

ETHICS

A Thematic Compilation

By **Avi Sion** PH.D.

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Ethics can be freely read online at avisionethics and in various other locations.

It can be purchased, in print and e-book editions, in Amazon.com, Lulu.com and many other online booksellers.

The present document contains **excerpts** from this book, namely: The Abstract; the Contents; and Sample text (Chapters 4 and 24).

Avi Sion (Ph.D. Philosophy) is a researcher and writer in logic, philosophy, and spirituality. He has, since 1990, published original writings on the theory and practice of inductive and deductive logic, phenomenology, epistemology, aetiology, psychology, meditation, ethics, and much more. Over a period of some 28 years, he has published 27 books. He resides in Geneva, Switzerland.

It is very difficult to briefly summarize Avi Sion's philosophy, because it is so wide-ranging. He has labeled it '**Logical Philosophy**', because it is firmly grounded in formal logic, inductive as well as deductive. This original philosophy is dedicated to demonstrating the efficacy of human reason by detailing its actual means; and to show that the epistemological and ethical skepticism which has been increasingly fashionable and destructive since the Enlightenment was (contrary to appearances) quite illogical – the product of ignorant, incompetent and dishonest thinking.

Abstract

Ethics is a collection of thoughts on the method, form and content of Ethics.

This book is a thematic compilation drawn from past works by the author, over a period of thirteen years. The essays are placed in chronological order.

Contents

1. Chapter One	9
1. Basic Properties.....	9
2. Complementary Factors	18
3. How to Count Mitzvot	29
4. Commanded vs. Personal Morality.....	43
2. Chapter Two	53
1. Karmic Law Denied.....	53
2. Empirical Observations.....	54
3. Inductive Conclusions.....	55
3. Chapter Three	58
1. Harmonizing Justice and Mercy.....	58
2. Feelings of Emptiness	64
4. Chapter Four	68
1. Knowledge of Volition.....	68
2. Freedom of the Will	73
3. Decision and Choice	79
4. Goals and Means	82
5. Chapter Five	87
1. The Consciousness in Volition.....	87
2. The Factors of Responsibility	94
3. Judging, and Misjudging, People	100

6.	Chapter Six	111
1.	Influence Occurs via Consciousness.....	111
2.	Knowledge of Effort, Influence and Freedom ..	116
3.	Formal Analysis of Influence.....	119
4.	Incitement	125
7.	Chapter Seven	131
1.	Some Features of Influence	131
2.	Processes of Influence.....	138
3.	Instincts in Relation to Freewill.....	143
4.	Liberation from Unwanted Influences	147
5.	Propositions about the Future	149
8.	Chapter Eight	152
1.	Volition and Biology.....	152
2.	Therapeutic Psychology.....	159
9.	Chapter Nine	166
1.	Cognition, Volition and Valuation.....	166
2.	Velleity.....	175
3.	Whim.....	179
4.	Inner Divisions.....	182
10.	Chapter Ten	186
1.	Valuation.....	186
2.	The Main Valuations.....	191
3.	Ethology.....	200
11.	Chapter Eleven	209
1.	Habits	209
2.	Obsessions and Compulsions.....	212
3.	The Ego Abhors a Vacuum.....	223

12.	Chapter Twelve	231
1.	Physical Urges and Impulses	231
2.	Mental Urges and Impulses.....	243
3.	Formal Analysis of Physical & Mental Urges ..	248
4.	Are There Drives Within the Soul?.....	253
5.	Formal Analysis of Spiritual Urges.....	256
13.	Chapter Thirteen	263
1.	Purposiveness.....	263
2.	Organic Functions	265
3.	The Continuity of Life	272
14.	Chapter Fourteen	279
1.	Social Darwinism	279
2.	Spiritual Darwinism	286
15.	Chapter Fifteen	292
1.	Founding Ethics	292
2.	Ethics is for the Living, Thinking, Willing	300
3.	Conscience and Conformism	304
4.	Tai Chi, Karma Yoga and Faith	308
16.	Chapter Sixteen	315
1.	Inducing Ethics.....	315
2.	Ethical Formulas	322
3.	Philosophy of Law	328
17.	Chapter Seventeen	335
1.	Against Kant on Freewill	335
2.	Alleged Influences	339

18.	Chapter Eighteen	343
1.	The Goals of Meditation	343
2.	The Individual Self in Monism	350
19.	Chapter Nineteen	357
1.	Distinguishing the Ego	357
2.	Dismissing the Ego	362
3.	Relief from Suffering	367
20.	Chapter Twenty	374
1.	Taking Up the Challenge	374
2.	Face Facts with Equanimity	377
21.	Chapter Twenty One	381
1.	Stop Substance Addictions	381
2.	Don't Stuff Yourself Silly	384
3.	Limit Input from the Media	385
22.	Chapter Twenty Two	389
1.	Forget Your Face	389
2.	Give Up Sensuality	391
3.	On "Sexual Liberation"	394
23.	Chapter Twenty Three	399
1.	Attachment	399
2.	Non-attachment	401
3.	Wise Moderation	403
24.	Chapter Twenty Four	406
1.	Freewill	406
2.	The Is-Ought Dichotomy	410
3.	The Standards of Ethics	416

25.	Chapter Twenty Five	419
1.	The Laws of Thought in Meditation	419
2.	Reason and Spirituality	425
26.	Chapter Twenty Six	431
1.	Mental Health.....	431
2.	Transcending Suffering and Karma	435
27.	Chapter Twenty Seven	440
1.	Enlightenment Without Idolatry	440
2.	Good People.....	446
3.	A World of Mercy.....	450
28.	Chapter Twenty Eight	454
1.	Understanding Injustice	454
2.	Forgiveness	460
3.	Actions and Reactions.....	465
	References	472

Sample text (chapters 4 and 24)

Chapter Four

1. Knowledge of Volition

There is little mystery left as to how to theoretically define causation and how we get to establish it in practice. A mixture of epistemological and ontological issues is involved, which are resolved with relative ease. Causation in general may be expressed in terms of conditional propositions, or more profoundly with reference to matricial analysis. And particular causative relations can be established inductively, by observation of conjunctions and separations of events and their negations, and appropriate generalizations and particularizations.

Not so easy for volition. Many philosophers and psychologists are discouraged by the difficulties surrounding the concept of volition (or will). How is it known? How can it be defined in general? How are particular acts of will apprehended? How can we prove they belong to the agent, are his responsibility? How to conceive freedom of the will, let alone prove it? And so forth. But a thinker should not despair too early. We can gradually build up our reflection on the subject, and hope to clarify issues.

As earlier suggested, volition – unlike causation – cannot entirely be defined by means of hypothetical (if–then) propositions. However, we can *partially* delimit volition that way, as follows.

First, we focus on volition as the presumed ‘causal’ relation between an agent (soul) and certain events in or around him (called events of will), whatever be the exact form of that relation. That relation may intuitively be assumed to be *other than* causation, though some causation may be involved in it. A general causative statement “without an agent, there would be no volition” can be invoked to show partial involvement of causation.

Second, we point out that without that *particular* agent, those particular events would not – indeed could not – occur; they are reserved for that soul, it is irreplaceable in their genesis. This may be expressed as a conditional proposition: “**if not this particular soul, then not those particular events**”. The latter just means that the agent concerned (as an individual, and not just as an instance of a kind) is a *sine qua non* of the particular events (presumed ‘of will’) under scrutiny.

However, while the soul is thus a necessary causative of the events, it does not causatively necessitate them, i.e. it is not a *complete* causative of them. For it is clear that, in what we call volition, the soul is not invariably followed by those events (the presumed events of will), but remains at all times – till they do occur – also compatible with their negations. That is to say, with

regard to causation, the compound conditional proposition “**if this soul, not-then these events and not-then their negations**” is true¹.

However – and therein lies the mystery of volition – we intuit that the agent *alone* does somehow ‘make necessary’ or ‘completely cause’ the events concerned *when they do occur*. At that time, the proposition “if this soul, then these events” becomes effectively true, although such a change of ‘natural law’ is not possible under the relation called causation. Therefore, some other category of causality must be involved in such cases, which we call volition.

That is about as far as we can get into a definition by means of ordinary conditional propositions. We can delimit the concept of volition to a large extent, and clearly distinguish it from causation, but that is still not enough to fully specify its formal structure. We can, however, go further by other means, step by step, as we shall see by and by.

Certain epistemological questions can be answered readily. To begin with, as I have argued in *Phenomenology*, the raw data for the concept of volition has to be personal ‘intuitions’ – in the sense of direct experience, self-knowledge – of one’s own particular acts of will.

Will has no phenomenal qualities: it should not be confused with its phenomenal products in the mental or material domains; volition cannot therefore be an abstraction from material or mental experiences. We evidently know introspectively – at least in some cases, when we make the effort of honest introspection – when we have willed, and what we have willed, and even the effort involved, i.e. to what degree we have willed. Such *particular* intuitions of will in the present tense give rise to the abstraction of will, i.e. the concept of volition.

Thus, the conception of volition is an ordinary inductive process, except that its experienced instances are not phenomenal percepts but intuitions. This of course does not tell us the definition of volition as a causal relation. But it does tell us that there is something to discuss and define, as in the above initial attempt.

But of course, we do not only assign volition to ourselves, but we assume it in other people (some of us assume it further in other animals², and also in God). Here, the thought involved is more intricate. A person knows from his own experience which externally visible actions of his are due to will (and which are not) – for example, moving one’s arm (as distinct from having it moved by someone or something). Having recorded the descriptions and conditions of willed (and unwilled) externally visible actions, we can by generalization assume that, when we see the same external behavior in others, we can infer a similar internal behavior in them.

¹ The “if-not-then” form of hypothetical, I remind the reader, is the exact contradictory of the “if-then” form. It simply means that the consequent “*does not follow*” the antecedent.

² As I write, it is mid-February, and almost every day, as I drink my morning coffee, I watch a pair of magpies not ten meters away, enacting a ritual. Each in turn tears a twig off the tree they are perched on, and places it precariously on the same branch for a moment, letting it eventually fall. They are, evidently, not yet trying to build a nest; rather, they seem to be making common plans, coming to an agreement as to where they intend to do it when the time is ripe. I even once saw them rehearsing feeding, with one bird pretending to put a small nut into the other’s beak. They, supposedly the same birds, actually started building their nest in late March. What I thought was rehearsal of feeding may have been that of cementing, because I saw that they bring each other what seems to be mud pellets that are stuffed between twigs. Anyone observing animals cannot but suppose they are able to imagine goals and to pursue them, as well as communicate (at least by such physical demonstrations) and cooperate (effectively sharing duties).

In other words, whereas with regard to ourselves, we know the cause first and thereafter observe its effects, with regard to other agents, we infer the cause from the observed effect, by analogy.

Of course, none of this implies omniscience, either of our own acts, and much less of others' acts. Sometimes, we have difficulties discerning our will – for instance, what we really wanted, or whether we acted voluntarily or involuntarily. Introspection is not always successful, especially if one has the habit of keeping one's inner life murky and inaccessible to scrutiny. Sometimes, even if one is sincere and transparent, contradictory subliminal forces are at play, causing confusion in us. All the more so, with respect to other people: we may not have all the evidence at hand allowing us to draw a conclusion. What we observe of their behavior may be only a partial picture, leaving us uncertain as to their intentions. And so forth; no need to go into detail at this stage.

Thus, it should be understood that in this field of knowledge, as in all others, our conclusions are ultimately inductive rather than deductive. We have a certain database – consisting of our own self-observations and all other information – and we use it, and our powers of imagination, to formulate and test hypotheses. The logic involved is similar to that in the natural sciences. The only difference is the nature and source of some of the data used: it is non-phenomenal and personally intuited. This is of course a significant ontological and epistemological difference, but once realized the issues are much simplified.

2. Freedom of the Will

With regard to the concept of *freedom* of the will, the following can be said at the outset.

We can roughly define freedom of the will by saying that “**agent A is ‘free’ to will or not will something (say, W) in a given set of circumstances, if neither W nor notW is inevitable in those circumstances**”. This of course does not define ‘will’ for us; but granting the term willing (or doing, in the sense of volition) understood, its freedom is relatively definable. Note that strictly speaking it is the agent who is free, not his will.

This definition is rough, in that it does not tell us how we are to know that under *the exact same* conditions, either event W or notW is potential – since conditions are *in fact never* identical again. However, this is an epistemological issue regarding the degree of empiricism of our knowledge of freedom. We can suggest that we have intimate knowledge (intuition) of our freedom as well as of our volition; or we may propose that freedom is known more hypothetically, by way of extrapolation from *approximately* similar conditions, i.e. by adduction. The former would be direct, particular knowledge; the latter, indirect, general knowledge.

A way to distinguish causation and volition is with reference to *identity*. In causation, the cause is viewed as being ‘caused to cause’ the effects it causes, by virtue of the underlying natural characteristics or essences of the entities involved; whereas in volition, the cause is ‘free’ – its nature or identity does not allow a hundred percent prediction of all its actions. In comparison to a deterministic entity, what distinguishes a volitional agent is such lack of definite identity.

Even the agent of volition cannot till he acts definitely predict his own acts, for he may at the last moment ‘change his mind’ for some reason (or even, perhaps, for no ‘reason’ – in which case we characterize the will as pure *whim* or caprice). The agent of volition is distinguished by creating (some of) his own identity as he proceeds. His ‘identity’ at any given moment is the sum of

previous such creations, but they do not fully determine his next creations, his later identity. The agent of volition has a distinctively ‘open-ended’ nature.

A way to express the freedom of (direct) volition is by reference to *autonomy* – that is, own (auto) lawmaking (nomy)³. Whereas natural objects are effectively subject *to* law, the agent of volition (to some extent, within certain natural boundaries) makes up his own laws for himself as he proceeds. These ‘laws’ may be ad hoc or they may have some regularity, of course. For the agent may choose to will on a *singular* basis, or may act by instituting personal *rules*, i.e. intended longer term patterns – predictable or repetitive behavior, plans, habits, etc.

We may, in the latter case, fashionably speak of self-programming. Such temporally stretched intentions may require a discipline of will to fulfill; often, however, by presetting personal conduct, we achieve an economy of effort, as comparatively less attention may be needed to perform. Many of the rules people adopt are of course collective, interpersonal promises. Some are imposed on them; still, most are ultimately self-imposed. Even when one fails to keep such personal or social promises, they may have considerable influence on action.

Perseverance of will (in the face of difficulty of some sort, over time) may be due to a series of punctual wills, or have some real continuity. Whether punctual or persistent, acts of will vary in the intensity of awareness and reflection they invest – some are the fruit of long and careful consideration (emotional or rational), others are seemingly impetuous (though often in fact merely the end product of a long gestation of more or less conscious thought).

The distinction of the freedom inherent in volition from that of chance must be stressed. Though there is an element of spontaneity in volition, it is not the blind spontaneity of chance. On the contrary, volition is in a way even more ‘deterministic’ than natural law, in the sense that the causal entity (agent) does not merely react into producing some effect (whatever is willed), but specifically chooses it out of two or more possibilities. Some awareness and intention is involved in all choice. At its most focused, choice is very conscious, with a clear goal in mind; the volitional act is normally purposive, it has an ‘end’ or, in Aristotelian language, a ‘final cause’. Notwithstanding, we should not at the outset exclude the possibility of truly purposeless acts of volition, with a strict minimum of awareness.

Volition may be influenced in some direction rather than another by the agent’s right or wrong view of the world in which he acts. But that influence is not determining: this is what we mean by freedom. You may coerce a man into doing what you want by threatening him with violence or other punishments, but even so, as experience shows, he can still disregard such threats, and even act in a suicidal manner. You may dangle great rewards under his nose, but he may still act seemingly against his own interests. Acts of will may equally well be rational or irrational, intelligent or stupid; they may be explicable by self-interest or altruism, or be quite whimsical. Their ‘logic’ may be sound or faulty; i.e. logic does not definitely determine them.

Another important concept is that of *degrees of freedom*. Freedom of the will is not absolute, except perhaps for God. And even in that case, He is supposedly limited by the laws of logic, and cannot create things without identity, or that both are and are-not, or that neither are nor are-not.

³ The free agent is ‘autonomous’ – this term is of course not to be confused with ‘autonomic’ motor system, which means the opposite, referring to the functioning of certain organs without recourse to will. Descartes’ term for autonomy is ‘self-determination’.

In the case of humans, freedom of the will varies; from time to time in any individual, and from one individual to another, according to the health and structure of his or her many faculties.

Likewise, the freedom of our will is broader than the freedom of will of other animal species in some respects, and admittedly narrower in other respects. To affirm that animals have some volition does not imply that one has to regard them as having powers of choice equal to those of humans. Each animal species has specific volitional powers, some of which may be found in other species and some not. Similarly, we suppose by extrapolation, God's will is the broadest possible of all.

But furthermore, one may have the freedom to do or not do something, and yet not have the freedom to do or not to do some *other* thing. One may have the freedom to do something conditionally, lacking it if certain conditions are not met. Some people (laymen or philosophers) are confused by the term 'freedom', thinking that freedom can only be total and unconditional! Freedom need not be viewed as limitless. We are quite able to develop a logical discourse about freewill, such that each specific freedom is predicated specifically to a given individual subject, at a given time or in given circumstances. We can then inductively generalize, and describe ranges of freedom applicable to classes of individuals, as the case may be.

Some people tend to deny volition to animals, because they confuse the issues and think volition has only one measure. Indeed, some deny volition even to humans, thinking that the concept requires absolute freedom. Not so. Each agent, according to his natural constitution, has or lacks freedom in relation to each kind of action. A duck can apparently choose to fly off or not, as you approach it; some do, some don't. But a duck cannot apparently choose to add five and six together, nor can an elephant flap its ears and fly. Likewise, humans are favored in some respects and deficient in others.

Many, or perhaps all, freedoms are also conditional. One may be free to run or stay, except in cases of extreme fear, or under hypnosis, which might exceptionally 'force' one to behave mechanically (like a zombie). Emotions normally play a role in volition as influences, but in some more extreme circumstances, they might become determining factors that paralyze freedom of the will altogether or generate automatic reactions. Likewise, one may temporarily lose certain freedoms, as when one cannot move because one is physically tied up or sick; or more permanently, as when one is deprived of a limb. In such cases, volition is temporarily or permanently lost and causation takes over.

To construct a realistic logic of volitional causality one must take all such variations into consideration; i.e. consider its intertwining with causation. Each agent has specific powers and limits, which may vary in time and according to surrounding conditions for any given individual, and which may vary from individual to individual of a species and from species to species.

3. Decision and Choice

The precise relationship between consciousness and volition, or between the status of being a Subject and that of being an Agent, needs elucidation. Empirically, the two seem tied together, though it is not clear just why. Conceptually, at first sight at least, one can imagine a Subject, floating in the universe as a pure observer, unable to do anything; and likewise, perhaps, an Agent that simply wills certain things without awareness. Maybe such entities exist somewhere, but we have not encountered any.

In any case, we must keep in mind that consciousness varies in intensity or scope. An insect's consciousness (which we infer from its sense-organs and its responses to stimuli) is seemingly weak and limited; that of a bird is somewhat more elaborate; and so forth. The powers of volition of different organisms seem proportionate to their powers of consciousness.

However, some intelligent people seem weak-willed (perhaps through indecision) and some stupid people seem strong-willed (perhaps through inability to conceive alternatives). It may not be merely an issue of character flaws; there may be an issue of uneven biological development of faculties.

In humans, at least (and perhaps, though to a much lesser extent, in higher animals), acts of will are usually preceded by some thought (in the largest sense, not necessarily meaning verbal deliberation; possibly merely an imaging).

There is usually a *decision* (which may be wordless, to repeat), followed by a choice of one course rather than another (or than no choice). But it should be stressed that some acts of will seem virtually devoid of decision-making (this is one more sense of the concept of spontaneity); however, a minimal level of consciousness may be involved even in such cases ('without conscious decision' may simply mean without very-conscious decision).

Also, decisions do not necessarily result in corresponding acts of will. The issue, here, is not whether an effort of will is successful in producing some intended result, but what we call *will-power*, arousing one's faculty of will. Sometimes, of course, hesitation or paralysis is due to indecision, when the pros and cons of a course of action seem balanced or too full of uncertainties.

A decision may be punctual or large, specific or general. A punctual decision relates to a single act of will; but a decision may be large, in the sense of an indefinite general resolve to pursue some goal over time, through numerous acts of will yet to be intellectually determined as events unfold. For this reason, the concept of decision is distinct from that of will.

An example of such general policy is what we call 'good will', the resolve to do whatever happens to seem like the right thing at any time, and avoid doing what seems wrong; good will implies a certain openness or eagerness, which facilitates many actions. The contrary attitude is that of 'bad will', a tendency to resist doing what one is supposed to, if not to perversely prefer doing what one is not supposed to; this often makes things more difficult.⁴

What we call *choice* is the logical aspect of a decision – two or more alternative courses of action are open to the agent, though possibly to different degrees, i.e. requiring different expenditures of effort, and one of them is 'taken' or 'opted for'. The alternatives may simply, of course, be to do or not-do one thing; or there may literally be several contrary or combinable alternatives.

Another important aspect of decision is *intention* – the pursuit by the agent of some *goal or purpose*. Without intention, the agent has no 'reason' to do anything. This is why Aristotle

⁴ Note how the attitude tends to influence results. Good will gives us moral credit for trying, even if we do not succeed; and bad will tends to discredit us, even if we do succeed. Of course, often we role-play good will, to give ourselves a good conscience, or to look good in other people's eyes. Also, of course, as the saying goes: "hell is paved with good intentions", and good will cannot be taken as the sole basis of moral judgments – contrary to Kant's doctrine that the intention (to act as duty dictates) is the overriding consideration.

regarded ‘final causes’ (intentions) as causes of motion. Intention, note, implies memory and anticipation, both of which imply consciousness. We project an image of the kind of thing we wish to attain.

In volition, purposeless motion seems virtually impossible. The purpose may just be to keep moving, or to exercise one’s faculties, or to discover or demonstrate one’s abilities, or to prove one can will without motive, but there seems to be need of some purpose. ‘Art for art’s sake’ or ‘spontaneous art’ also have a goal of sorts, be it self-expression, beauty or humor, money or sex. Of course, the result of one’s action may not be what one intended.

Non-willing entities remain essentially passive objects, even when they are causes (within the domain of causation), or the result or theater of spontaneous events (in an apparently causeless domain, one governed by chance). Whereas willing entities are truly active: they are more than objects, they are subjects and agents.

Influence is the interface between these two kinds of entity: objects impinging on subjects; or in some cases, subjects producing objects that impinge on subjects. The impact may be to stimulate, inhibit, or direct hither rather than thither, some event of will.

4. Goals and Means

What we have just said about volition requiring intention shows the interdependence between meta-psychology and ethical and legal studies. In formal logic, aetiology leads to *teleology*: “**To obtain Y, X is required**” is based on “If not X, then not Y”. Philosophically, consideration of intention naturally raises the question: what ought we intend – what *goals* or ends shall we pursue? Thereafter, the question arises: by what *means* may such goals be reached, i.e. what is needed or required to attain them?

Goals may be broad and long-term, or narrow and immediate. They may be consciously ordered in a consistent hierarchy, or may be a confused mix of unrelated or even contradictory directions. They may in either case, for any individual, change over time, or be doggedly adhered to. Some may be very consciously developed, others very instinctive. Our goals may be reduced to a limited number of basic goals, or standards or norms.

Means also vary greatly. They may be appropriate or inappropriate to one’s goals. They must be timely, to be effective. There may be many possible means to the same goal, of which some are known and some not (or not yet). Some may be easier, some harder. Means may take time to identify, and the identification, as said, may be correct or incorrect. All these details will emerge in the course of formal analysis.

It is a common error to think that logic has nothing to say in the setting of standards for ethics or politics. The anarchist premise that ‘anything goes’ in these fields is logically untenable. The anarchist cannot plead against legalism, since by virtue of his advocacy of general unlimited freedom he allows for legalism; but the legalist can in all fairness frown on the anarchist without inconsistency. Thus, whereas anarchism paradoxically allows for its logical opposite, legalism – the latter logically excludes the former. It follows that anarchism is a self-inconsistent and so false thesis, while legalism is a coherent and true thesis. That is, we can in principle aspire to justifying some ‘objective’ norms of behavior.

Note well *the form of norm-setting argument*; it is essentially dilemmatic: “**If X, then Y, and if not X, then Y; therefore, in any case, Y**”.

In this way, we can argue, for instance, that *the use of logic* (meaning: any epistemological ways and means that are demonstrably effective in increasing or improving knowledge of reality) is an absolute imperative. No matter what our norms or standards of value be, whatever the goals we pursue – to find out the means that indeed result in these desired results, we need to know reality; it follows that all aspects of scientific methodology are imperative, since they are the way the truth gets to be known, i.e. the way any intellectual issues encountered are resolved. Thus, science (in this broad, open sense) is a means common to all goals, a fundamental and general imperative.

From a biological point of view, of course, the ultimate (minimal) goal of all volitional action is or should be *survival* of the individual living organism, or at least of its descendents, or its other family or larger group members, or the species it belongs to, or life itself on earth and perhaps beyond. That is because survival is the necessary precondition, the *sine qua non* of all other pursuits.⁵

It is a minimum need; but of course, maximum health and wellbeing is preferable; and this implies realizing one’s full potential, psychologically and spiritually as well as physically. In other words, our cognitive and volitional nature must be taken into account in our understanding of what we mean by ‘life’.

For ethics in general, then: life, cognition and volition are three natural norms, insofar as nothing that a particular ethics might recommend can be done without these three basic values. Being relative to no norm in particular, these values are absolute for all in general.

Intention presupposes *imagination*: one imagines something not yet there and proceeds to bring it about. Such imagination of a goal presupposes an informational context, which may be realistic or unrealistic, i.e. based on knowledge or mere belief. Even if the subject’s ideas on what it is possible for him to have and how it is possible for him to get it are illusory, they are influential; and they may even be efficacious! Realistic ideas are, of course, likewise influential; and in principle, and statistically, no doubt more efficacious, but they do not always or necessarily lead to success.

The *motive* of an action is the thought of its goal, or perhaps more precisely, the pressure or attraction one feels towards that goal. This is stated to clarify that it is not really or directly ‘the goal’ that influences one’s action; logically, the goal cannot do anything since it lies in the future! So rather we must refer to the *present thought of* that intended end; and even that mental image has little power, except insofar as it stirs a desire within the agent. Thus, the relation of the goal to our striving activity must be specified with reference to a motive (analogous to a force, a motor), a present influence by a mental image and the stirring it produces in us to get into action.

Note in passing that having a certain motive, and being aware of having it, and publicly admitting to having it – are three different things. Often, we conceal our real motive from ourselves or from others, and replace it with a more acceptable *pretext*. Such *rationalization* is made possible by the

⁵ In more artificial perspectives (viz. certain religious, political or behavioral doctrines, like sadomasochism), survival is not essential; however, the founding arguments of such doctrines are logically very debatable.

fact that our actions often have incidental or even accidental consequences, in addition to the goals they intended to pursue. We pretend these side effects are our ‘motive’, to divert attention from our effective motive, and give ourselves a good conscience or a virtuous facade.⁶

The most fundamental faculties of the soul are, in that order, cognition, volition and valuation. Cognition refers to consciousness, volition to actions, and valuation to affections and appetites. The soul has three corresponding and interdependent roles, as subject, agent and evaluator. Volition implies, and is impossible without, cognition. Valuation implies, and is impossible without, cognition and volition. With regard to goals and means: the goal is the value sought (seeking implies consciousness anticipating, note) by act(s) of will; the means is identified (rightly or wrongly) by consciousness, and is executed by the act(s) of will.

Chapter Twenty-Four

5. Freewill

Next, let us consider Hume’s opinions regarding freewill. Given his opinions with regard to the self and to causation, we can with relative ease anticipate the way his thinking will go with regard to human volition and ethics.

Since Hume has denied the self, he cannot be expected to believe in volition in the ordinary sense, i.e. in freedom of the individual soul to will or not-will something irrespective of influences one way or the other. Therefore, one would expect him to opt for some sort of determinism⁷. Although he has denied causation, or our knowledge of it, in the physical realm, this does not logically exclude causation in the “mental” realm, so such determinism would be consistent for him.

Yet, he struggles to salvage for human beings some vestige of volition. We are not in his view mere rubber balls that react to events in wholly predictable ways. We are it seems somewhat free to do what we feel like doing. Our actions are related to our character, desires, passions; it is such distinctive attributes of ours that make these actions our own. We are thus determined by impulses, preferences and emotions – or rather, they *are* ‘us’, we are their sum total. This is consistent with his view of the self as an aggregate of passing mental phenomena.

This is of course not what we would call free will. It is rather slavery to random passions. Hume admits as much when he says: “Reason is, and ought only to be, slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them”⁸. By this he means that, though

⁶ The problem with such distortions of reality is that they eventually boomerang psychologically and socially. Deceiving ourselves, we lose track of the truth; deceiving others, we lose their trust.

⁷ Parenthetically: to his credit, Hume realizes that freewill ought not be identified with mere spontaneous occurrence. Indeterminism, whether in the physical or mental realm, constitutes a determinism of sorts relative to human beings. If things happen to us at random, without any cause, we are subject to them as surely as if they were determinist causal factors. That is, their own lack of causes does not diminish their causal impact on us.

⁸ *Treatise*, Book II, Part III, Sect. iii.

induction and deduction provide us with information that may affect our actions, they cannot determine it. According to him, only the passions can truly move us; it is ultimately with them that we identify and go.

Now, this tells us a lot about the way Hume's mind works, and even about the way many other people's minds work, but it does not accurately reflect the full range of human nature. It may apply to some of the people some of the time, but does not apply to all of the people all of the time. For though it is true that reason does not necessarily affect our actions, it is also true that passions need not do so. Just as the information reason gives us can influence our actions but may well be ignored, i.e. is not determining – so it goes for the passions. We do not have to be slaves of our passions or identified with them; we are in fact distinct from them and able to transcend them.

It is true that many (maybe even most) people are not aware of this freedom of the will, and let their passions rule them. Some people, by the way, are similarly ruled by their reason, i.e. they are tormented by family, social, political or religious obligations, and unable to resist them. But such passivity or dependence is not normal or inevitable; it is a curable sickness of the soul. The passions, like reason, can only really 'influence' the soul, not 'determine' it – the soul still in all cases has the capacity and the responsibility to choose between them and decide which way to act. This is clear to anyone who practices self-control.

We can with effort learn to rule over our own minds, and indeed such policy is wisdom itself. But this demanding virtue depends on our making a clear distinction between causation (or deterministic causality) and volition (or personal causality), and on our understanding what 'influence' means.

A person is said to be influenced by something to act (or not act) in a certain way if the person's perception or conception of the thing makes acting in that way easier (or harder). Such *facilitation* (or on the contrary, impedance) of the will is never determining: the person remains free not to will in the direction of (or against) the influence; he or she can still go the other way. The potentiality of the will is increased (or decreased), but the person still has the final choice.

Thus, influence is a special sort of conditioning of voluntary action. The action is not caused (in the sense of causation) directly by the event or thing influencing it – but rather, our *awareness* to some degree of that event or thing (be it concrete or abstract) affects us (the doer of the deed), by making such action more or less easy than it otherwise would be. The influential thought pushes us or slows us down, but we still (so long as we have freewill) have to make an effort to actualize anything.

Once we understand the causal relation called influence, we can distance ourselves from our passions and even from our reason, and view them all as mere influential information, to be taken into consideration in motivating or deciding action, but which should never be allowed to usurp the sovereignty of the soul, who ultimately alone commands the will and is responsible for its orientations. But Hume cannot see this, because he is himself still too unconscious and too involved in his passions. Having denied the very existence of a self or person, he naturally misconceives the will as subservient to the passions.

Thus, Hume confuses his personal opinions and behavior with general truths about human nature. Here again, we find him making inaccurate observations and over-generalizing. He does not always realize the hypothetical nature of his propositions, and the need to try to establish them

with reference to precise inductive procedures. Since he has misconceived induction to begin with, he has incapacitated himself methodologically.

Philosophers do not have special powers of ‘insight’ into truth, independent of logical scrutiny and correction. They think like everyone else by inductive means, and they can make mistakes like everyone else if they are not careful.

6. The Is-Ought Dichotomy

David Hume’s views and opinions on many philosophical topics seem (to me) to be driven by the desire to exempt himself from ‘morality’. That often seems to be the underlying driving force or motive of all his skeptical philosophy, what it all manifestly tends towards. By denying induction, causation, the self and an effective power of freewill, he is justifying the idea that “anything goes” in knowledge and in personal behavior. This overall trend is again confirmed when we consider some of his positions regarding ethical reasoning.

Hume questions the possibility of deriving prescriptive statements, which tells us what we ought to do or not do, from descriptive statements, which tell us the way things are or are not. The distinction between these two sorts of statement is in his opinion so radical that one cannot be reduced to the other. This means effectively that moral or ethical propositions have no formal basis in fact, i.e. they cannot be claimed as true in an absolute sense. There is no logical way, in his view, to deduce or induce an “ought” from an “is”.

Prescriptive statements are then, according to Hume, at best just practical advice on how to pursue our self-interest and the interests of the people we value (or more broadly, sympathize or empathize with). This is a kind of pragmatism or utilitarianism, in lieu of heavier moral notions of duty or obligation. In this way, ethics is made essentially amoral – an issue of convenience, a mere description of the ways we might best pursue our arbitrary values. The implication is one of relativism and convention.

It should be added that Hume’s conclusion with a non-ethics or relativistic ethic is consistent with his position on freewill. For if we do not really have freewill, but are inevitably driven by our passions, and moreover can rely on them rather than reason for guidance, then we have no need for ethics. *Ethics is only meaningful if we have a real power of choice and must therefore take decisions.*

Hume’s view of ethical logic is an interesting mix of truth and falsehood, which is why many have agreed with him and many have found it difficult to refute him. Ethics is of course a vast and complex subject, and I do not propose here to treat the topic in detail⁹. I would just like to show briefly how and why Hume’s approach, for all its seeming skeptical mastery, is here again superficial and narrow.

⁹ Note that I do not believe it is the task of the ethical philosopher to foresee every situation in life, and prescribe optimum behavior for them. Certainly, the philosopher is called upon to consider difficult general cases and propose wise responses. But each situation is unique in some respects, so the main task in this field is to teach people to think for themselves – in sensitive, intelligent and logical ways – about ethical issues. Ethical philosophy is primarily ethical logic, and only secondarily deals with certain contents. It is not a totalitarian doctrine. Each person has to live his or her own life.

The issue raised is primarily formal. What are prescriptive propositions and how do they relate to descriptive ones? The obvious answer to the question would be that prescriptions *relate ends to means*. I ought to do (or not-do) this *if* I want to (or not-to) obtain or attain that. The ‘ought’ (or ‘should’ or ‘must’) modality is essentially the bond in a specific kind of if-then proposition, with a desire or ‘value’ as antecedent and an action or ‘virtue’ as consequent.

Such if-then propositions are not themselves descriptive, but are deductively derived from descriptive forms. When we say “if we want so and so, then thus and thus is the way to get it”, we are affirming that “thus and thus” is/are *cause(s) of* “so and so”¹⁰. The latter is a factual claim, which may be true or false. It follows that the prescriptive statement can also be judged true or false, at least in respect of the correctness of the connection implied between its antecedent and consequent.

Be it mentioned in passing, prescriptive statements may be positive (imperatives) or negative (prohibitions). As well, note, the negations of prescriptive statements, viz. not imperative (exempt) and not prohibited (permitted) are also significant ethical modalities. But for brevity’s sake we will here only concentrate on imperatives, for the rest logically follows.

We see from our above definition of an imperative that it is *conditional*. Good or bad mean good or bad *for* something or someone. The imperative is only true as such *if* we grant that the value pursued is indeed of value. But how can we ever know whether any of our values are valuable in an absolute sense? This is Hume’s query, and it is quite valid. But his conclusion that values are formally bound to be arbitrary (i.e. cannot be deduced from plain facts) is open to challenge.

Our task is to show that we can arrive somehow at *categorical* imperatives¹¹, i.e. ethical standards that can ground and justify all subsequent conditional imperatives. One conceivable way to do so is to use a dilemmatic argument: ‘Whether you want this or that or anything else, the pursuit of so and so would in any case be a precondition’.

Something is an absolute value if it is necessary to the pursuit of *any and all* arbitrary values one personally opts for. A relative value can be by-passed in the pursuit of other relative values, but an absolute value is one presupposed in every pursuit and must therefore be respected unconditionally.

Are there any such absolute values? Clearly, yes. An obvious such value is *life* itself: if one lacks life, one cannot pursue anything else; therefore life must be protected and enhanced. Another absolute value is *the self* – if the soul is the source of all our actions, good or bad, then the soul’s welfare is an absolute value. Whatever one wants, one needs the physiological and psychological

¹⁰ I won’t here go into the different determinations of causation. Suffices to say that obviously if A is the only way to X, then I can say: “I must do A to get to X”. But if there are alternative ways to X – say, A, B and C, then I can only say: “I must do A or B or C to get X” – i.e. my prescription is disjunctive.

¹¹ It should be clear that, although I use this expression intentionally, I do not mean by it the same as Kant did. It is form, not content. I am here discussing formal ethical logic, not advocating a general or particular categorical imperative. Kant considers an imperative categorical if it is universal, i.e. applicable to everyone, all *agents*. Whereas in my view, a categorical imperative can be quite singular. What makes an imperative categorical, instead of hypothetical, is its necessity to all *goals* open to that agent. Logically, this is more symmetrical. What means are universal in this sense, i.e. universal to all goals (not necessarily all people)? Life, bodily wholeness and health, soul, cognition, volition, valuation, mental wholeness and health – these are means we always need to succeed, whatever our particular goals.

means that make such pursuit at all possible – viz. one’s bodily and mental faculties. And most of all, one needs to be present oneself!

These are obvious examples. What do they teach us? If we wish to understand, use and validate ethical propositions, we have to realize *what makes all such discourse possible and necessary*. A simple illustration and proof of that is that if I tell you ‘don’t follow any ethical doctrine’, I am uttering an ethical doctrine, and therefore committing a self-contradiction.

Ethical propositions do not apply to inanimate objects. They apply only to living beings, because only such entities have anything to win or lose. But to apply them to all living beings is not correct, for though plants, insects and lower animals can objectively be said by us to have values, their functioning is either automatic or instinctive, and they cannot understand or voluntarily apply ethics.

Only humans, and maybe higher animals like chimps or dolphins, can have ethical thoughts and the power of will to carry them out. These thoughts are verbal or non-verbal in the case of humans, and necessarily non-verbal in the case of higher animals. Thus, in the last analysis, explicit ethical discourse concerns only human beings.

And we can say at the outset that to engage at all in ethical discourse, humans have to study and take into consideration their nature, their true identity. They have to realize their biological and spiritual nature, the nature of their physical-mental organism and the nature of their soul. Moreover, since biology and spirituality relate not just to the individual in isolation, but to larger groups and to society as a whole – ethics has to be equally broad in its concerns.

If this large factual background is ignored in the formulation of ethical propositions, one is bound to be arbitrary and sooner or later fall into error. In conclusion, we can develop an ethic that involves absolute values and is based on factual truths. Ethics is clearly seen not to be arbitrary, if we consider the conditions that give rise to it in the first place – viz. that we are fragile living beings, with natural needs and limits, and that we are persons, with powers of cognition, volition and valuation.

If all the relevant facts are taken into consideration, then, an “ought” encapsulates a mass of “is” information, and can therefore be regarded as a special sort of “is”. That is, if properly developed, an ethical statement can be declared true, like any other factual claim. It is ethical fact, as against ‘alethic’ fact. Of course, if not properly induced and deduced, an ethical can be declared false – but not all ethical propositions are false.

Hume failed to realize the said logical preconditions of any ethics, and therefore got stuck in the shallow idea that ethics cannot be deeply grounded in fact. Since the scope of his considerations was partial, he could at least see that an “ought” is to start with conditional, but he could not see further how it could eventually be made unconditional. He therefore wrongly concluded that inferring an “ought” from an “is” is fallacious reasoning. This was later pompously called “the naturalistic fallacy”¹².

¹² By George Edward Moore, in his *Principia Ethica* (1903). I say ‘pompously’ to stress that no logical fallacy is involved, in my view. The issue is a logical problem – but one open to solution. My rejecting this so-called fallacy is not intended to reject offhand Moore’s central thesis, viz. that of the intellectual primacy of the concept of ‘good’, i.e. that we tacitly understand the term in some way before any theory attempting to define it.

7. The Standards of Ethics

In the above discussion of the ethical means and ends, I pointed out that, for instances, life and soul were two things that could logically be affirmed to be natural and absolute standards of value, since they are preconditions of any ethical discourse, i.e. since ethical discourse is only applicable to beings with life and more specifically with soul, i.e. beings with powers of consciousness, volition and valuation like us humans.

As I have suggested in my work *Volition and Allied Causal Concepts*, the term “life” in this context does not just mean bodily life – though this is doubtless its primary meaning. The term can also legitimately be taken to refer to spiritual life, i.e. the life of the soul. Indeed, in the last analysis ethics is concerned with bodily welfare rather accessorially: its main concern is with the soul’s welfare.

An obvious consequence of such extension of meaning is that those who believe in life after death (as in Judaism, Christianity and Islam) or in reincarnation (as in Buddhism and Hinduism) can construct an ethics without committing a logical error. That is to say, ethics is not necessarily limited to this life and this world.

Clearly, if we assume that our life goes on or returns in some form even after our body has died, it is logically quite okay (though at first sight it might seem paradoxical) to build an ethics in which the body might be deliberately risked or sacrificed in favor of the soul’s longer-term interest.

Those who view their life on earth as a mere visit in a longer journey naturally and quite logically evaluate their thoughts, words and deeds with reference to that broader context rather than in the narrow sense of physical survival. Although such survival is important to ethics, it can on occasion be overridden by more abstract, wider or higher considerations. Such occasions provide one with a test of one’s true values.

Of course, such self-sacrifice can easily be wrongly based on fantasy and illusion, since we do not know of the hereafter except by hearsay or presupposition. In most circumstances, it is wise to assume that one’s continued survival is the most beneficial course of action. But in special circumstances one might well judge that to accept some present evil would endanger one’s future life or lives. For example, some saintly persons have preferred to die rather than to be forced to kill an innocent person.

People can conceivably and sometimes do risk or give their physical lives in defense of their family, their people or nation, humanity as a whole, life as such, or in God’s service, because they perceive themselves, not as delimited bodies and independent individuals, but as parts of a larger whole – a group of people or of living things or the collective or root soul that is God. The value of one’s life is in such case a function of the value of the larger unit.

In sum, though we may use the term “life” as a short and sweet standard of ethical discourse, the term should not exclusively be understood in its simplest, material sense, but may logically be widened to admit more spiritual goals, whether this-worldly and other-worldly.

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