# CHAPTER III THE OBJECTIVITY OF MORAL JUDGEMENTS

AGAINST the theory, which has been stated in the last two chapters, an enormous variety of different objections may be urged; and I cannot hope to deal with nearly all of them. What I want to do is to choose out those, which seem to me to be the most important, because they are the most apt to be strongly felt, and because they concern extremely general questions of principle. It seems to me that some of these objections are well founded, and that others are not, according as they are directed against different parts of what our theory asserts. And I propose, therefore, to split up the theory into parts, and to consider separately the chief objections which might be urged against each of these different parts.

And we may begin with an extremely fundamental point. Our theory plainly implied two things. It implied (1) that, if it is true at any one time that a particular voluntary action is right, it must always be true of that particular action that it was right: or, in other words, that an action cannot change from right to wrong, or from wrong to right; that it cannot possibly be true of the very same action that it is right at one time and wrong at another. And it implied also (2) that the same action cannot possibly at the same time be both right and wrong. It plainly implied both these two things because it asserted that a voluntary action can only be right, if it produces a maximum of pleasure, and can only be wrong, if it produces less than a maximum. And obviously, if it is once true of THE OBJECTIVITY OF MORAL JUDGEMENTS 51

any action that it did produce a maximum of pleasure, it must *always* be true of it that it did; and obviously also it cannot be true at one and the same time of one and the same action both that it did produce a maximum of pleasure and also that it produced less than a maximum. Our theory implied, therefore, that any particular action cannot possibly be *both* right and wrong either at the same time or at different times. At any particular time it must be either right or wrong, and, whichever it is at any one time, it will be the same at all times.

It must be carefully noticed, however, that our theory only implies that this is true of any particular voluntary action, which we may choose to consider: it does not imply that the same is ever true of a class of actions. That is to say, it implies that if, at the time when Brutus murdered Caesar, this action of his was right, then, it must be equally true now, and will always be true, that this particular action of Brutus was right, and it never can have been and never will be true that it was wrong. Brutus' action on this particular occasion cannot, it says, have been both right and wrong; and if it was once true that it was right, then it must always be true that it was right; or if it was once true that it was wrong, it must always be true that it was wrong. And similarly with every other absolutely particular action, which actually was done or might have been done by a particular man on a particular occasion. Of every such action, our theory says, it is true that it cannot at any time have been both right and wrong; and also that, whichever of these two predicates it possessed at any one time, it must possess the same at all times. But it does not imply that the same is true of any particular class of actions-of murder, for instance. It does not assert

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that if one murder, committed at one time, was wrong, then any other murder committed at the same time must also have been wrong; nor that if one murder, committed at one time, is wrong, any other murder committed at any other time must be wrong. On the contrary, though it does not directly imply that this is false, yet it does imply that it is unlikely that any particular class of actions will absolutely always be right or absolutely always wrong. For, it holds, as we have seen, that the question whether an action is right or wrong depends upon its effects; and the question what effects an action will produce depends, of course, not only upon the *class* to which it belongs. but also on the particular circumstances in which it is done. While, in one set of circumstances, a particular kind of action may produce good effects, in other circumstances a precisely similar action may produce bad ones. And, since the circumstances are always changing, it is extremely unlikely (though not impossible) that actions of any particular class, such as murder or adultery, should absolutely always be right or absolutely always wrong. Our theory, therefore, does not imply that, if an action of a particular class is right once, every other action of the same class must always be right: on the contrary, it follows from its view that this is unlikely to be true. What it does imply, is that if we consider any particular instance of any class, that particular instance cannot ever be both right and wrong, and if once right, must always be right. And it is extremely important to distinguish clearly between these two different questions, because they are liable to be confused. When we ask whether the same action can be both right and wrong we may mean two entirely different things by this question. We may merely mean to ask: Can the same kind of action be

right at one time and wrong at another, or right and wrong simultaneously? And to this question our theory would be inclined to answer: It can. Or else by the same action, we may mean not merely the same kind of action, but some single absolutely particular action, which was or might have been performed by a definite person on a definite occasion. And it is to this question that our theory replies: It is absolutely impossible that any one single, absolutely particular action can ever be both right and wrong, either at the same time or at different times.

Now this question as to whether one and the same action can ever be both right and wrong at the same time, or can ever be right at one time and wrong at another, is, I think, obviously, an extremely fundamental one. If we decide it in the affirmative, then a great many of the questions which have been most discussed by ethical writers are at once put out of court. It must, for instance, be idle to discuss what characteristic there is, which universally distinguishes right actions from wrong ones, if this view be true. If one and the same action can be both right and wrong, then obviously there can be no such characteristicthere can be no characteristic which always belongs to right actions, and never to wrong ones: since, if so much as one single action is both right and wrong, this action must possess any characteristic (if there is one) which always belongs to right actions, and, at the same time, since the action is also wrong, this characteristic cannot be one which never belongs to wrong actions. Before, therefore, we enter on any discussions as to what characteristic there is which always belongs to right actions and never to wrong ones, it is extremely important that we should satisfy ourselves, if we can, that one and the same action

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cannot be both right and wrong, either at the same time or at different times. For, if this is not the case, then all such discussions must be absolutely futile. I propose, therefore, first of all, to raise the simple issue: Can one and the same action be both right and wrong, either at the same time or at different times? Is the theory stated in the last two chapters in the right, so far as it merely asserts that this cannot be the case?

Now I think that most of those who hold, as this theory does, that one and the same action cannot be both right and wrong, simply assume that this is the case, without trying to prove it. It is, indeed, quite common to find the mere fact that a theory implies the contrary, used as a conclusive argument against that theory. It is argued: Since this theory implies that one and the same action can be both right and wrong, and since it is evident that this cannot be so, therefore the theory in question must be false. And, for my part, it seems to me that such a method of argument is perfectly justified. It does seem to me to be evident that no voluntary action can be both right and wrong; and I do not see how this can be proved by reference to any principle which is more certain than it is itself. If, therefore, anybody asserts that the contrary is evident to him-that it is evident to him that one and the same action can be both right and wrong, I do not see how it can be proved that he is wrong. If the question is reduced to these ultimate terms, it must, I think, simply be left to the reader's inspection. Like all ultimate questions, it is incapable of strict proof either way. But most of those who hold that an action can be both right and wrong are, I think, in fact influenced by certain considerations, which do admit of argument. They hold certain views,

from which this conclusion follows; and it is only because they hold these views that they adopt the conclusion. There are, I think, two views, in particular, which are very commonly held and which are specially influential in leading people to adopt it. And it is very important that we should consider these two views carefully, both because they lead to this conclusion and for other reasons.

The first of them is as follows. It may be held, namely, that, whenever we assert that an action or class of actions is right or wrong, we must be merely making an assertion about somebody's feelings towards the action or class of actions in question. This is a view which seems to be very commonly held in some form or other; and one chief reason why it is held is, I think, that many people seem to find an extreme difficulty in seeing what else we possibly can mean by the words 'right' and 'wrong', except that some mind or set of minds has some feeling, or some other mental attitude, towards the actions to which we apply these predicates. In some of its forms this view does not lead to the consequence that one and the same action may be both right and wrong; and with these forms we are not concerned just at present. But some of the forms in which it may be held do directly lead to this consequence; and where people do hold that one and the same action may be both right and wrong, it is, I think, very generally because they hold this view in one of these forms. There are several different forms of it which do lead to this consequence, and they are apt, I think, not to be clearly distinguished from one another. People are apt to assume that in our judgements of right and wrong we must be making an assertion about the feelings of some man or some group of men, without trying definitely to make up

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their minds as to who the man or group of men can be about whose feelings we are making it. So soon as this question is fairly faced, it becomes plain, I think, that there are serious objections to any possible alternative.

To begin with, it may be held that whenever any man asserts an action to be right or wrong, what he is asserting is merely that he himself has some particular feeling towards the action in question. Each of us, according to this view, is merely making an assertion about his own feelings: when I assert that an action is right, the whole of what I mean is merely that I have some particular feeling towards the action; and when you make the same assertion, the whole of what you mean is merely that you have the feeling in question towards the action. Different views may, of course, be taken as to what the feeling is which we are supposed to assert that we have. Some people might say that, when we call an action right, we are merely asserting that we like it or are pleased with it; and that when we call one wrong, we are merely asserting that we dislike it or are displeased with it. Others might say, more plausibly, that it is not mere liking and dislike that we express by these judgements, but a peculiar sort of liking and dislike, which might perhaps be called a feeling of moral approval and of moral disapproval. Others, again, might, perhaps, say that it is not a pair of opposite feelings which are involved, but merely the presence or absence of one particular feeling: that, for instance, when we call an action wrong, we merely mean to say that we have towards it a feeling of disapproval, and that by calling it right, we mean to say, not that we have towards it a *positive* feeling of approval, but merely that we have not got towards it the feeling of disapproval. But whatever view be taken as to the

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precise nature of the feelings about which we are supposed to be making a judgement, *any* view which holds that, when we call an action right or wrong, each of us is always merely asserting that he *himself* has or has not some particular feeling towards it, does, I think, inevitably lead to the same conclusion—namely, that quite often one and the same action is *both* right and wrong; and *any* such view is also exposed to one and the same fatal objection.

The argument which shows that such views inevitably lead to the conclusion that one and the same action is quite often both right and wrong, consists of two steps, each of which deserves to be separately emphasized.

The first is this. If, whenever I judge an action to be right, I am merely judging that I myself have a particular feeling towards it, then it plainly follows that, provided I really have the feeling in question, my judgement is true, and therefore the action in question really is right. And what is true of me, in this respect, will also be true of any other man. No matter what we suppose the feeling to be, it must be true that, whenever and so long as any man really has towards any action the feeling in question, then, and for just so long, the action in question really is right. For what our theory supposes is that, when a man judges an action to be right, he is merely judging that he has this feeling towards it; and hence, whenever he really has it, his judgement must be true, and the action really must be right. It strictly follows, therefore, from this theory that whenever any man whatever really has a particular feeling towards an action, the action really is right; and whenever any man whatever really has another particular feeling towards an action, the action really is wrong. Or, if we

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take the view that it is not a pair of feelings which are in question, but merely the presence or absence of a single feeling-for instance, the feeling of moral disapproval; then, what follows is, that whenever any man whatever fails to have this feeling towards an action, the action really is right, and whenever any man whatever has got the feeling, the action really is wrong. Whatever view we take as to what the feelings are, and whether we suppose that it is a pair of feelings or merely the presence and absence of a single one, the consequence follows that the presence (or absence) of the feeling in question in any man whatever is sufficient to ensure that an action is right or wrong, as the case may be. And it is important to insist that this consequence does follow, because it is not, I think, always clearly seen. It seems sometimes to be vaguely held that when a man judges an action to be right, he is merely judging that he has a particular feeling towards it, but that yet, though he really has this feeling, the action is not necessarily really right. But obviously this is impossible. If the whole of what we mean to assert, when we say that an action is right, is merely that we have a particular feeling towards it, then plainly, provided only we really have this feeling, the action must really be right.

It follows, therefore, from any view of this type, that, whenever *any* man has (or has not) some particular feeling towards an action, the action is right; and also that, whenever *any* man has (or has not) some particular feeling towards an action, the action is wrong. And now, if we take into account a second fact, it seems plainly to follow that, if this be so, one and the same action must quite often be both right and wrong.

This second fact is merely the observed fact, which it seems difficult to deny, that, whatever pair of

feelings or single feeling we take, cases do occur in which two different men have opposite feelings towards the same action, and in which, while one has a given feeling towards an action, the other has not got it. It might, perhaps, be thought that it is possible to find some pair of feelings or some single feeling, in the case of which this rule does not hold: that, for instance, no man ever really feels moral approval towards an action, towards which another feels moral disapproval. This is a view which people are apt to take, because, where we have a strong feeling of moral disapproval towards an action, we may find it very difficult to believe that any other man *really* has a feeling of moral approval towards the same action, or even that he regards it without some degree of moral disapproval. And there is some excuse for this view in the fact, that when a man says that an action is right, and even though he sincerely believes it to be so, it may nevertheless be the case that he really *feels* towards it some degree of moral disapproval. That is to say, though it is certain that men's opinions as to what is right and wrong often differ, it is not certain that their *feelings* always differ when their opinions do. But still, if we look at the extraordinary differences that there have been and are between different races of mankind, and in different stages of society, in respect of the classes of actions which have been regarded as right and wrong, it is, I think, scarcely possible to doubt that, in some societies, actions have been regarded with actual feelings of positive moral approval, towards which many of us would feel the strongest disapproval. And if this is so with regard to *classes* of actions, it can hardly fail to be sometimes the case with regard to particular actions. We may, for instance, read of a particular action, which excites in us a strong feeling of moral

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disapproval; and yet it can hardly be doubted that sometimes this very action will have been regarded by some of the men among whom it was done, without any feeling of disapproval whatever, and even with a feeling of positive approval. But, if this be so, then, on the view we are considering, it will absolutely follow that whereas it was true *then*, when it was done, that that action was right, it is true *now* that the very same action was wrong.

And once we admit that there have been such real differences of feeling between men in different stages of society, we must also, I think, admit that such differences do quite often exist even among contemporaries, when they are members of very different societies; so that one and the same action may quite often be at the same time both right and wrong. And, having admitted this, we ought, I think, to go still further. Once we are convinced that real differences of *feeling* towards certain classes of actions, and not merely differences of opinion, do exist between men in different states of society, the probability is that when two men in the same state of society differ in opinion as to whether an action is right or wrong, this difference of opinion, though it by no means always indicates a corresponding difference of feeling, yet sometimes really is accompanied by such a difference: so that two members of the same society may really sometimes have opposite feelings towards one and the same action, whatever feeling we take. And finally, we must admit, I think, that even one and the same individual may experience such a change of feeling towards one and the same action. A man certainly does often come to change his opinion as to whether a particular action was right or wrong; and we must, I think, admit that, sometimes at least, his feelings

towards it completely change as well; so that, for instance, an action, which he formerly regarded with moral disapproval, he may now regard with positive moral approval, and vice versa. So that, for this reason alone, and quite apart from differences of feeling between different men, we shall have to admit, according to our theory, that it is often now true of an action that it was right, although it was formerly true of the same action that it was wrong.

This fact, on which I have been insisting, that different men do feel differently towards the same action, and that even the same man may feel differently towards it at different times, is, of course, a mere commonplace; and my only excuse for insisting on it in that it might possibly be thought that some one feeling or pair of feelings, and those the very ones which it is most plausible to regard as the ones about which we are making an assertion in our judgements of right and wrong, are exceptions to the rule. I think, however, we must recognize that no feeling or pair of feelings, which could possibly be maintained to be the ones with which our judgements of right and wrong are concerned, does, in fact, form an exception. Whatever feeling you take, it seems hardly possible to doubt that instances have actually occurred, in which, while one man really had the feeling in question towards a given action, other men have not had it, and some of them have even had an opposite one, towards the same action. There may, perhaps, be nome classes of actions in the case of which this has never occurred; but what seems certain is that there are some classes, with which it has occurred: and, if there are any at all, that is sufficient to establish our conclusion. For if this is so, and if, when a man unnerts an action to be right or wrong, he is always

merely asserting that he himself has some particular feeling towards it, then it absolutely follows that one and the same action has sometimes been *both* right and wrong—right at one time and wrong at another, or both simultaneously.

And I think that some argument of this sort is the chief reason why many people are apt to hold that one and the same action may be both right and wrong. They are much impressed by the fact that different men do feel quite differently towards the same classes of action, and, holding also that, when we judge an action to be right or wrong, we must be merely making a judgement about somebody's feelings, it seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that one and the same action often is both right and wrong. This conclusion does not, indeed, necessarily follow from these two doctrines taken together. Whether it follows or not, depends on the precise form in which we hold the latter doctrine-upon who the somebody is about whose feelings we are making the assertion. But it does follow from the precise form of this doctrine which we are now considering-the form which asserts that each man is merely making an assertion about his own feelings. And, since this is one of the most plausible forms in which the doctrine can be held, it is extremely important to consider, whether it can be true in this form. Can it possibly be the case, then, that, when we judge an action to be right or wrong, each of us is only asserting that he himself has some particular feeling towards it?

It seems to me that there is an absolutely fatal objection to the view that this is the case. It must be remembered that the question is merely a question of fact; a question as to the actual analysis of our moral judgements—as to what it is that actually happens,

THE OBJECTIVITY OF MORAL JUDGEMENTS 63 when we think an action to be right or wrong. And if we remember that it is thus merely a question as to what we actually think, when we think an action to be right or wrong,-neither more nor less than this,-it can, I think, be clearly seen that the view we are considering is inconsistent with plain facts. This is so, because it involves a curious consequence, which those who hold it do not always seem to realize that it involves; and this consequence is, I think, plainly not in accordance with the facts. The consequence is this. If, when one man says, 'This action is right', and another answers, 'No, it is not right', each of them is always merely making an assertion about his own feelings, it plainly follows that there is never really any difference of opinion between them: the one of them is never really contradicting what the other is asserting. They are no more contradicting one another than if, when one had said, 'I like sugar', the other had answered, 'I don't like sugar'. In such a case, there is, of course, no conflict of opinion, no contradiction of one by the other: for it may perfectly well be the case that what each asserts is equally true; it may quite well be the case that the one man really does like sugar, and the other really does not like it. The one, therefore, is *never* denying what the other is asserting. And what the view we are considering involves is that when one man holds an action to be right, and another holds it to be wrong or not right, here also the one is never denying what the other is asserting. It involves, therefore, the very curious consequence that no two men can ever differ in opinion as to whether an action is right or wrong. And surely the fact that it involves this consequence is sufficient to condemn it. It is surely plain matter of fact that

when I assert an action to be wrong, and another man

asserts it to be right, there sometimes is a real difference of opinion between us: he sometimes is denying the very thing which I am asserting. But, if this is so, then it cannot possibly be the case that each of us is merely making a judgement about his own feelings; since two such judgements never can contradict one another. We can, therefore, reduce the question whether this theory is true or not, to a very simple question of fact. Is it ever the case that when one man thinks that an action is right and another thinks it is not right, that the second really is thinking that the action has not got some predicate which the first thinks that it has got? I think, if we look at this question fairly, we must admit that it sometimes is the case; that both men may use the word 'right' to denote exactly the same predicate, and that the one may really be thinking that the action in question really has this predicate, while the other is thinking that it has not got it. But if this is so, then the theory we are considering certainly is not true. It cannot be true that every man always denotes by the word 'right' merely a relation to his own feelings, since, if that were so, no two men would ever denote by this word the same predicate; and hence a man who said that an action was not right could never be denying that it had the very predicate, which another, who said that it was right, was asserting that it had. are 6

It seems to me this argument proves conclusively that, whatever we do mean, when we say that an action is right, we certainly do not mean merely that we *our*selves have a certain feeling towards it. But it is important to distinguish carefully between exactly what it *does* prove, and what it does *not* prove. It does *not* prove, at all, that it may not be the case, that, whenever any man judges an action to be right, he

THE OBJECTIVITY OF MORAL JUDGEMENTS 65 always, in fact, has a certain feeling towards it, and even that he makes the judgement only because he has that feeling. It only proves that, even if this be so, what he is judging is not merely that he has the feeling. And these two points are, I think, very liable to be confused. It may be alleged to be a fact that whenever a man judges an action to be right, he only does so, because he has a certain feeling towards it; and this alleged fact may actually be used as an argument to prove that what he is judging is merely that he has the teeling. But obviously, even if the alleged fact be a fact, it does not in the least support this conclusion. The two points are entirely different, and there is a most important difference between their consequences. The difference is that, even if it be true that a man never judges an action to be right, unless he has a certain feeling towards it, yet, if this be all, the mere fact that he has this feeling, will not prove his judgement to be true; we may quite well hold that, even though he has the feeling and judges the action to be right, yet sometimes his judgement is false and the action is not really right. But if, on the other hand, we hold that what he is judging is merely that he has the feeling, then the mere fact that he has it will prove his judgement to be true: if he is only judging that he has it, then the mere fact that he has it is, of course, autheient to make his judgement true. We must, therefore, distinguish carefully between the assertion that, whenever a man judges an action to be right, he only does so because he has a certain feeling, and the entirely different assertion that, whenever he judges an action to be right, he is merely judging that he has this feeling. The former assertion, even if it be true, does not prove that the latter is true also. And we may, therefore, dispute the latter without disputing

the former. It is *only* the latter which our argument proves to be untrue; and not a word has been said tending to show that the former may not be perfectly true.

Our argument, therefore, does not disprove the assertion, if it should be made, that we only judge actions to be right and wrong, when and because we have certain feelings towards them. And it is also important to insist that it does not disprove another assertion also. It does not disprove the assertion that, whenever any man has a certain feeling towards an action, the action is, as a matter of fact, always right. Anybody is still perfectly free to hold that this is true, as a matter of fact, and that, therefore, as a matter of fact, one and the same action often is both right and wrong, even if he admits what our argument does prove; namely, that, when a man thinks an action to be right or wrong, he is not merely thinking that he has some feeling towards it. The only importance of our argument, in this connexion, is merely that it destroys one of the main reasons for holding that this is true, as a matter of fact. If we once clearly see that to say that an action is right is not the same thing as to say that we have any feeling towards it, what reason is there left for holding that the presence of a certain feeling is, in fact, always a sign that it is right? No one, I think, would be very much tempted to assert that the mere presence (or absence) of a certain feeling is invariably a sign of rightness, but for the supposition that, in some way or other, the only possible meaning of the word 'right', as applied to actions, is that somebody has a certain feeling towards them. And it is this supposition, in one of its forms, that our argument does disprove.

But even if it be admitted that, in this precise form,

THE OBJECTIVITY OF MORAL JUDGEMENTS 67 the view is quite untenable, it may still be urged that nevertheless it is true in some other form, from which the same consequence will follow-namely, the consequence that one and the same action is quite often both right and wrong. Many people have such a strong disposition to believe that when we judge an action to be right or wrong we must be merely making an assertion about the feelings of some man or set of men, that, even if they are convinced that we are not always merely making an assertion, each about his own feelings, they will still be disposed to think that we must be making one about somebody else's. The difficulty is to find any man or set of men about whose feelings it can be plausibly held that we are making an assertion, if we are not merely making one about our own; but still there are two alternatives, which may seem, at first sight, to be just possible, namely (1) that each man, when he asserts an action to be right or wrong, is merely asserting that a certain feeling is generally felt towards actions of that class by most of the members of the society to which he belongs, or (2) merely that some man or other has a certain feeling towards them.

From either of these two views, it will, of course, follow that one and the same action is often both right and wrong, for the same reasons as were given in the last case. Thus, if, when I assert an action to be right, I am merely asserting that it is generally approved in the society to which I belong, it follows, of course, that if it *is* generally approved by my society, my assertion is true, and the action really *is* right. But as we saw, it seems undeniable, that some actions which are generally approved in *my* society, will have been disapproved or will still be disapproved in other societies. And, since any member of one of those

societies will, on this view, when he judges an action to be wrong, be merely judging that it is disapproved in his society, it follows that when he judges one of these actions, which really is disapproved in his society, though approved in mine, to be wrong, this judgement of his will be just as true as my judgement that the same action was right: and hence the same action really will be both right and wrong. And similarly, if we adopt the other alternative, and say that when a man judges an action to be right he is merely judging that some man or other has a particular feeling towards it, it will, of course, follow that whenever any man at all really has this feeling towards it, the action really is right, while, whenever any man at all has not got it or has an opposite feeling, the action really is wrong: and, since cases will certainly occur in which one man has the required feeling, while another has an opposite one towards the same action, in all such cases the same action will be both right and wrong.

From either of these two views, then, the same consequence will follow. And, though I do not know whether any one would definitely hold either of them to be true, it is, I think, worth while briefly to consider the objections to them, because they seem to be the only alternatives left, from which this consequence will follow, when once we have rejected the view that, in our judgements of right and wrong, each of us is merely talking about *his own* feelings; and because, while the objection which did apply to that view, does not apply equally to these, there is an objection which does apply to these, but which does not apply nearly so obviously to that one.

The objection which was urged against that view does, indeed, apply, in a limited extent, to the first of these two: since if when a man judges an action

THE OBJECTIVITY OF MORAL JUDGEMENTS 69 to be right or wrong, he is always merely making an assertion about the feelings of his own society, it will follow that two men, who belong to different societies, can never possibly differ in opinion as to whether an action is right or wrong. But this objection does not apply an between two men who both belong to the same nociety. The view that when any man asserts an action to be right he is merely making an assertion about the feelings of his own society, does allow that two men belonging to the same society may really differ in opinion as to whether an action is right or wrong. Neither this view, therefore, nor the view that we are merely asserting that some man or other has a particular feeling towards the action in question involves the absurdity that no two men can ever differ in opinion as to whether an action is right or wrong. We cannot, therefore, urge the fact that they involve this absurdity as an objection against them, as we could against the view that each man is merely talking of his own feelings.

But both of them are nevertheless exposed to another objection, equally fatal, to which that view was not so obviously exposed. The objection is again merely one of psychological fact, resting upon observation of what actually happens when a man thinks an action to be right or wrong. For, whatever feeling or feelings we take as the ones about which he is supposed to be judging, it is quite certain that a man may think an action to be right, even when he does *not* think that the members of his society have in general the required feeling (or absence of feeling) towards it; and that similarly he may doubt whether an action is right, even when he does *not* doubt that *some man or other* has the required feeling towards it. Cases of this kind certainly constantly occur, and what they prove is that,

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whatever a man is thinking when he thinks an action to be right, he is certainly not merely thinking that his society has in general a particular feeling towards it; and similarly that, when he is in doubt as to whether an action is right, the question about which he is in doubt is not merely as to whether any man at all has the required feeling towards it. Facts of this kind are. therefore, absolutely fatal to both of these two theories: whereas in the case of the theory that he is merely making a judgement about his own feelings, it is not so obvious that there are any facts of the same kind inconsistent with it. For here it might be urged with some plausibility (though, I think, untruly) that when a man judges an action to be right he always does think that he himself has some particular feeling towards it; and similarly that when he is in doubt as to whether an action is right he always is in doubt as to his own feelings. But it cannot possibly be urged, with any plausibility at all, that when a man judges an action to be right he always thinks, for instance, that it is generally approved in his society; or that when he is in doubt, he is always in doubt as to whether any man approves it. He may know quite well that somebody does approve it, and yet be in doubt whether it is right; and he may be quite certain that his society does not approve it, and yet still think that it is right. And the same will hold, whatever feeling we take instead of moral approval.

These facts, then, seem to me to prove conclusively that, when a man judges an action to be right or wrong, he is *not* always merely judging that his society has some particular feeling towards actions of that class, nor yet that *some* man has. But here again it is important to insist on the limitations of the argument; and to distinguish clearly between what it *does* prove and

what it does not. It does not, of course, prove that any class of action towards which any society has a particular feeling, may not, as a matter of fact, always be right; nor even that any action, towards which any man whatever has the feeling, may not, as a matter of fact, always be so. Anybody, while fully admitting the force of our argument, is still perfectly free to hold that these things are true, as a matter of fact; and hence that one and the same action often is both right and wrong. All that our arguments, taken together, do strictly prove, is that, when a man asserts an action to be right or wrong, he is not merely making an assertion either about his own feelings nor yet about those of the nocicty in which he lives, nor yet merely that some man or other has some feeling towards it. This, and nothing more, is what they prove. But if we once admit that this much is proved, what reason have we left for anacrting that it is true, as a matter of fact, that whatever any society or any man has a particular feeling towards, always is right? It may, of course, be true an a matter of fact; but is there any reason for supposing that it is? If the predicate which we mean by the word 'right', and which, therefore, must belong to every action which really is right, is something quite different from a mere relation to anybody's feelings, why should we suppose that such a relation does, in fact, always go along with it; and that this predicate always belongs, in addition, to every action which has the required relation to somebody's feelings? If rightmens is not the same thing as the having a relation to the feelings of any man or set of men, it would be a curious coincidence, if any such relation were invariably a sign of rightness. What we have proved is that rightness is not the same thing as any such relation ; and if that be so, then, the probability is that even

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where an action has the required relation to somebody's feelings, it will not always be right.

There are, then, conclusive reasons against the view that, when we assert an action to be right or wrong, we are merely asserting that somebody has a particular feeling towards it, in any of the forms in which it will follow from this view that one and the same action can be both right and wrong. And we can, I think, also see that one of the reasons, which seems to have had most influence in leading people to suppose that this view must be true, in some form or other, is quite without weight. The reason I mean is one drawn from certain considerations as to the origin of our moral judgements. It has been widely held that, in the history of the human race, judgements of right and wrong originated in the fact that primitive men or their non-human ancestors had certain feelings towards certain classes of actions. That is to say, it is supposed that there was a time, if we go far enough back, when our ancestors did have different feelings towards different actions, being, for instance, pleased with some and displeased with others, but when they did not, as yet, judge any actions to be right or wrong: and that it was only because they transmitted these feelings, more or less modified, to their descendants, that those descendants at some later stage, began to make judgements of right and wrong; so that, in a sense, our moral judgements were developed out of mere feelings. And I can see no objection to the supposition that this was so. But, then, it seems also to be often supposed that, if our moral judgements were developed out of feelings-if this was their origin-they must still at this moment be somehow concerned with feelings: that the developed product must resemble the germ out of which it was developed

in this particular respect. And this is an assumption for which there is, surely, no shadow of ground. It is admitted, on all hands, that the developed product does always differ, in some respects, from its origin; and the precise respects in which it differs is a matter which can only be settled by observation: we cannot lay down a universal rule that it must always resemble it in certain definite respects. Thus, even those who hold that our moral judgements are merely judgements about feelings must admit that, at some point in the history of the human race, men, or their ancestors, began not merely to have feelings but to judge that they had them: and this alone means an enormous change. If such a change as this must have occurred at some time or other, without our being able to say precisely when or why, what reason is there, why another change, which is scarcely greater, should not also have occurred, either before or after it? a change consisting in the fact that men for the first time become conscious of another predicate, which might attach to actions, beside the mere fact that certain feelings were felt towards them, and began to judge of this other predicate that it did or did not belong to certain actions? It is certain that, if men have been developed from non-human ancestors at all, there must have been many occasions on which they became possessed for the first time of some new idea. And why should not the ideas, which we convey by the words 'right' and 'wrong', be among the number, even if these ideas do not merely consist in the thought that some man has a particular feeling towards some action? There is no more reason why such an idea should not have been developed out of the mere existence of a feeling than why the judgement that we have feelings should not have been developed from the same origin. And hence

the theory that moral judgements originated in feelings does not, in fact, lend any support at all to the theory that now, as developed, they can only be judgements *about* feelings. No argument from the origin of a thing can be a safe guide as to exactly what the nature of the thing is now. That is a question which must be settled by actual analysis of the thing in its present state. And such analysis seems plainly to show that moral judgements are *not* merely judgements about feelings.

I conclude, then, that the theory that our judgements of right and wrong are merely judgements about somebody's feelings is quite untenable in any of the forms in which it will lead to the conclusion that one and the same action is often both right and wrong. But I said that this was only one out of two theories, which seem to be those which have the most influence in leading people to adopt this conclusion. And we must now briefly consider the second of these two theories.

This second theory is one which is often confused with the one just considered. It consists in asserting that when we judge an action to be right or wrong what we are asserting is merely that somebody or other thinks it to be right or wrong. That is to say, just as the last theory asserted that our moral judgements are merely judgements about somebody's feelings, this one asserts that they are merely judgements about somebody's thoughts or opinions. And they are apt to be confused with one another because a man's feelings with regard to an action are not always clearly distinguished from his opinion as to whether it is right or wrong. Thus one and the same word is often used, sometimes to express the fact that a man has a feeling towards an action, and sometimes to express the fact

THE OBJECTIVITY OF MORAL JUDGEMENTS 75 that he has an opinion about it. When, for instance, we say that a man approves an action, we may mean either that he has a feeling towards it, or that he thinks it to be right; and so too, when we say that he disapproves it, we may mean either that he has a certain feeling towards it, or that he thinks it to be wrong. But yet it is quite plain that to have a feeling towards an action, no matter what feeling we take, is a different thing from judging it to be right or wrong. Even if we were to adopt one of the views just rejected and to may that to judge an action to be right or wrong is the same thing as to judge that we have a feeling towards it, it would still follow that to make the judgement is something different from merely having the feeling; for a man may certainly have a feeling, without thinking that he has it; or think that he has it, without having it. We must, therefore, distinguish between the theory that to say that an action is right or wrong in the same thing as to say that somebody has some kind of *feeling* towards it, and the theory that it is the same thing as to say that somebody thinks it to be right or wrong.

This latter theory, however, may be held in the same three different forms, as the former; and in whichever form it is held, it will lead to the same conclusion namely, that one and the same action is very often both right and wrong—and for the same reasons. If, for instance, when I say that an action is right, all that I mean is that I *think* it to be right, it will follow, that, if I do really think it to be right, my judgement *that* I think so will be true; and since this judgement is supposed to be identical with the judgement that it is right, it will follow that the judgement that it is right is true and hence that the action really is right. And since it is even more obvious that different men's

opinions as to whether a given action is right or wrong differ both at the same time and at different times, than that their feelings towards the same action differ. it will follow that one and the same action very often is both right and wrong. And just as the conclusion which follows from this theory is the same as that which followed from the last, so also, in each of the three different forms in which it may be held, it is open to exactly the same objections. Thus, in its first form, it will involve the absurdity that no two men ever differ in opinion as to whether an action is right or wrong, and will thus contradict a plain fact. While in the other two forms, it will involve the conclusions that no man ever thinks an action to be right. unless he thinks that his society thinks it to be right, and that no man ever doubts whether an action is right, unless he doubts whether any man at all thinks it right-two conclusions which are both of them certainly untrue.

These objections are, I think, sufficient by themselves to dispose of this theory as of the last; but it is worth while to dwell on it a little longer, because it is also exposed to another objection, of quite a different order, to which the last was not exposed, and because it owes its plausibility partly, I think, to the fact that it is liable to be confused with another theory, which may be expressed in exactly the same words, and which may quite possibly be true.

The special objection to which this theory is exposed consists in the fact that it is in all cases totally impossible that, when we believe a given thing, what we believe should merely be that we (or anybody else) have the belief in question. This is impossible, because, if it were the case, we should not be believing anything at all. For let us suppose it to be the case: let us suppose

THE OBJECTIVITY OF MORAL JUDGEMENTS 77 that, when I believe that A is B, what I am believing in merely that somebody believes that A is B. What I am believing, on this supposition, is merely that somebody (either myself or somebody else) entertains the belief that A is B. But what is this belief which I am believing that somebody entertains? According to the theory it is itself, in its turn, merely the belief that somebody believes that A is B. So that what I am believing turns out to be that somebody believes that somebody believes-that A is B. But here again, we may substitute for the phrase 'that A is B', what is supposed to be identical with it-namely, that somebody believes, that A is B. And here again we may make the same substitution; and so on absolutely ad infinitum. So that what I am believing will turn out to be that nomebody believes, that somebody believes, that somebody believes, that somebody believes . . . ad infinitum. Always, when I try to state, what it is that the somebody believes, I shall find it to be again merely that somebody believes . . ., and I shall never get to anything whatever which is what is believed. But thus to believe that somebody believes, that somebody believes, that somebody believes . . . quite indefinitely, without ever coming to anything which is what is believed, is to believe nothing at all. So that, if this were the case, there could be no such belief as the belief that A is B. We must, therefore, admit that, in no case whatever, when we believe a given thing, can the given thing in question be merely *that* we ourselves (or somebody else) believe the very same given thing. And since this is true in all cases, it must be true in our apecial case. It is totally impossible, therefore, that to believe an action to be right can be the same thing as believing that we ourselves or somebody else believe It to be right.

But the fact that this view is untenable is, I think, liable to be obscured by the fact that we often express, in the same words, another view, quite different from this, which may quite well be true. When a man asserts that an action is right or wrong, it may quite well be true, in a sense, that all that he is expressing by this assertion is the fact that he thinks it to be right or wrong. The truth is that there is an important distinction, which is not always observed, between what a man means by a given assertion and what he expresses by it. Whenever we make any assertion whatever (unless we do not mean what we say) we are always expressing one or other of two things-namely, either that we think the thing in question to be so or that we know it to be so. If, for instance, I say 'A is B', and mean what I say, what I mean is always merely that A is B; but those words of mine will always also express either the fact that I think that A is B, or the fact that I know it to be so; and even where I do not mean what I say, my words may be said to imply either that I think that A is B or that I know it, since they will commonly lead people to suppose that one or other of these two things is the case. Whenever, therefore, a man asserts that an action is right or wrong, what he expresses or implies by these words will be either that he thinks it to be so or that he knows it to be so, although neither of these two things can possibly constitute the whole of what he means to assert. And it is quite possible to hold that, as between these two alternatives which he expresses or implies, it is always the first only, and never the second, which is expressed or implied. That is to say, it may be held, that we always only believe or think that an action is right or wrong, and never really know which it is; that, when, therefore, we assert one to be so, we are always merely

THE OBJECTIVITY OF MORAL JUDGEMENTS 79 expressing an opinion or belief, never expressing knowledge.

This is a view which is quite tenable, and for which there is a great deal to be said; and it is, I think, certainly liable to be confused with that other, quite untenable, view, that, when a man asserts an action to be right or wrong, all that he means to assert is that he thinks it to be so. The two are, in fact, apt to be expressed in exactly the same language. If a man asserts 'Such and such an action was wrong', he is liable to be met by the rejoinder, 'What you really mean in that you think it was wrong'; and the person who makes this rejoinder will generally only mean by it, that the man does not know the action to be wrong, but only believes that it is so: that he is merely expressing his opinion, and has no absolute knowledge on the point. In other words, a man is often loosely said to mean by an assertion what, in fact, he is only expressing by it; and for this and other reasons the two views we are considering are liable to be confused with one another.

But obviously there is an immense difference between the two. If we only hold the tenable view that no man ever *knows* an action to be right or wrong, but can only *think* it to be so, then, so far from implying the untenable view that to assert an action to be right or wrong is *the same thing* as to assert that we think it to be so, we imply the direct opposite of this. For nobody would maintain that I cannot know *that I think* an action to be right or wrong; and if, therefore, I cannot know that it *is* right or wrong, it follows that there is an immense difference between the assertion that it *is* right or wrong, and the assertion that *I think* it to be so: the former is an assertion, which, according to this view, I can *never* know to be true,

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whereas the latter is an assertion which I obviously can know to be true. The tenable view, therefore, that we can never know whether an action is right or wrong, does not in the least support the untenable view that for an action to be right or wrong is the same thing as for it to be thought to be so: on the contrary, it is quite inconsistent with it, since it is obvious that we can know that certain actions are thought to be right and that others are thought to be wrong. But yet, I think, it is not uncommon to find the two views combined, and to find one and the same person holding, at the same time, both that we never know whether an action is right or wrong, and also that to say that an action is right or wrong is the same thing as to say that it is thought to be so. The two views ought obviously to be clearly distinguished; and, if they are so distinguished, it becomes, I think, guite plain that the latter must be rejected, if only because, if it were true, the former could not possibly be so.

We have, then, considered in this chapter two different views, namely (1) the view that to say that an action is right or wrong is the same thing as to say that somebody has some feeling (or absence of feeling) towards it, and (2) the view that to say that an action is right or wrong is the same thing as to say that somebody thinks it to be so. Both these views, when held in certain forms, imply that one and the same action very often is both right and wrong, owing to the fact that different men, and different societies, often do have different and opposite feelings towards, and different and opposite opinions about, the same action. The fact that they imply this is, in itself, an argument against these views; since it seems evident that one and the same action cannot be both right and wrong. But some people may not think that this is evident;

and therefore independent objections have been urged against them, which do, I think, show them to be untenable. In the case of the first view, such arguments were only brought against those forms of the view, which do imply that one and the same action is often both right and wrong. The same view may be held in other forms, which do not imply this consequence, and which will therefore be dealt with in the next chapter. But in the case of the second view a general argument was also used, which applies to absolutely all forms in which it may be held.

Even apart from the fact that they lead to the conclusion that one and the same action is often both right and wrong, it is, I think, very important that we abould realize, to begin with, that these views are false; because, if they were true, it would follow that we must take an entirely different view as to the whole nature of Ethics, so far as it is concerned with right and wrong, from what has commonly been taken by a majority of writers. If these views were true, the whole husiness of Ethics, in this department, would merely connist in discovering what feelings and opinions men have actually had about different actions, and why they have had them. A good many writers seem actually to have treated the subject as if this were all that it had to investigate. And of course questions of this sort are not without interest, and are subjects of legitimate curiosity. But such questions only form one special branch of Psychology or Anthropology; and most writtens have certainly proceeded on the assumption that the special business of Ethics, and the questions which it has to try to answer, are something quite different from this. They have assumed that the question whether an action is right cannot be completely settled by showing that any man or set of men

have certain feelings or opinions about it. They would admit that the feelings and opinions of men may, in various ways, have a bearing on the question; but the mere fact that a given man or set of men has a given feeling or opinion can, they would say, never be sufficient, by itself, to show that an action is right or wrong.

But the views, which have been considered in this chapter, imply the direct contrary of this: they imply that, when once we have discovered, what men's feelings or opinions actually are, the whole question is finally settled; that there is, in fact, no further question to discuss. I have tried to show that these views are untenable, and I shall, in future, proceed upon the assumption that they are so; as also I shall proceed on the assumption that one and the same action cannot be both right and wrong. And the very fact that we can proceed upon these assumptions is an indirect argument in favour of their correctness. For if, whenever we assert an action to be right or wrong, we were merely making an assertion about some man's feelings or opinions, it would be incredible we should be so mistaken as to our own meaning, as to think that a question of right or wrong cannot be absolutely settled by showing what men feel and think, and to think that an action *cannot* be both right and wrong. It will be seen that, on these assumptions, we can raise many questions about right and wrong, which seem obviously not to be absurd; and which yet would be quite absurd-would be questions about which we could not hesitate for a moment---if assertions about right and wrong were merely assertions about men's feelings and opinions, or if the same action could be both right and wrong.

# CHAFTER IV THE OBJECTIVITY OF MORAL JUDGEMENTS (concluded)

It was stated, at the beginning of the last chapter, that the ethical theory we are considering-the theory stated in the first two chapters does not maintain with regard to any class of voluntary actions, that, if an attion of the class in question is once right, any other action of the same class must always be right. And this is true, in the sense in which the statement would. I think, he naturally understood. But it is now important to emphasize that, in a certain sense, the statement is untrue. Our theory does assert that, if any voluntary action is once right, then any other voluntary action which resembled it in one particular respect (or rather in a combination of two respects) must always also be right; and since, if we take the word class in the widest possible sense, any set of actions which resemble one another in any respect whatever may be said to form a class, it follows that, in this wide sense, our theory does maintain that there are many classes of action, such that, if an action belonging to one of them is once right, any action belonging to the same class would always be right. ,

Exactly what our theory does assert under this head cannot, I think, be stated accurately except in rather a complicated way; but it is important to state it as preciacly as possible. The precise point is this. This theory asserted, as we saw, that the question whether a voluntary action is right or wrong always depends upon what its *total effects* are, *as compared with* the total effects of all the alternative actions, which we