Moral Conflicts

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By 'Moral Conflicts' (the title of this lecture) I mean situations in which we seem to have conflicting duties. Mr. Anthony Kenny once told me about an inscription on a 'wayside pulpit' outside a church in Yorkshire which said 'If you have conflicting duties, one of them isn't your duty.' But many moral philosophers have not been able to treat the matter so lightly. Indeed, to many these conflicts have seemed to be the stuff of tragedy and of anguish. Philosophers who have made much of such situations are (besides the Existentialists)[1] Bernard Williams,[2] Thomas Nagel, [3] and Sir Isaiah Berlin.[4]

It can hardly be denied that it is sometimes the case that a person thinks that he ought to do *A,* and also thinks that he ought to do *B,* but cannot do both. For example, he may have made a promise, and circumstances may have intervened, by no fault of his, such that he has an urgent duty to perform which precludes his fulfilling the promise. To start with the kind of trivial example which used to be favoured by intuitionist philosophers: I have promised to take my children for a picnic on the river at Oxford, and then a lifelong friend turns up from Australia and is in Oxford for the afternoon and wants to be shown round the colleges with his wife. Clearly I ought to show him the colleges, and clearly I ought to keep my promise to my children. Not only do I think these things, but in some sense I am clearly right.

If I am in this dilemma, I may decide, on reflexion, and in spite of thinking, and *going on* thinking, that I ought to keep my promise to my children, that what I ought, all things considered,

[1] E.g., J.-P. Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme* (1946), pp. 37 ff.
[2] 'Ethical Consistency', *Proc. of Aristotelian Society,* Supp. vol. 39 (1965).
[3] 'War and Massacre', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1772).
[4] In B. Magee, ed., *Men of Ideas* (London: B.B.C. Publications, 1978), p. 17.

to do is to take my friend round the colleges; and this involves a decision that *in some sense* I ought not to take my children for their picnic, because it would preclude my doing what, all things considered, I ought to do, namely take my friend round the colleges. It will be helpful at this point to take a look at the phenomena of moral thinking and ask why philosophers, and indeed most of us, are so certain that we *ought* to do two things of which we *cannot* do both. One clue is to be found in an argument sometimes advanced. It is said that, whichever of the things we do, we shall, if we are morally upright people, experience *remorse,* and that this is inseparable from thinking that we ought not to have done what we did. If, it is said, we just stopped having a duty to do one of the things because of the duty to do the other (as on the wayside pulpit) whence comes the remorse ?

This might be questioned. It might be said that though *regret* is in place (for my children, after all, have had to miss their picnic, and that is a pity), remorse is not; just because it implies the thought that I ought not to have done what I did (a thought which I do not have), it is irrational to feel remorse. On this account, the philosophers in question have just confused remorse with regret. Or they might be said to have confused either of these things with a third thing, which we might call *compunction;* this afflicts us during or before the doing of an act, unlike remorse, which only occurs afterwards. Compunction, like remorse, *can* be irrational; it would be a very hardened intuitionist who maintained that we never have these intimations of immorality from early childhood on occasions on which it is wholly absurd to have them. So perhaps, on the occasion I have been describing, regret would be in place (just as it would be if the picnic or the tour of the colleges had to be cancelled because of the weather), but remorse and compunction are not.

W e may, however, feel a lingering unease at this reply. Would not the man who could break his promise to his children without

a twinge be, not a better, because more rational, person, but a morally worse one than most of us who are afflicted in this way? It is time we came to more serious examples. In the movie *The Cruel Sea*[5] the commander of the corvette is faced with a situation in which if he does not drop depth charges the enemy submarine will get away to sink more ships and kill more people; but if he does drop them he will kill the survivors in the water. In fact he drops them, and is depicted in the movie as suffering anguish of mind. And we should think worse of him if he did not. Although we might feel tempted to say that this anguish is just extreme regret and not remorse, because he has decided that he ought to drop the depth charges, and remorse implies thinking that he ought not to have dropped them, which, *ex hypothesi,* he does not think —all the same we may also hold that there is some residuum of *moral* sentiment in his state of mind which is not mere non-moral regret. This, at any rate, is the source of the strength of the intuitionist view that I am discussing.

Reverting to the case of promising: let us suppose that I have been well brought up; I shall then think, let us say, that one ought never to break promises. And suppose that I get into a situation in which I think that, in the circumstances, I ought to break a promise. I cannot then just abolish my past good upbringing and its effects; nor should I wish to. If I have been well brought up, I shall, when I break the promise, experience this feeling of compunction (no doubt 'remorse' would be too strong a word in this case) which could certainly be described, *in a sense,* as 'thinking that I ought not to be doing what I am doing, namely breaking a promise'. This is even clearer in the case of lying. Suppose that I have been brought up to think that one ought not to tell lies, as most of us have been. And suppose that I get into a situation in which I decide that I ought, in the circumstances, to tell a lie. It

[5] Adapted from the novel of the same name by Nicholas Monsarrat (London: Cassell, 1951).

does not follow in the least that I shall be able to tell the lie without compunction. That is how lie-detectors work (on people who have been to this minimal extent well brought up). Even if I do not blush, something happens to the electrical properties of my skin. And for my part, I am very glad that this happens to my skin; for, if it did not, I should be a morally worse educated man.

I am now going to say something which may be found reminiscent of Plato and Aristotle.[6] When we bring up our children, one of the things we are trying to do is to cause them to have reactions of this kind. It is not by any means the whole of moral education, although some people speak as if it were; indeed, since one can do this sort of thing even to a dog, it may not be part of a typically human moral education at all, or at any rate not the distinctive part. People who think that it is the whole of moral education, and call it 'teaching children the difference between right and wrong' do not have my support, though they are very common (which explains why intuitionism is such a popular view in moral philosophy). But there is no doubt that most of us have, during our upbringing, acquired these sentiments, and not much doubt that this is, on the whole, a good thing, for reasons which I shall be discussing later.

Suppose that I am coming back through the Berlin Wall, and Fräulein Schmidt, whose father has already escaped from Eastern Germany, has convinced me that the police there will put the screws on her if they catch her, to find out what her father and his friends have been up to; and suppose that I have therefore concealed her in my baggage when I am going back to West Berlin. Still, though I am absolutely convinced that I am not doing what I ought not (indeed I am being quite heroic), nevertheless, when I am asked by the guards what I have got in the trunk, it is not merely fear of the consequences of being apprehended that I feel; I also feel *guilty* when I tell the lie that I am quite sure I ought to

[6] *Republic, passim; Nicornachean Ethics, passim,* esp. 1104 b 12.

tell. And if I did not feel that way, I should be a morally worse man. So, then, if I feel guilty, it looks as if there is a sense of 'ought' in which I do think that I ought not to be telling the lie.

Nobody who actually uses moral language in his practical life will be content with a mere dismissal of the paradox that we can feel guilty for doing what we think we ought to do. It will not do to say 'There just are situations in which, whatever you do, you will be doing what you ought not, i.e., doing wrong.' There are, it is true, some people who like there to be what they call 'tragic situations'; the world would be less enjoyable without them, for the rest of us; we could have much less fun writing and reading novels and watching movies, in which such situations are a much sought-after ingredient. The trouble is that, if one is sufficient of an ethical descriptivist to make the view that there are such situations tenable, they stop being tragic. If, that is to say, it just is the case that both the acts open to a person have the moral property of wrongness, one of their many descriptive properties, why should he bother about that? What makes the situation tragic is that he is using moral thinking to help him decide what he ought to do; and when he does this with no more enlightenment than that provided by philosophers such as Professor Anscombe, who believe in very simple and utterly inviolable principles, it leads to an impasse. He is like a rat in an insoluble maze, and that is tragic. But the very tragedy of it should make him reject the philosophical view which puts him there, if he can find some better explanation of his predicament. In such a conflict between intuitions, it is time to call in reason.

I am not yet taking sides on the question of how *simple* moral principles have to be; as we shall see, it depends on the purposes for which the principles are to be used, and different sorts of principles are appropriate for different purposes. Let us look at some of these purposes. One very important one is in *learning.* I have

said a little about this in my first book, *The Language of Morals*.[7] If principles reach more than a certain degree of complexity, it will be impossible to formulate them verbally in sentences of manageable length; but it might still be possible, even after that, to learn them —i.e., to come to know them in some more Rylean sense which does not involve being able to recite them.[8] Assuredly there are many things we know without being able to say in words what we know. All the same, there is a degree of complexity, higher than this, beyond which we are unable to learn principles even in this other sense, which does not require being able to recite them. So principles which are to be learnt for use on subsequent occasions have to be of a certain degree of simplicity, although the degree has been exaggerated by some people.

In addition to this psychological reason for a limit to the complexity of principles, there is also a practical reason related to the circumstances of their use. Situations in which we find ourselves are not going to be minutely similar to one another. A principle which is to be useful as a practical guide will have to be unspecific enough to cover a variety of situations all of which have certain salient features in common. What is wrong about situational ethics and certain extreme forms of existentialism (we shall see in a moment what is right about them) is that they make impossible what is in fact an indispensable help in coping with the world (whether we are speaking of moral decisions or prudential or technical ones, which in this are similar), namely the formation in ourselves of relatively simple reaction-patterns (whose expression in words, if they had one, would be relatively simple prescriptive principles) which prepare us to meet new contingencies resembling in their important features contingencies in which we have found ourselves in the past. If it were not possible to form such dispositions, any kind of learning of behaviour would be

[7] Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952, pp. 60–68.

[8] See G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1949), pp. *27* ff.

ruled out, and we should have to meet each new situation entirely unprepared. Let anybody who is tempted by doctrines of this kind think what it would be like to drive a car without having *learnt* how to drive a car, or having totally forgotten everything that one had learnt; to drive it, that is, deciding *ab initio* at each moment what to do with the steering wheel, brake, and other controls.

There is, then, both a practical and a psychological necessity to have relatively simple principles of action if we are to learn to behave either morally or skilfully or with prudence. The thinkers I have been speaking of have rejected this obvious truth because they have grasped another obvious truth which they think to be incompatible with it, though it will seem to be so only to someone who has failed to make the distinction between the two levels of moral thinking which I shall be postulating. The situations in which we find ourselves are like one another, sometimes, in some important respects, but not like one another in all respects; and the differences may be important too. 'No two situations and no two people are ever exactly like each other': this you will recognize as one of the battle cries of the school of thought that I am speaking of.

It follows from this that, although the relatively simple principles that are used at the intuitive level are necessary for human moral thinking, they are not sufficient. Since any new situation will be unlike any previous situation in *some* respects, the question immediately arises whether the differences are relevant to its appraisal, moral or other. If they are relevant, the principles which we have learnt in dealing with past situations may not be appropriate to the new one. So the further question arises of how we are to decide whether they are appropriate. The question obtrudes itself most in cases where there is a conflict between the principles which we have learnt — i.e., where, as things contingently are, we cannot obey them both. But if it arises in those cases, it can arise in any case, and it is mere intellectual sloth to pretend otherwise.

The most fundamental objection to the one-level account of moral thinking called intuitionism is that it yields no way of answering such a question. The intuitive level of moral thinking certainly exists and is (humanly speaking) an essential part of the whole structure; but however well equipped we are with these relatively simple, *prima facie,* intuitive principles or dispositions, we are bound to find ourselves in situations in which they conflict and in which, therefore, some other, non-intuitive, kind of thinking is called for, to resolve the conflict. The intuitions which give rise to the conflict are the product of our upbringing and past experience of decision-making. They are not self-justifying; we can always ask whether the upbringing was the best we could have, or whether the past decisions were the right ones, or, even if so, whether the principles then formed should be applied to a new situation, or, if they cannot all be applied, *which* should be applied. To use intuition itself to answer such questions is a viciously circular procedure; if the dispositions formed by our upbringing are called in question, we cannot appeal to them to settle the question.

What *will* settle the question is a type of thinking which makes no appeal to intuitions other than linguistic. This is what I shall call *critical* thinking. It consists in making a choice under the constraints imposed by the logical properties of the moral concepts. This choice is what I called in my book *The Language of Morals* a decision of principle;[9] but the principles involved here are of a different kind from the *prima facie* principles considered so far. Since some people have been misled by the term 'principle' I have asked myself whether I should avoid it altogether; but I have in the end retained it in order to mark an important logical similarity between the two kinds of principles. Both are universal prescriptions; the difference lies in the generality–specificity dimen-

[9] Chapter 4. The 'clairvoyant' there described has only some of the powers of my 'archangel' (below),

sion. To explain this: a *prima facie* principle has, for reasons I have just given, in order to fulfil its function, to be relatively simple and general (i.e., unspecific). But a principle of the kind used in critical moral thinking (let us call it a critical moral principle; it is the same as I have called elsewhere a level-2 principle)[10] can be of unlimited specificity.

I have no time to explain at length the difference between universality and generality;[11] briefly, generality is the opposite of specificity, whereas universality, in the sense in which I am using the word, is compatible with specificity, and means merely the logical property of being governed by a universal quantifier and not containing singular terms (i.e., individual constants). Critical principles and *prima facie* principles, then, are both universal prescriptions; but whereas the former can be, and for their purpose have to be, highly specific, the latter can be, and for *their* purpose have to be, relatively general.

Let us, after these preliminaries, return to our conflict-situation, in which two *prima facie* principles require two incompatible actions. This will be because one of the principles picks out certain features of the situation as relevant (e.g., that a promise has been made), and the other picks out certain others (e.g., that the failure to show my friend the colleges would bitterly disappoint him). The problem is to determine which of these principles should be applied to yield a prescription for this particular situation. We could in theory, though not in practice, give a complete description of the situation in universal terms, including descriptions of the alternative actions that are open and their respective

[10] 'Principles', *Proc. of Aristotelian Society* 73 (1972-73); 'Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism', in H. D. Lewis, ed., *Contemporary British Philosophy* 4 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976). The term 'critical' is appropriate, not merely because I have called the level of thinking by the same name, but for two etymological reasons: these principles are used in *criticising prima facie* principles, and they are used to discriminate between cases which the *prima facie* principles do not distinguish.

[11] See 'Principles'.

consequences. All individual references would, however, be omitted, so that the description would apply equally to any precisely similar situation involving precisely similar persons, places, actions, consequences.

The universalizability of moral judgments, which is one of their best established logical properties, requires that if we make any moral judgment about this situation, we must be prepared to make it about any of the other precisely similar situations. Note that these do not have to be *actual* situations; they can be precisely similar logically possible hypothetical situations.[12] Therefore the battle cry I referred to earlier 'No two situations and no two people are ever exactly like each other', is not relevant in this part of moral thinking, and the thought that it is relevant is due only to confusion with other parts. What we are doing now is trying to find a moral judgment to make about this conflict-situation which can also be made about all the other similar situations. Since these other similar situations will include situations in which we occupy, respectively, the positions of all the other parties in the actual situation, no judgment will be acceptable to us which does not do the best, all in all, for all the parties. Thus the logical apparatus of universal prescriptivism, if we understand what we are saying when we make moral judgments, will lead to our making judgments which are the same as an act-utilitarian would make. We see here how the utilitarians and Kant get synthesized. I have explained in detail elsewhere how it comes about.[13]

I emphasize that this is what happens in *critical* moral thinking. It could not happen in intuitive moral thinking, which has a quite different role. Intuitive moral thinking is for use in practice, often in situations of stress, in which there is no time for critical thinking and in which, being human, we may easily 'cook'

[12] See my 'Relevance', in A. Goldman and J. Kim, eds., *Values and Morals* (Dordrecht and Boston: Reidel, 1978); also my *Freedom and Reason (FR)*, index, s.v. 'Hypothetical cases' (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).

[13] See 'Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism'.

our critical thinking to suit our own interest. For example, it is only too easy to persuade ourselves that the act of telling a lie to get ourselves out of a hole does a great deal of good to ourselves at relatively small cost to anybody else, whereas in fact, if we viewed the situation impartially, the indirect costs are much greater than the total gains. It is partly to avoid such cooking that we have intuitions or dispositions firmly built into our characters and motivations.

The term 'rules of thumb' is sometimes used in this connexion, but should be avoided as thoroughly misleading. Some philosophers use it in a quite different way from engineers, gunners, navigators, and the like, whose expression it really is, and in whose use a rule of thumb is a mere time- and thought-saving device, the breach of which, unlike the breach of the principles we are discussing, excites no compunction.

Much of the controversy about act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism has been conducted in terms which ignore the difference between the critical and intuitive levels of moral thinking. Once the levels are distinguished, it becomes easy to see how the conformity to received opinion which rule-utilitarianism is designed to provide is provided by the *prima facie* principles used at the intuitive level; but secondly, how the critical moral thinking which selects these principles and adjudicates between them in cases of conflict, is act-utilitarian in character, but also (for reasons which I have explained elsewhere)[14] rule-utilitarian in that version of the rule-utilitarian doctrine which allows its rules to be of unlimited specificity, and which therefore (as has been pointed out by David Lyons[15] and myself)[16] is in effect not distinguishable from act-utilitarianism. The two kinds of utilitarianism, therefore, can coexist at their respective levels: act-utilitarianism, or

[14] 'Principles'.

[15] *Forms and Limits of Utilitarinnism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp, 121 ff.

[16] *FR*, pp. 130–36.

specific rule-utilitarianism, at the critical level and general rule-utilitarianism at the intuitive.

What, then, is the relation between the two levels? And how do we know when to engage in one kind of moral thinking, and when in the other? Let us be clear, first of all, that critical moral thinking and intuitive moral thinking are not *rival* procedures, as much of the dispute between utilitarians and intuitionists seems to presuppose. They are elements in a common structure, each with its part to play. But how are they related?

Let us consider two extreme cases of people, or beings, who would use *only* critical moral thinking, or *only* intuitive moral thinking. First, consider a being with superhuman powers of thought, superhuman knowledge, and no human weaknesses. I am going to call him the *archangel.* The archangel will need to use only critical thinking. When presented with a novel situation, he will be able at once to scan all its properties, including the consequences of alternative actions, and frame a universal prescription (perhaps a highly specific one) which he can accept for action in that situation, no matter what role he himself is to occupy in it. Such an archangel does not need intuitive thinking; everything is done by reason in a moment of time. Nor, therefore, would he need the sound general principles, the good dispositions, the intuitions which guide the rest of us.

On the other hand, consider a person who is more than usually stupid. Not only does he, like most of us, have to rely on intuitions and sound *prima facie* principles and good dispositions in most of the common contingencies that he meets; he is totally incapable of critical thinking even when there is leisure for it. Such a person, if he is to have the *prima facie* principles he needs, will have to get them from other people by education or imitation. I felt tempted to call this person the intuitionist; but since that might be thought offensive (intuitionist philosophers are not stupid; some of them are quite clever; they just talk as if the

human race were more stupid than it is), I am going to call him the *prole* (after George Orwell in *1984).* Although the archangel and the prole are exaggerated versions of the top and bottom classes in Plato's *Republic,*[17] it is far from my intention to divide up the human race into archangels and proles; we all share the characteristics of both to limited and varying degrees and at different times.

Our question is, then, When ought we to think like archangels and when ought we to think like proles? Once we have posed the question in this way, the answer is obvious: it depends on how much each one of us, on some particular occasion or in general, resembles one or the other of these two characters. There is no philosophical answer to the question; it depends on what powers of thought and character each one of us, for the time being, thinks he possesses. We have to know ourselves in order to tell how much we can trust ourselves to play the archangel without ending up in the wrong Miltonic camp and becoming *fallen* archangels.

One thing, however, is certain; that we cannot all of us, all the time, behave like proles (as the intuitionists would have us do) if there is to be a system of *prima facie* principles at all. For the selection of *prima facie* principles, critical thinking is necessary. If we do not think men can do it, we shall have to invoke a Butlerian God to do it for us, and reveal the results through our consciences.

I have, then, sidestepped the question of when we should engage in these two kinds of thinking; it is not a philosophical question. The other question, however, *is* a philosophical question; for unless we can say how the two kinds of thinking are related to each other, we shall not have given a complete account of the structure of moral thinking.

[17] It would have been interesting, but beyond the scope of the lecture, to examine the resemblances and differences between my *two* characters and Plato's *three* classes.

Aristotle, in a famous metaphor, says that the relation of thc intellect to the character (which is what we are talking about) has to be a paternal one: in so far as a man's motives and dispositions are rational, it is because they 'listen to reason as to a father.'[18] I am not now going to get involved in Aristotelian exegesis; nor shall I raise the issue of the relation between our moral intuitions and our ingrained moral character and dispositions. Some may wish to maintain that these things are quite dis tinct. I should doubt this; but all I wish to do now is to borrow Aristotle's metaphor. In so far as intuitive moral thinking cannot be self-supporting, whereas critical moral thinking can be and is, the latter is epistemologically prior. *If* we were archangels, we could by critical thinking alone decide what we ought to do on each occasion; on the other hand, if we were proles, we could not do this, at least not beyond the possibility of question, by intuitive thinking. What is the right thing for us to do either in general or on a particular occasion is what the archangel would pronounce if he addressed himself to the question. Intuitive thinking has the function of yielding a working approximation to this for those of us who cannot think like archangels on a particular occasion.

We are, however, as I have said elsewhere, concerned not merely with what is right but with what is rational (i.e., to put it crudely and inaccurately, what is most likely to be right).[19] And we are also concerned with the moral appraisal of people as well as acts. Many confusions arise through our failing to distinguish between these different kinds of appraisal. If we wish to ensure the greatest possible conformity to what an archangel would choose, we have to try to implant in ourselves and in others whom we influence a set of dispositions, motivations, intuitions, *prima facie* principles (call them what you will) which will have this

[18] *Nicornachean Ethics* 1103 a 3.

[19] See 'Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism', p. 125. On the inaccuracy, see J. J. C Smart in Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cam bridge University Press, 1973), p. 47.

effect. We are more likely to succeed in this way than by aiming to think like archangels on occasions when we have neither the time nor the capacity for it. The *prima facie* principles themselves, however, have to be selected by critical thinking; if not by our own critical thinking, by that of people whom we trust to be able to do it.

Let us suppose that we are thus criticizing a proposed *prima facie* principle. What, as legislating members of this kingdom of ends, do we actually think about? The principle is for use in our actual world. One thing, therefore, that we do *not* do is to call to mind all the improbable or unusual cases that novelists, or philosophers with axes to grind, have dreamt up, and ask whether in *those* cases the outcome of inculcating the principle would be for the best. To take an analogous example from prudential thinking instead of moral: suppose that we are wondering whether to adopt a principle always to wear our seat belts when driving. Statistics are in this case available. Consider someone who alleges, perhaps truly, that in *some* collisions the risk of injury or death is increased by wearing belts (for instance, when an unconscious driver would otherwise have been thrown clear of a vehicle which caught fire). There are people who fix their attention on such cases and use them as a reason for rejecting the rule to wear seat belts; and many philosophers argue similarly in ethics, using the mere possibility or even mere conceivability of some unusual case, in which a principle would enjoin an obviously unacceptable action, as an argument for rejecting the principle. The method is unsound. If, say, in 95 percent of severe collisions the risk of injury is reduced by wearing seat belts, and in 5 percent it is increased, it will be rational to wear them if we want to escape injury.

To generalize: if we are criticizing *prima facie* principles, we have to look at the consequences of inculcating them in ourselves and others, and, in examining these consequences, we have to

balance the size of the good or bad effects in cases which we consider against the probability or improbability of such cases occurring in our actual experience. I think it is the case that popular morality has actually been caused to deteriorate by failure to do this. It is very easy for a novelist (D. H. Lawrence, for example) to depict with great verisimilitude, as if they were everyday occurrences, cases in which the acceptance by society of the traditional principles of, say, fidelity in marriage leads to unhappy results. The public is thus persuaded that the principles ought to be rejected. But in order for such a rejection to be rational, it would have to be the case, not merely that situations *can* occur or be conceived in which the results of the acceptance of the principle are not for the best, but that these situations are common enough to outweigh those others in which they are for the best. It is of course a matter for dispute what principle about fidelity in marriage would, on a more rational calculation, be the one to adopt; I have my opinion on that matter, but I shall not either declare or defend it.

A similar, or complementary, mistake is often made by opponents of utilitarianism when they produce unusual examples (such as the sheriff who knows — do not ask me how — that the innocence of the man whom he optimifically hangs will never be exposed). The purpose of the examples is to convince us that utilitarianism, when applied in these unusual situations, yields precepts which are at variance with our common intuitions. But this should not be surprising. Our common intuitions are sound ones just because they yield acceptable precepts in common cases. For this reason, it is highly desirable that we should all have these intuitions and that our consciences should give us a bad time when we go against them. Therefore all well brought up people can be got to gang up against the utilitarians (if they can be somehow inhibited from any deep philosophical reflexion) by citing some *uncommon* case, which is undoubtedly subsumable under

the *prima facie* principle which we have all absorbed, and in which therefore we shall accept the utilitarian precept only with the greatest repugnance.

These anti-utilitarians sometimes, indeed, overreach themselves. Professor Bernard Williams, in his elaboration of a well-known example (the Pedro case in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*),[20] thinks he can score against the utilitarians by producing a case in which we all have qualms about adopting the utilitarian solution. But of course we all have qualms; we have rightly been brought up to condemn the killing of innocent people, and good utilitarian reasons could be given to justify such an upbringing. But when we come to consider what actually ought to be done in this bizarre situation, even Williams seems at least to contemplate the possibility of its being right to shoot the innocent man to save the nineteen other innocent men. All he has shown is that we shall reach this conclusion with the greatest repugnance, if we are 'decent' people; but there is nothing to stop the utilitarian agreeing with this.

I have now said all I have time for about the relation between the two kinds of moral thinking. To summarize: critical thinking aims to select the best set of *prima facie* principles for use in intuitive thinking; the best set will be that whose acceptance yields actions most approximating to those which would be done if we were able to use critical thinking all the time. This answer could be given in terms of acceptance-utility, if one is a utilitarian; if one is not a utilitarian but a Kantian, one can say in effect the same thing by advocating the adoption of a set of maxims for general use whose acceptance yields actions most approximating to those which would be done if the categorical imperative were applied direct on each occasion by an archangel. Thus a clear-headed Kantian and a clear-headed utilitarian would find them-

[20] Pp. 98 f.; for Williams' own verdict, see p. 117.

selves in agreement, once they distinguished between the two levels of thinking.

I said that this distinction helps to dispose of all manner of problems; and I shall spend the rest of the lecture doing so very summarily. The key to all the problems lies in seeing what is right and what is wrong about intuitionism and, in general, descriptivism. Intuitionism has been called the moral philosophy of the plain man. The plain man is not, in my sense, a prole; but he has some prolish attributes, and on these the intuitionists play. It is true that, most of the time, the *prima facie* principles of accepted morality do well enough for the plain man. He has been brought up to observe them as second nature; he *knows,* as he would say, the difference between right and wrong. In the terms I used in *The Language of Morals,*[21] the descriptive meaning of the moral words is, for the plain man, very firmly attached to them indeed. It would be going too far to say that the plain man uses these words as if they were nothing but descriptive words (i.e., as if their descriptive meaning were all the meaning that they had); for if he did this (i.e., if he forgot about their prescriptive or evaluative meaning) he would rapidly degenerate into a 'So what?' moralist (that is to say, into someone who can say without a qualm 'Yes, I ought; so what?').[22] Moral judgments would stop guiding his actions. But all the same it may be their firmly attached descriptive meaning that is most obvious to him: the meaning they would have if they *were* simply descriptive and if the accepted *prima facie* principles were true by definition.

Consider, from this point of view, the problems of weakness of will and of conflict of duties. Both of these problems arise because the plain man is firmly convinced that he ought to do certain things; and he is convinced of this because his intuitions,

21 Pp. 118–25; see also *FR,* chapter 2.

22 See my *Essays on Philosophical Method* (London: Macmillan, 1971), pp, 112–13.

embodied in *prima facie* principles, assure him that this is so. So it is very easy for a philosopher to set up cases which will convince the plain man that he ought to do each of two incompatible things, or that he knows he ought to do something which he has no intention of doing. The first of these cases is that of conflict of duties which I have been discussing in this lecture. The second is *one* of the varieties of case loosely included under the term 'weakness of will', which I have discussed at length in my book *Freedom and Reason.*[23] I have time now only for a few more comments.

Because we are human beings and not angels we have adopted what I called the intuitive level of moral thinking with its *prima facie* principles, backed up by powerful moral feelings, attached to rather general characteristics of actions and situations. In our predicament this is not vicious; we need this device, as I have amply explained. The *prima facie* principles are general in two connected senses; they are rather simple and unspecific, and they admit of exceptions, in that it is possible to go on holding them while allowing that in particular cases one may break them. In other words, they are overridable.[24] Again, though in the sense in which I have been using the term they are universal (they contain no individual references and start with a universal quantifier), in another sense they are not fully universal: they are not universally binding; one may make exceptions to them. It would be impossible for *prima facie* principles to fulfil their practical function unless they had these features, which may from the theoretical point of view seem faults. In order to be of use in moral education and character formation, they have to be to a certain degree simple and general; but if they are simple and general we shall encounter cases (the world being so various) in

[23] Chapter 5.

[24] For the term see *FR,* pp. 168 f. The division of moral thinking into two levels requires a qualification to the view that moral judgments are not overridable; this applies only to *critical* moral principles and judgments.

which to obey them, even if two of them do not actually conflict, would run counter to the prescriptions of an angelic moral thinking.

This amply explains why *prima facie* principles have to be overridable — why, that is to say, it is possible to go on holding them even when one does not obey them in a particular case. This overridability does not mean that they are not prescriptive; *if* applied, they would require a certain action, but we just do not apply them in a certain case. Moreover, although I have so far considered cases in which one such *prima facie* principle is overridden in favour of another, it is likely that a principle which has this feature of overridability will also be open to being overridden by other, non-moral, prescriptions, as when we take, however reprehensibly, what has been called (though I do not much like the expression) a 'moral holiday'. That is why I said that the whole problem becomes clearer when one sees the kind of conflict which we call weakness of will as just one example of conflicts between prescriptions. What happens when I decide that I ought to break a promise in order not to disappoint my Australian friend of his tour of Oxford has quite close affinities with what happens when I decide to break a promise in order not to disappoint my own appetites.

I hope I have succeeded in showing how the split-level structure of moral thinking which I am advocating enables us to give an account of some cases of moral conflict which have been raised against prescriptivism by its opponents, without abandoning anything that is essential to the prescriptivism. For the theory, in origin and essence, was about critical moral thinking, which, as I said, is done in its purest form only by archangels, but to which even human beings have to aspire if they are to get for themselves the *prima facie* principles which are their staple for most of the time, The critical principles which are used in the course of critical moral thinking are both prescriptive and overriding, and can be both, because they can also be highly specific and therefore

can accommodate themselves to any particular case without being overridden. But because of this specificity they cannot perform the function which *prima facie* principles perform in human thinking; for that, generality is required, which in its turn brings the requirement of overridability, though prescriptivity remains. And this, further, while it makes possible the solution of moral conflicts, also makes possible moral holidays. Even a moderately good man will feel compunction whatever solution of his moral conflicts he adopts; and, needless to say, he will feel compunction to a greater or less degree (depending on the seriousness of the occasion) if ever he takes a moral holiday.

I introduced this topic, however, not merely in order to show how I would solve these particular difficulties for prescriptivism. Far more important is the light it sheds in general on the controversy between prescriptivists and their opponents. What has been happening is that descriptivists, and intuitionists in particular, who are not terribly interested in critical moral thinking, have been attacking prescriptivism as an account of intuitive moral thinking, which is the only kind they are interested in. On the rare occasions on which intuitionists and other descriptivists pay attention to critical moral thinking, they tend to speak as if it could be covered by a relatively minor extension of intuitive thinking — we 'weigh' our intuitions against one another when they conflict, or balance them in some 'reflective equilibrium'; but no clear account is given of how we are to do this. It does not seem to be necessary, because there are always plenty of prejudices to hand to which appeal can be made in order to support any proffered solution of a conflict, provided that the case is described in sufficient detail. This will always be so, if the audience is select enough (it would not do, for example, to advocate liberal solutions, even in philosophical examples, in a book to be published in South Africa or in the Soviet Union).

It seems to me that if intuitive thinking were the only kind

of moral thinking (if we were all, say, some kind of divinely guided proles), descriptivism of some sort might be an adequate ethical theory. 'So what?' difficulties could arise in principle, but would not in practice, because the proles would be too well-conducted to raise them. It is when we come to deal with actual serious moral dilemmas in which we are of different opinions that descriptivism breaks down; for then critical thinking is required, and of this descriptivism can give no account.

However, the prescriptivist on his part can readily incorporate in his theory, by adopting the separation of levels, an account of all the phenomena that descriptivists appeal to. The various sorts of descriptivism then appear as correct but partial accounts of the phenomena. Intuitions do occur, and have an important role in moral thinking; and phenomenologically speaking they are very like the descriptions given of them by intuitionists. Moral judgments do have a descriptive meaning, and, if we were to ignore all else, the account given of this element in their meaning by some naturalists is not far from the truth. The controversy between prescriptivists and their opponents should not be represented as one between a correct and an incorrect account of the matter, but as one between a complete and an incomplete account.

But it was not the desire to turn the tables on my descriptivist opponents that first led me to advocate the separation of levels. It was rather the need to defend my views about normative ethics. I had reached, via a study of the logic of the moral concepts, a view about moral reasoning which has very strong affinities with utilitarianism. There are well-known objections to the classical forms of utilitarianism, and in seeking answers to these objections the utilitarians, starting already with Bentham and Mill, to say nothing of Sidgwick, began to see the necessity for separation of levels. These answers developed into the various forms of rule-utilitarianism (one of the first and most persuasive advocacies of rule-utilitarianism was couched by Professor Urmson in the form

of an exposition of Mill).[25] Parallel with these developments, somewhat superficial Kantians like Prichard and Ross were advocating forms of intuitionism which had the merit of giving a tolerable account of the intuitive level, though they almost ignored the critical level (unlike their master Kant). In deference to these important though one-sided thinkers I have adopted the term '*prima facie* principles' in giving my own account.

I find it encouraging that the same device, the separation of levels, seems to help with all these problems. It makes me even think that it may represent the truth about our moral thinking.

[25] *Philosophical Quarterly* 3 (1953), repr. in P. R. Foot, ed., *Theories of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).