

CHAPTER V

RESULTS THE TEST OF RIGHT AND WRONG

IN our last chapter we began considering objections to one very fundamental principle, which is presupposed by the theory stated in the first two chapters—a principle which may be summed up in the two propositions (1) that the question whether an action is right or wrong always depends upon its *total* consequences, and (2) that if it is once right to prefer one set of *total* consequences, A, to another set, B, it must always be right to prefer any set precisely similar to A to any set precisely similar to B. The objections to this principle, which we considered in the last chapter, rested on certain views with regard to the meaning of the words 'right' and 'good'. But there remain several other quite independent objections, which may be urged against it even if we reject those views. That is to say, there are objections which may and would be urged against it by many people who accept both of the two propositions which I was trying to establish in the last chapter, namely (1) that to call an action 'right' or 'wrong' is not the same thing as to say that any being whatever has towards it any mental attitude whatever; and (2) that if any given whole is once intrinsically good or bad, any whole precisely similar to it must always be intrinsically good or bad in precisely the same degree. And in the present chapter I wish briefly to consider what seem to me to be the most important of these remaining objections.

All of them are directed against the view that right and wrong do always depend upon an action's *actual*

RESULTS THE TEST OF RIGHT AND WRONG 107
consequences or results. This may be denied for several different reasons; and I shall try to state fairly the chief among these reasons, and to point out why they do not seem to be conclusive.

In the first place, it may be said that, by laying down the principle that right and wrong depend upon consequences, we are doing away with the distinction between what is a *duty* and what is merely *expedient*; and between what is *wrong* and what is merely *inexpedient*. People certainly do commonly make a distinction between duty and expediency. And it may be said that the very meaning of calling an action 'expedient' is to say that it will produce the best consequences possible under the circumstances. If, therefore, we also say that an action is a *duty*, whenever and only when it produces the best possible consequences, it may seem that nothing is left to distinguish duty from expediency.

Now, as against this objection, it is important to point out, first of all, that, even if we admit that to call an action expedient is the same thing as to say that it produces the best possible consequences, our principle still does not compel us to hold that to call an action expedient is *the same thing* as to call it a duty. All that it does compel us to hold is that whatever is expedient is always *also* a duty, and that whatever is a duty is always *also* expedient. That is to say, it *does* maintain that duty and expediency *coincide*; but it does *not* maintain that the meaning of the two words is the same. It is, indeed, quite plain, I think, that the meaning of the two words is *not* the same; for, if it were, then it would be a mere tautology to say that it is always our duty to do what will have the best possible consequences. Our theory does not, therefore, do away with the distinction between the *meaning* of the

words 'duty' and 'expediency'; it only maintains that both will always apply to the same actions.

But, no doubt, what is meant by many who urge this objection is to deny this. What they mean to say is not merely that to call an action expedient is a different thing from calling it a duty, but also that sometimes what *is* expedient is *wrong*, and what *is* a duty is *inexpedient*. This is a view which is undoubtedly often held; people often speak as if there often were an actual conflict between duty and expediency. But many of the cases in which it would be commonly held that there is such a conflict may, I think, be explained by supposing that when we call an action 'expedient' we do not always mean quite strictly that its *total* consequences, taking absolutely *everything* into account, are the best possible. It is by no means clear that we do always mean this. We may, perhaps, sometimes mean merely that the action is expedient for some particular purpose; and sometimes that it is expedient in the interests of the agent, though not so on the whole. But if we only mean this, our theory, of course, does *not* compel us to maintain that the expedient *is* always a duty, and duty always expedient. It only compels us to maintain this, if 'expedient' be understood in the strictest and fullest sense, as meaning that, when *absolutely all* the consequences are taken into account, they will be found to be the best possible. And if this be clearly understood, then most people, I think, will be reluctant to admit that it can ever be really inexpedient to do our duty, or that what is really and truly expedient, in this strict sense, can ever be wrong.

But, no doubt, some people may still maintain that it is or may be sometimes our duty to do actions which will *not* have the best possible consequences, and

sometimes also positively wrong, to do actions which will. And the chief reason why this is held is, I think, the following.

It is, in fact, very commonly held indeed that there are certain specific kinds of action which are absolutely always right, and others which are absolutely always wrong. Different people will, indeed, take different views as to exactly what kinds of action have this character. A rule which will be offered by one set of persons as a rule to which there is absolutely no exception will be rejected by others, as obviously admitting of exceptions; but these will generally, in their turn, maintain that some other rule, which they can mention, really has no exceptions. Thus there are enormous numbers of people who would agree that *some rule or other* (and generally more than one) ought *absolutely always* to be obeyed; although probably there is not one single rule which *all* the persons who maintain this would agree upon. Thus, for instance, some people might maintain that murder (defined in some particular way) is an act which ought absolutely *never* to be committed; or that to act *justly* is a rule which ought absolutely always to be obeyed; and similarly it might be suggested with regard to many other kinds of action, that they are actions, which it is either *always* our duty, or *always* wrong to do.

But once we assert with regard to any rule of this kind that it *is absolutely always* our duty to obey it, it is easy and natural to take one further step and to say that it *would* always be our duty to obey it, *whatever* the consequences might be. Of course, this further step does not necessarily and logically follow from the mere position that there are some kinds of action which ought, *in fact*, absolutely always to be done or avoided. For it is just possible that there are some kinds which

do, as a matter of fact, absolutely always produce the best possible consequences, and other kinds which absolutely never do so. And there is a strong tendency among persons who hold the first position to hold that, as a matter of fact, this is the case: that right actions always do, as a matter of fact, produce the best possible results, and wrong actions never. Thus even those who would assent to the maxim that 'Justice should always be done, though the heavens should fall', will generally be disposed to believe that justice never will, in fact, cause the heavens to fall, but will rather be always the best means of upholding them. And similarly those who say that 'you should never do evil that good may come', though their maxim seems to imply that good *may* sometimes come from doing wrong, would yet be very loth to admit that, by doing wrong, you ever would *really* produce better consequences *on the whole* than if you had acted rightly instead. Or again, those who say 'that the end will never justify the means', though they certainly imply that certain ways of acting would be always wrong, *whatever* advantages might be secured by them, yet, I think, would be inclined to deny that the advantages to be obtained by acting wrongly ever do *really* outweigh those to be obtained by acting rightly, if we take into account absolutely *all* the consequences of each course.

Those, therefore, who hold that certain specific ways of acting are absolutely always right, and others absolutely always wrong, do, I think, generally hold that the former do also, as a matter of fact, absolutely always produce the best results, and the latter never. But, for the reasons given at the beginning of Chapter III, it is, I think, very unlikely that this belief can be justified. The total results of an action always depend, not merely on the specific nature of the action, but on

the circumstances in which it is done; and the circumstances vary so greatly that it is, in most cases, extremely unlikely that any particular kind of action will *absolutely* always, in absolutely all circumstances, either produce or fail to produce the best possible results. For this reason, if we do take the view that right and wrong depend upon consequences, we must, I think, be prepared to doubt whether any particular kind of action whatever is absolutely always right or absolutely always wrong. For instance, however we define 'murder', it is unlikely that absolutely *no* case will ever occur in which it would be right to commit a murder; and, however we define 'justice', it is unlikely that *no* case will ever occur in which it would be right to do an injustice. No doubt it may be possible to define actions of which it is true that, in an *immense* majority of cases, it is right or wrong to perform them; and perhaps *some* rules of this kind might be found to which there are really *no* exceptions. But in the case of most of the ordinary moral rules, it seems extremely unlikely that obedience to them will *absolutely always* produce the best possible results. And most persons who realize this would, I think, be disposed to give up the view that they ought absolutely *always* to be obeyed. They would be content to accept them as *general* rules, to which there are very few exceptions, without pretending that they are absolutely universal.

But, no doubt, there may be some persons who will hold, in the case of some particular rule or set of rules, that even if obedience to it does in some cases *not* produce the best possible consequences, yet we ought even in these cases to obey it. It may seem to them that they really do know certain rules, which ought *absolutely always* to be obeyed, *whatever* the consequences may be, and even, therefore, if the total

consequences are not the best possible. They may, for instance, take quite seriously the assertion that justice ought to be done, even though the heavens should fall, as meaning that, *however* bad the consequences of doing an act of justice might in some circumstances be, yet it always would be our duty to do it. And such a view does necessarily contradict our principle; since, whether it be true or not that an act of injustice ever actually could in this world produce the best possible consequences, it is certainly possible to *conceive* circumstances in which it would do so. I doubt whether those who believe in the absolute universality of certain moral rules do generally thus distinguish quite clearly between the question whether disobedience to the rule ever *could* produce the best possible consequences, and the question whether, *if* it did, then disobedience would be wrong. They would generally be disposed to argue that it never really *could*. But some persons might perhaps hold that, even if it did, yet disobedience would be wrong. And if this view be quite clearly held, there is, so far as I can see, absolutely no way of refuting it except by appealing to the self-evidence of the principle that if we *knew* that the effect of a given action really would be to make the world, as a whole, *worse* than it would have been if we had acted differently, it certainly would be wrong for us to do that action. Those who say that certain rules ought *absolutely always* to be obeyed, *whatever* the consequences may be, are logically bound to deny this; for by saying '*whatever* the consequences may be', they do imply '*even if* the world as a whole were the worse because of our action'. It seems to me to be self-evident that knowingly to do an action which would make the world, on the whole, really and truly *worse* than if we had acted differently, must always be wrong.

And if this be admitted, then it absolutely disposes of the view that there are any kinds of action whatever, which it *would* always be our duty to do or to avoid, *whatever* the consequences might be.

For this reason it seems to me we must reject this particular objection to the view that right and wrong always depend upon consequences; namely, the objection that there are certain *kinds* of action which ought absolutely always and quite unconditionally to be done or avoided. But there still remain two other objections, which are so commonly held, that it is worth while to consider them.

The first is the objection that right and wrong depend neither upon the nature of the action, nor upon its consequences, but partly, or even entirely, upon the *motive* or *motives* from which it is done. By the view that it depends *partly* upon the motives, I mean the view that no action can be *really* right, unless it be done from some one motive, or some one of a set of motives, which are supposed to be good; but that the being done from such a motive is not sufficient, *by itself*, to make an action right: that the action, if it is to be right, must always *also* either produce the best possible consequences, or be distinguished by some other characteristic. And this view, therefore, will not necessarily contradict our principle so far as it asserts that no action can be right, *unless* it produces the best possible consequences: it only contradicts that part of it which asserts that *every* action which does produce them is right. But the view has sometimes been held, I think, that right and wrong depend *entirely* upon motives: that is to say, that not only is no action right, *unless* it be done from a good motive, but also that *any* action which is done from some one motive or some one of a set of motives is always right, whatever its

consequences may be and whatever it may be like in other respects. And this view, of course, will contradict both parts of our principle; since it not only implies that an action, which produces the best possible consequences may be wrong, but also that an action may be right, in spite of failing to produce them.

In favour of both these views it may be urged that in our moral judgements we actually do, and ought to, take account of motives; and indeed that it marks a great advance in morality when men do begin to attach importance to motives and are not guided exclusively, in their praise or blame, by the 'external' nature of the act done or by its consequences. And all this may be fully admitted. It is quite certain that when a man does an action which has bad consequences from a good motive, we do tend to judge him differently from a man who does a similar action from a bad one; and also that when a man does an action which has good consequences from a bad motive, we may nevertheless think badly of him for it. And it may be admitted that, in some cases at least, it is right and proper that a man's motives should thus influence our judgement. But the question is: What *sort* of moral judgement is it right and proper that they should influence? Should it influence our view as to whether the action in question is right or wrong? It seems very doubtful whether, as a rule, it actually does affect our judgement on this particular point, for we are quite accustomed to judge that a man sometimes acts *wrongly* from the best of motives; and though we should admit that the good motive forms some excuse, and that the whole state of things is better than if he had done the same thing from a bad motive, it yet does not lead us to deny that the action *is* wrong. There is, therefore, reason to think that the kind of moral judgements

which a consideration of motives actually *does* affect do not consist of judgements as to whether the action done from the motive is *right* or *wrong*; but are moral judgements of *some different kind*; and there is still more reason to think that it is only judgements of some different kind which *ought* to be influenced by it.

The fact is that judgements as to the rightness and wrongness of actions are by no means the only kind of moral judgements which we make; and it is, I think, solely because some of these other judgements are confused with judgements of right and wrong that the latter are ever held to depend upon the motive. There are three other kinds of judgements which are chiefly concerned in this case. In the first place it may be held that some motives are *intrinsically good* and others *intrinsically bad*; and though this is a view which is inconsistent with the theory of our first two chapters, it is not a view which we are at present concerned to dispute: for it is not at all inconsistent with the principle which we are at present considering—namely, that right and wrong always depend solely upon consequences. If we held this view, we might still hold that a man may act wrongly from a good motive, and rightly from a bad one, and that the motive would make no difference whatever to the rightness or wrongness of the action. What it would make a difference to is the goodness or badness of the whole state of affairs: for, if we suppose the same action to be done in one case from a good motive and in the other from a bad one, then, so far as the consequences of the action are concerned, the goodness of the whole state of things will be the same, while the presence of the good motive will mean the presence of an *additional* good in the one case which is absent in the other. For this reason alone, therefore, we might justify the view that motives are

relevant to *some* kinds of moral judgements, though not to judgements of right and wrong.

And there is yet another reason for this view, and this a reason which may be consistently held even by those who hold the theory of our first two chapters. It may be held, namely, that good motives have a *general* tendency to produce right conduct, though they do not *always* do so, and bad motives to produce wrong conduct; and this would be another reason which would justify us in regarding right actions done from a good motive differently from right actions done from a bad one. For though, in the case supposed, the bad motive would not *actually* have led to wrong action, yet, if it is true that motives of that kind do *generally* lead to wrong action, we should be right in passing this judgement upon it; and judgements to the effect that a motive is of a kind which generally leads to wrong action are undoubtedly moral judgements of a sort, and an important sort, though they do not prove that every action done from such a motive is wrong.

And finally motives seem also to be relevant to a third kind of moral judgement of great importance—namely, judgements as to whether, and in what degree, the agent *deserves* moral praise or blame for acting as he did. This question as to what is deserving of moral praise or blame is, I think, often confused with the question as to what is right or wrong. It is very natural, at first sight, to assume that to call an action morally praiseworthy is the same thing as to say that it is right, and to call it morally blameworthy the same thing as to say that it is wrong. But yet a very little reflection suffices to show that the two things are certainly distinct. When we say that an action *deserves* praise or blame, we imply that it is *right* to praise or blame it; that is to say, we are making a judgement *not* about the

rightness of the original action, but about the rightness of the further action which we should take, if we praised or blamed it. And these two judgements are certainly not identical; nor is there any reason to think that what is right *always* also deserves to be praised, and what is wrong *always* also deserves to be blamed. Even, therefore, if the motive *is* relevant to the question whether an action deserves praise or blame, it by no means follows that it is *also* relevant to the question whether it is right or wrong. And there is some reason to think that the motive *is* relevant to judgements of the former kind: that we really *ought* sometimes to praise an action done from a bad motive less than if it had been done from a good one, and to blame an action done from a good motive less than if it had been done from a bad one. For one of the considerations upon which the question whether it is right to blame an action depends, is that our blame may tend to prevent the agent from doing similar wrong actions in future; and obviously, if the agent only acted wrongly from a motive which is not likely to lead him wrong in the future, there is less need to try to deter him by blame than if he had acted from a motive which was likely to lead him to act wrongly again. This is, I think, a very real reason why we *sometimes* ought to blame a man less when he does wrong from a good motive. But I do not mean to say that the question whether a man deserves moral praise or blame, or the degree to which he deserves it, depends *entirely* or *always* upon his motive. I think it certainly does not. My point is only that this *question* does *sometimes* depend on the motive in some degree; whereas the question whether his action was right or wrong *never* depends upon it at all.

There are, therefore, at least three different kinds

of moral judgements, in making which it is at least plausible to hold that we ought to take account of motives; and if all these judgements are carefully distinguished from that particular kind which is solely concerned with the question whether an action is right or wrong, there ceases, I think, to be any reason to suppose that this last question ever depends upon the motive at all. At all events the mere fact that motives are and ought to be taken account of in *some* moral judgements does not constitute such a reason. And hence this fact cannot be urged as an objection to the view that right and wrong depend solely on consequences.

But there remains one last objection to this view, which is, I am inclined to think, the most serious of all. This is an objection which will be urged by people who strongly maintain that right and wrong do *not* depend either upon the nature of the action or upon its motive, and who will even go so far as to admit as self-evident the hypothetical proposition that *if* any being absolutely *knew* that one action would have better total consequences than another, then it *would* always be his duty to choose the former rather than the latter. But what such people would point out is that this hypothetical case is hardly ever, if ever, realized among us men. We hardly ever, if ever, *know for certain* which among the courses open to us *will* produce the best consequences. Some accident, which we could not possibly have foreseen, may always falsify the most careful calculations, and make an action, which we had every reason to think would have the best results, *actually* have worse ones than some alternative would have had. Suppose, then, that a man has taken all possible care to assure himself that a given course will be the best, and has adopted it for that reason, but that

owing to some subsequent event, which he could not possibly have foreseen, it turns out *not* to be the best: are we for that reason to say that his action was wrong? It may seem outrageous to say so; and yet this is what we must say, if we are to hold that right and wrong depend upon the *actual* consequences. Or suppose that a man has deliberately chosen a course, which he has every reason to suppose will *not* produce the best consequences, but that some unforeseen accident defeats his purpose and makes it actually turn out to be the best: are we to say that such a man, because of this unforeseen accident, has acted rightly? This also may seem an outrageous thing to say; and yet we must say it, if we are to hold that right and wrong depend upon the *actual* consequences. For these reasons many people are strongly inclined to hold that they do *not* depend upon the *actual* consequences, but only upon those which were antecedently *probable*, or which the agent had *reason* to expect, or which it was *possible* for him to *foresee*. They are inclined to say that an action is *always* right, whatever its *actual* consequences may be, provided the agent had reason to expect that they would be the best possible; and *always* wrong, if he had reason to expect that they would not.

This, I think, is the most serious objection to the view that right and wrong depend upon the *actual* consequences. But yet I am inclined to think that even this objection can be got over by reference to the distinction between what is right or wrong, on the one hand, and what is morally praiseworthy or blameworthy on the other. What we should naturally say of a man whose action turns out badly owing to some unforeseen accident when he had every reason to expect that it would turn out well, is not that his action was right, but rather that *he is not to blame*. And it may be

fully admitted that in such a case he really *ought* not to be blamed; since blame cannot possibly serve any good purpose, and would be likely to do harm. But, even if we admit that he was not to blame, is that any reason for asserting also that he acted rightly? I cannot see that it is; and therefore I am inclined to think that in all such cases the man really did act *wrongly*, although he is not to blame, and although, perhaps, he even deserves praise for acting as he did.

But the same difficulty may be put in another form, in which there may seem an even stronger case against the view that right and wrong depend on the *actual* consequences. Instead of considering what judgement we ought to pass on an action *after* it has been done, and when many of its results are already known, let us consider what judgement we ought to pass on it *beforehand*, and when the question is which among several courses still open to a man he *ought* to choose. It is admitted that he cannot *know for certain* beforehand which of them will actually have the best results; but let us suppose that he has every reason to think that one of them will produce decidedly better results than any of the others—that all probability is in favour of this view. Can we not say, in such a case, that he absolutely *ought* to choose that one? that he will be acting very *wrongly* if he chooses any other? We certainly *should* actually say so; and many people may be inclined to think that we should be right in saying so, no matter what the results may subsequently prove to be. There does seem to be a certain paradox in maintaining the opposite: in maintaining that, in such a case, it can possibly be true that he *ought* to choose a course, which he has every reason to think will *not* be the best. But yet I am inclined to think that even this difficulty is not fatal to our view. It may be

admitted that we should say, and should be justified in saying, that he absolutely *ought* to choose the course, which he has reason to think will be the best. But we may be justified in saying many things, which we do not know to be true, and which in fact are not so, provided there is a strong probability that they are. And so in this case I do not see why we should not hold, that though we should be justified in saying that he *ought* to choose one course, yet it may not be really true that he ought. What certainly will be true is that he will deserve the strongest moral blame if he does not choose the course in question, even though it may be wrong. And we are thus committed to the paradox that a man may really deserve the strongest moral condemnation for choosing an action, which *actually* is right. But I do not see why we should not accept this paradox.

I conclude, then, that there is no conclusive reason against the view that our theory is right, so far as it maintains that the question whether an action is right or wrong *always* depends on its *actual* consequences. There seems no sufficient reason for holding either that it depends on the intrinsic nature of the action, or that it depends upon the motive, or even that it depends on the *probable* consequences.