate to the meaning of ethical statements. For however ideal some of his characteristics may be, an ideal observer is, after all, a *person*; and whatever may be true of the future, our conception of the personality of an ideal observer has not yet undergone the refining processes which have enabled theologians, apparently with clear conscience, to employ the term "person" in exceedingly abstract ways. Most of us, indeed, can be said to have a conception of an ideal observer only in the sense that the characteristics of such a person are implicit in the procedures by which we compare and evaluate moral judges, and it seems doubtful, therefore, that an ideal observer can be said to lack any of the determinable properties of human beings.

The determinate properties of an ideal observer, however, except for the

ideal characteristics which we have so far discussed, are apparently not capable of precise definition. We may employ the customary linguistic device, to be sure, and say that the properties of an ideal observer cannot vary beyond the limits of "normality," but there are a number of reasons why it does not seem to be possible to define these limits satisfactorily. It is evident, for example, that normality is a gestalt concept, and that a certain trait which in abstraction might properly be called abnormal, could nevertheless contribute to a total personality which falls within the bounds of normality. And this fact by itself is sufficient to destroy any hope of defining the term "normal" by continuing to add specific characteristics to the ones which we have already attributed to an ideal observer. This difficulty, however, and the others which prevent us from formulating a satisfactory definition of "normal," are practical rather than theoretical, and they do not tend in the slightest degree to disprove the thesis that ethical statements are statements about an ideal observer and his ethically-significant reactions. There are analogous difficulties, moreover, in formulating a dispositional analysis of the statement "This is (really) yellow"; and I have yet to find any convincing reason, indeed, for believing that "yellow" can be defined dispositionally although "right" cannot.

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EXTRACTO

Un análisis en sentido absolutista de una proposición del tipo "x tiene razón" tendría que adoptar la forma siguiente: "Tal sujeto (al que se llamaría en adelante 'el observador ideal'), si existiera, reaccionaría ante x de tal manera." Este análisis sería: 1º. absolutista, porque no contendría ningún término egocéntrico; 2º. dispositivo, porque se formularía como condicional ajeno al hecho; 3º. objetivo, porque la verdad de un juicio ético no dependería en él, por definición, de la existencia de sujetos de experiencia; 4º. relativo, porque elaboraría el juicio ético para afirmar la relación que existe entre el sujeto de dicho juicio y un observador ideal; y 5º. empírico, porque sería epistemológicamente monístico.

El observador ideal sería: 1º. omnisciente con respecto a todo hecho no ético; 2º. omniperceptivo; 3º. desinteresado, en el sentido de que carecería de todo "interés particular"; 4º. desapasionado, excepto para aquellas emociones, si las hubiera, que formaran parte de sus reacciones éticamente significativas; 5º. congruente, en el sentido de que sus reacciones éticamente significativas frente a un acto determinado serían siempre exactamente similares; y 6º. normal, en un número indefinido de aspectos.