

LF1217.5 I5 1971

Archives

SOME LIMITS
TO MORAL ENDEAVOUR

*Inaugural Lecture of the
Professor of Philosophy
delivered at the University College of Swansea
on 11 November 1971*

by
PROFESSOR D. Z. PHILLIPS
M.A., B.LITT.

Gomerian Press - Llandysul



UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SWANSEA



Classmark: LF1217.5 IS 1971

Accession no: 71/750

Location: Archives

SWANSEA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
LIBRARY

This book must be returned immediately it is asked for by the Librarian, and in any case by the last date stamped below.

115 DEC 1971

SWANSEA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LIBRARY.

1002077595



UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SWANSEA

SOME LIMITS TO MORAL ENDEAVOUR

*Inaugural Lecture of the
Professor of Philosophy
delivered at the University College of Swansea
on 11 November 1971*

by
PROFESSOR D. Z. PHILLIPS
M.A., B.LITT.

SOME LIMITS TO MORAL ENDEAVOUR

Mr. Principal, Ladies and Gentlemen, on January 20th, 1953, as a first-year student at this College, I heard the late Professor J. R. Jones deliver his inaugural lecture on "Religion As True Myth". Within one term J. R. Jones had impressed students as an enthusiastic teacher of his subject, and those who continued with philosophy in the honours school found in him someone to whom they could turn for help and advice at any time. J. R. Jones was never content with a superficial treatment of philosophical problems. He revised and restated his discussions of self-identity and the concept of a person many times, and imposed high critical standards on his own work. He was prepared to go wherever discussion led him, and in relation to religious questions this meant the acceptance of painful, but necessary, conclusions. In the last few years of his life his interest in problems of identity, among other things, brought him to a deep concern with questions connected with the identity of a people. For J. R. Jones, the identity of a people is inextricably bound up with what he called the interpenetration of land and language. His love of Wales, and his sorrow at seeing its language decline, led him to write movingly on these questions.

During his eighteen years as professor, J. R. Jones's main concern was to maintain the right of his Department to control and teach courses in philosophy as it saw fit, a right which he saw as an important contribution to the deservedly high reputation associated with the study of philosophy at Swansea.

J. R. Jones died on June 3rd, 1970. Those who knew him remember him not only with respect, but with warmth and affection. It is good to know that his name and memory will be perpetuated in the Department and the College.

I cannot let this occasion pass, Mr. Principal, without mentioning the other members of the Department of

Philosophy who were my teachers. R. F. Holland and Peter Winch now hold the chairs of philosophy at the University of Leeds and King's College, London, respectively. Over the last eighteen years I have been philosophically and personally indebted to them. Including their appointments, six former teachers at Swansea now hold chairs of philosophy at different universities.

My greatest debt, however, is to Rush Rhees who taught at Swansea from 1940 to 1966. I cannot hope to convey in a few words his distinction as a philosopher and his devotion to his subject. I can do no better than to repeat the words the late Professor J. R. Jones used to mark Rush Rhees's retirement: "I shall always regard it as my good fortune to have known a man of the intellectual calibre and personal integrity of Rush Rhees".

I think you will agree, Mr. Principal, that to have been taught by these four men is a privilege and a philosophical good fortune. I know I speak for a great many students in expressing my gratitude to them.

I

The question of the ways in which moral considerations place limits on human action is one which can never be far away from central issues in moral philosophy. It is generally agreed that some account must be given of the limiting role of moral considerations, since, without one, one is left with a mere caricature of human action. That caricature would consist, roughly, of a picture of human action as the calculation of the most efficient means of attaining predetermined ends. Within this context, of course, there is legitimate talk of limits. If a man has a purpose in mind, the very character of that purpose rules certain means out of consideration. It does so, not only by showing that some means are more effective than others in securing the desired end, but also by circumscribing a certain area of relevance so that courses of action which fall outside it would not even arise for

consideration. Thus, if what I want to do is to add to the money I have in the bank, various suggestions may be made to me. I may be told to leave it where it is, buy a business with it, invest it, gamble with it, or a thousand other things. People would differ over the effectiveness of the means proposed, but not anything could count as possible advice. If someone told me to give all I had away or to go for a long walk, I might take this as a way of telling me to forget the purpose I had in mind, but I could not take it as possible means of attaining that end.

Purposive activities must not be ignored in an account of human behaviour. It would be foolish to do so, since it is hard to see how one can speak of human activities as rational or irrational without ever mentioning the purposes of those activities and the means which lead to them. Seeing the bearing which one thing has on another is often a matter of seeing how one thing leads to another. The point to stress, however, is that this is often, but not always, the case. This is why J. L. Stocks spoke of "the limits of purpose"; he wanted to deny that purposive action exhausted the character of human actions. Indeed, if that were all there were to tell, things would be very different from what we know them to be.

"If this were a complete account of human nature the world would be a very different place from what it actually is. If desire and its service were the whole of life there would be no fondness for places and buildings, no contemplative enjoyment of sights and sounds, no ties of affection and friendship, but only the continual grasping calculation of something to be got from men and things as they served a more or less transient need. The convenience of a utensil would be the highest form of praise".¹

We know, however, that things are not like this; that there is such a thing as moral praise and blame; that there is a concern, not simply with working out the best ways of getting what we want, but with the character of

¹J. L. Stocks, *Morality and Purpose*, edited with an Introduction by D. Z. Phillips, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969, pp. 39-40.

our wants and the nature of our strivings to satisfy them. Here we have a limit placed on human action which is different in kind from the limits which our purposes place on the means we employ. The limits set by moral considerations constitute what Stocks calls, "an additional principle of discrimination", since more is taken into account than our purposes and the best ways of achieving them. When purpose and its execution have said all there is to say, there remains the question of whether such a course of action can be undertaken in the name of decency.

It is very tempting to minimise the differences between the limits which purpose imposes on action and those limits determined by moral considerations. It is tempting to suggest that morality is an additional guide to human conduct which gives men, not concerns which are different in kind, but purposes which are higher on the scale of human desires, purposes which constitute what a man really wants in the end. In this way, morality, like any other means, would be concerned with the attainment of human purposes and with removing or minimising any difficulties which stand in the way. I have been suggesting that this misrepresents the ways in which moral considerations place limits on human conduct. Peter Winch makes the same point in his inaugural lecture when he says that,

"... of course, men try to attain goals and they encounter obstacles in their way : lack of money, lack of various kinds of natural ability, lack of friends, opposition by other men, to name just a few. But morality has nothing much to do with helping people to overcome any of these. On the contrary, were it not for morality, they would often be a great deal easier to overcome . . . Morality, we are told, is a guide which helps him round his difficulty. But were it not for morality, there would be no difficulty !"¹

¹Peter Winch, *Moral Integrity*, Basil Blackwell, 1968, p. 4.

Moral considerations impose a limit on our purposes and their execution which the distinction between means and ends cannot account for, since means and ends alike come under moral scrutiny. Yet in passing it should be said that to say that such scrutiny imposes limits on our conduct, though correct, may mislead if talk of limits is conceived too narrowly. It may give the impression that moral considerations play a purely negative part, namely, that of preventing men from doing what they want to do and pronouncing vetoes from time to time on their plans and aspirations. While it is true that moral considerations limit our actions in this way, they also constitute a limit in another sense. To appreciate it, one must not think of the limit simply as a boundary which curtails expansion, but also as the boundary of a territory which has riches to offer to those who pass over into it which cannot be found elsewhere. If moral considerations condemn meanness, they also extol generosity ; if they condemn lying, they have a regard for truthfulness. Generosity, truthfulness, kindness, loyalty, etc. are not mere negations or restrictions, but positive virtues and ideals in human life which for many make that life worth living. Morality is as much a discovery of the worthwhile as a condemnation of the worthless.

Instead of pursuing the above point further, I want to take a brief look at some recent accounts of the relations between moral considerations and human actions. I want to suggest that if there are dangers of presenting a caricature of human action if one neglects to take account of the limits imposed on it by moral considerations, there are also dangers of caricature involved in attempting to give an account of these limits. I shall take a brief look at three accounts presented in recent moral philosophy.¹

¹While they do not claim to be accurate in every detail, the three accounts I examine were suggested to me by the writings of R. M. Hare, Philippa Foot and A. I. Melden, respectively.

II

According to the first account of moral values I want to consider, such values do constitute a limit on human actions. Moral values are the product of our commendations, evaluations and prescriptions. Men decide their ultimate moral principles and, in theory, anything could count as a moral principle. On the other hand, moral principles are also the product of reason and are therefore universalisable. Thus, we expect our moral judgements to win the assent of any reasonable man placed in similar circumstances. Granted that a fanatic could hold that one should be free to kill anyone one dislikes as long as he accords this right to anyone who wishes to kill him for the same reason, we do, nevertheless, call such a man a fanatic, and his kind make up a very small minority. Normally we find a general agreement in the things men prescribe because of an agreement in the kinds of things men want and need. Furthermore, the commendations and prescriptions which men make form a rough-and-ready hierarchy in their eyes. Moral maturity consists in recognising this hierarchy ; recognising when one moral rule takes precedence over another ; always being alive to circumstances which present exceptions to our present rules. To tell the truth blindly, without considering whether the principle applies to the given case, is the very antithesis of moral sensitivity. Thus, corresponding to a hierarchy in our purposes and methods of attainment, we have a hierarchy of commendations and prescriptions. The morally mature man not only puts aside his previous purposes when moral considerations demand that he should do so, but also puts aside some moral considerations in deference to others once he begins to appreciate the relations between moral rules and their exceptions. The discrimination of moral maturity is matched by its sincerity. The moral man's actions are as good as his word. What he believes is to be found in what he does ; and failure to act in accordance with professed belief is generally a sign of insincerity.

In the second account I want to present to you, moral beliefs are not conceived as limits on human purposes. They cannot be so conceived since, according to this view, they constitute the best means of attaining those purposes. There are certain things which all men want, things which make up human good. Similarly there are things which all men want to avoid, things which make up human harm. Acting according to moral beliefs is the way to attain human good and to avoid human harm. A man needs the virtues in order to flourish just as a plant needs water in order to grow. Sometimes men do not realise this ; they think they want other things. This is the case when men ignore moral considerations or disagree about them. Such disagreement and lack of attention are understandable, since the appreciation of what constitutes human good and harm often requires experience and imagination. Once all the facts were known, however, such shortsightedness and disagreement would be rectified, since the facts would reveal human good and harm. Since all men appeal to such facts in deciding what is good and bad, ideally, though often not realised in fact, moral values would commend themselves to all men in an agreed hierarchy of priorities.

The third account of moral beliefs I want to consider denies that alleged facts concerning human good and harm could somehow establish for us what is good and what is evil. On the contrary, it is argued, men come to have a regard for certain ways of doing things, come to extol a certain character in human actions and relationships, but this concern does not depend on anything external to itself which is meant to demonstrate its validity. Furthermore, no one thing can be accepted as a definition of such concern, since there is a complex of varied moral beliefs within most societies. Different institutions and movements are characterised by different ideals, different rights and obligations. On many occasions, not all the rights involved can be satisfied, not all the obligations can be fulfilled. What is important,

however, it is argued, is that all the moral factors involved in the situation are considered. There will always be exceptions to rules which state that certain rights should be fulfilled or that certain obligations should be met. There is no exception to the rule that rights and obligations should be considered when they are involved in a situation in which a moral decision is called for. Given that such consideration has taken place, the people involved will recognise the procedure by which a decision is reached as being characteristic of a not uncommon moral wisdom. Within an institution such as the family, for example, decisions are accepted even when they do not satisfy all the rights involved. In this way, it is argued, the family is maintained as a moral community. Similarly, when the claims of a man's family conflict with the claims of his work, the decision which a man makes after due consideration and which is accepted, sustains the wider moral community of which family and work form a part. In this way, within something called the total moral community, a hierarchy of decisions can be agreed on and progress made.

What are we to say of these three accounts of the relations which are said to hold between moral beliefs on the one hand and human purposes and methods for attaining them on the other? They represent views which, though different in ways which it would be important to bring out in other contexts, can be said to have three characteristics in common, namely—order, progress and optimism. While they see that moral beliefs place limits on human conduct, they characterise those limits as ordered in some kind of hierarchy of importance, so that a man will know where his allegiance lies without too much difficulty.

I said at the outset that if moral considerations are left out of an account of human activities one has a mere caricature of those activities. Man is represented simply as calculating the best ways to get what he wants, whereas we know that he also cares about ideals, rights and

obligations, with all that entails. Nevertheless, it is also possible to present a caricature of men's moral concerns, and I suggest that our three accounts have come close to doing so. We are asked to accept that men aim for certain things, but that above these considerations of efficiency and attainment are moral considerations to which the former must always be subordinated. The method and order of this subordination is something which reasonable men will agree about. Purposive activities afford the opportunity for a rich moral harvest, and if the reapers are few that is only because men lack experience and imagination and are sometimes mistaken about what they really want. Once these shortcomings are removed, moral considerations, already in a system of priorities, will bring order to the range of human desires. Thus ethics and rationality are made to coincide: the moral thing to do is also the reasonable thing to do. A man learns to put first things first, not only in his purposive activities, but in his moral concerns as well. Ideally, what is important in a man's life is seen in the orderly subjection of his purposes and methods of attainment to an already ordered set of moral values. These values are brought to bear on his actions as a hierarchical system which commends itself to him as being what he really wants or as the values of a community he wants to perpetuate. If the ideal were realised in practice, a man would go about his business choosing which goals he favours, which human relationships he enters into, which decisions he makes, all in accordance with his hierarchical system of moral beliefs. The picture is one of order, progress and optimism. It constitutes what I mean by the second caricature of human activity.

III

When we turn from these tidy philosophical accounts of the ways in which moral beliefs place limits on human actions to look at actual situations, do we not want to

accuse these accounts of an over-simplification and falsification of the facts? If asked what accounts for these distortions, I think much of the answer would be found in the neglect of the sense in which I want to speak of the limits to moral endeavour. The sense I have in mind is not that in which moral considerations place limits on human actions, but that in which moral endeavour itself is often subjected to limits. The three accounts we have considered give little, if any, hint of these. On the contrary, they speak as if the subjection of human wants and desires to moral considerations were an orderly progressive procedure. But is this the case? Is there a blueprint by which a moral order, agreed on by everyone or almost everyone, is imposed on our activities? What is one to make of remorse, helplessness, the impossible good, the unanswerable difficulty, the restricted sphere of action, and countless other barriers to moral endeavour? These are what constitute the limits to moral endeavour, and when we take account of them, we begin to recognise the three outlines I have presented as attempts to account for moral considerations in human activities, but as caricatures of those activities nevertheless. This conclusion can be underlined by considering four contexts in which one would want to speak of limits to moral endeavour.

Since I have spoken of the first limit to moral endeavour I want to mention elsewhere, I shall not dwell on it for very long in this lecture.¹ I refer to moral dilemmas. If one accepts the reality of such dilemmas, one can see how the optimistic progressive picture of the relations between moral considerations and human conduct becomes less plausible. When one finds oneself in situations where, whatever one does, one is going to hurt someone, talk of arranging goods in an order of priority often seems out of

¹See D. Z. Phillips and H. O. Mounce, *Moral Practices*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970, Chap. 8, "Moral Dilemmas". See also, D. Z. Phillips and H. S. Price, "Remorse Without Repudiation", *Analysis*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 1967.

place. The discovery of what is morally possible for one in such situations is not the elevation of a good in an order of priority such that once the order is established one does not have to worry about the lower reaches of the scale. On the contrary, as I have argued elsewhere, even after a person has decided what he must do in these situations, he may still feel remorse for having committed the evil which his decision inevitably involved. When one lies to save a friend further suffering despite the fact that one's whole relationship with him has been characterised by absolute straightforwardness and honesty; when one has to go against the wishes of parents who have sacrificed a great deal for one in deciding to marry a certain girl or to take up a certain job; when a man is forced to kill another person in order to save a child's life; talk about establishing an order of goods would be a vulgar falsification for many people. They did what they had to do, but they did not glory in it. In the cases I have mentioned, a trust in truthfulness has been betrayed, great sacrifice has been counted an insufficient reason, a life has been taken: all these are considered to be terrible, and the decisions which brought them about and had to be taken were terrible decisions nevertheless. It is essential to recognise that in moral dilemmas, the discovery of what must be done often involves one in evil, pain and suffering.

The above account of moral dilemmas is unacceptable to those who think that moral decisions establish or reflect an ordered hierarchical system of goods. It can be no part of the philosopher's intention to deny that there are such people, people who in one way or another can describe their activities as putting first things first. What can be said is that such people, from the very nature of the case, cannot be faced with dilemmas such as those I have described. For them, there are no such dilemmas. If they present philosophical accounts of moral endeavour which allow no place for these moral dilemmas, they can be accused of falsifying the facts and obscuring moral possibilities. Within the variety of moral attitudes and

responses one finds the man who sees his life as the establishing of a moral order which reaches out for higher and higher achievements. One also finds the man who morally does not know where to turn, and in making his decisions hopes that he will not hurt too many people. One thanks God that he is getting better all the time ; the other thanks God if he finds he is no worse. Philosophical accounts of moral endeavour must not deny the first his heights, but neither must they deny the second his limits. I have been insisting on the recognition of these limits by philosophers, and on the fact that moral decisions often carry with them measures of guilt almost equal to any good achieved.

In the moral dilemmas we have considered, the limits to moral endeavour come from the fact that not all the moral beliefs involved can be acted on. Yet, in resolving the dilemma a person discovers what he must do. In making his decision he discovers something about himself ; he discovers what was possible for him. In the second context of some limits to moral endeavour I want to consider, however, there is often no difficulty in seeing what the outcome of a situation ought to be ; no difficulty in appreciating what morality requires. The trouble is that all this is thwarted by the situations themselves ; the situations themselves limit the possibilities of moral endeavour.

In William Faulkner's novel, *Sanctuary*, Benbow, a city lawyer, accidentally falls into the company of a group of liquor pedlars, one of whom, Popeye, is a killer. He has to spend a night in the company of these men. Later, when one of the gang is killed, Benbow has no doubt that Popeye has murdered him. The local leader of the liquor pedlars, Goodwin, is accused of the crime. Benbow feels that he must do something to help. After all, it was quite clear that Goodwin was being accused unjustly, that Popeye was going to get away with a murder, and that Goodwin's mistress and their ailing child needed his help and protection. He believes unquestioningly that he

can help because he believes that justice and truth will prevail. When he fails to get Goodwin to testify against Popeye, he pursues his enquiries further until he persuades Temple, a college girl who witnessed the murder and who has since been abducted by the murderer, to give evidence. The results are disastrous. Temple gives false evidence which damns Goodwin who meets his death at the hands of an infuriated mob.

We might agree with Benbow that Goodwin was accused unjustly and that he ought to be acquitted ; we might agree that Popeye was guilty and that he ought to pay for his crime ; we might also agree that a false conviction would be disastrous for the accused's mistress and child. It seems to follow inevitably that something should be done about these things. But this conclusion does not follow. As we have seen, all Benbow's attempts at making things better, made things infinitely worse. What Benbow lacked was psychological insight into the character of the people with whom he was dealing. He was an outsider who did not appreciate the forces and counter-forces at work in the situation in which he found himself. To have psychological insight one must have a knowledge of men and the lives they lead. One must be acquainted with their different ideas of what is worthwhile in life and with how they would react to various circumstances. In short, one's knowledge must extend beyond one's immediate circles. Benbow's knowledge does not extend thus, and therefore he has no knowledge of the liquor pedlars who are social outcasts. He cannot appreciate their way of thinking, their sentiments and their fears. Goodwin knows how useless it would be to give evidence against Popeye. As soon as he did so his days would be numbered. One way or another Popeye would claim his revenge. This is what Benbow cannot understand. His thoughts are governed by ideas of justice prevailing and the security of the law. These ideas meant little to Goodwin. He had been in jail, struggled for existence, and risked his life many times. He knows

that it is better to take his chance in a trial without saying a word about Popeye, than to ensure his own death by testifying against him. Benbow has no idea of the influence the murderer has had on the young college girl plunged into what for her was a world of nightmares.

No doubt Goodwin would have agreed with Benbow that justice, truth and fairness are fine things, but he might well have asked, "What has that to do with the situation I find myself in?" Benbow failed to recognise the limits which the situation placed on the pursuance of his moral ideals. He was convinced that he ought to help, whereas he should have seen that there was little, if anything, he could have done to help.

I have emphasised one example in order to show that it is just as important to recognise that there are situations in which one should not try to help, as it is to recognise situations where help is called for. The conviction that one *must* help to relieve distress, and that it *must* be possible to help, is a tempting but mistaken doctrine. There are plenty of examples other than the one we have considered which illustrate this truth, but one more will suffice. A man may feel that he must try to help to keep his friend's marriage from breaking up. It might well be the case, however, that nothing can be done from the outside, that the difficulties are such that there is no solution to them. To interfere in such circumstances is usually to court disaster and to make matters worse than they were before. Once again, there may be no disagreement about the things one should strive for in marriage, or about what an ideal outcome of present difficulties would be. Nevertheless, it is recognised that, in the case in question, these things are not possible. The difficulties place limits on moral endeavour and limit the moral possibilities open to would-be helpers.

A persistent optimistic moral theroist would try to avoid the conclusions of this lecture, conclusions which he would find extremely distasteful. He might suggest that the realisation that nothing can be done to help in

various situations is itself a moral realisation. Even if this is so, however, it can in no way obscure the limits to moral endeavour which those situations illustrate. Recognising that one can do nothing to help in certain situations may be the product of moral or psychological insight, but one could hardly call it a moral achievement. The insight in question, far from being a source of moral satisfaction, is one of the reasons for that sense of helplessness which sees that there are limits to moral endeavour, and that often the morally admirable action is simply not possible.

The third context in which some limits to moral endeavour can be found is related to the examples we have just considered. In those examples I referred to situations which limited the possibility of moral endeavour in various ways. In the examples I want to consider now, moral endeavour is limited, not by the situations in which it is called for, but by the people it is required of. We have just seen how mistaken it is to assume that in all situations where help is needed it makes sense to think of providing it; to assume that where morally satisfactory outcomes can be thought of abstractly, it must be possible to implement them in actual situations. It is equally mistaken to assume that if we can think of something morally finer and more admirable than we have attained, we should, if that description is correct, aim for those ideals. It is easy to accept that a man's attempts to be better may fail, but it is harder to see that sometimes a man should not try to be better. Yet, to recognise the third context of some limits to moral endeavour is to accept this conclusion. This can be shown by considering three examples.

A minister of religion may have no doubt that a fellow minister who works in the city slums has a deeper sense of vocation than himself. Let us assume that his judgement is correct. It certainly does not follow that he too should go to work in the slums. He knows only too well that if he did he would make a complete mess of things. He may also recognise that more often than not the

question does not even arise for him ; that his sense of vocation is not deep enough for such a commitment. He concludes, rightly, that it would be foolish of him to endeavour to be like his fellow minister. He accepts his limitations.

Or again, consider a married couple who start off their marriage with certain ideal conceptions of what married life ought to be like. They may know of marriages where these ideals are realised to a large extent. Very soon, however, they have to accept the fact that their marriage is not going to be like that. This does not mean that their relationship is devoid of any integrity, but it is not what they thought it might be. They conclude, rightly, that it would be foolish of them to try to emulate or seek after the kind of relationship they believe is deeper. They settle for less.

In Dostoyevsky's *A Nasty Story*, Ivan Ilyich Pralinsky is full of ideas of social reform and equality, although a sense of his own social superiority is never absent from his presentation of these ideas. One evening he discusses his views with a colleague and his superior in government service.

“And I persist in the idea, and put it forward on every occasion, that humanity, and specifically humanity to inferiors, of the official to the clerk, the clerk to the porter, the porter to the lowest peasant—humanity, I say, may serve, so to speak, as the corner-stone of the coming reforms and generally of our regenerated society. Why? Because. Take the syllogism : I am humane, therefore I am loved. I am loved, consequently they feel confidence. They feel confidence, consequently they believe in me ; they believe in me, consequently they love me . . . no, what I mean to say is that if they believe in me, they will believe in the reforms as well, they will understand, so to speak, the very essence of the matter, so to speak, they will morally embrace one another and settle the whole thing amicably and fundamentally”.¹

¹*The Gambler/Bobok/A Nasty Story*, trans. by Jessie Coulson, Penguin Classics, pp. 189—190.

His colleague comments, “We shan’t be able to stand it”, but Ivan does not understand what he means. On leaving his host and having to walk home Ivan passes the house of one of his minor clerks whose wedding supper is taking place. The scene is one of great merriment and jollity. Ivan sees a chance of putting his love of humanity into practice. He is sure that after an initial bewilderment and surprise at his arrival he will be welcomed as an example of the reformed society to come. In this spirit he enters the wedding-feast. The results are disastrous. The guests cannot forget his official status and are extremely uncomfortable in his presence. Champagne is brought to him although the household cannot afford it. Ivan realises that he is ruining the occasion. Later, when the party regains its liveliness, Ivan, eating and drinking too much, can see that his intrusion has been put down to drunkenness. His plans for preaching fellowship and equality are shattered and becoming drunker and drunker he is reduced to seeking reassurances that he has not disgraced himself. In the end he is so ill that he has to be put to bed. He is given the best bed, the bridal bed. Ivan is ill for eight days. When he returns to the office he cannot face anyone. He is relieved to find that the clerk has put in for a transfer to another department. Ivan’s love of humanity is replaced by very different conclusions : “ ‘No ; severity, severity, nothing but severity !’ he almost unconsciously whispered to himself, and suddenly his face was suffused with bright red. He felt ashamed and oppressed as he had never done in the most unbearable moments of his eight-day illness. ‘I wasn’t able to stand it !’ he said to himself, sinking helplessly into his chair”.¹

No doubt in Dostoyevsky’s story the social situation limits the possibilities of moral endeavour as much as the limitations in Ivan’s character. Nevertheless, the story does show how nasty the consequences can be sometimes when a man attempts to do what is morally beyond him or

¹*ibid.*, pp. 237—238.

what is morally misconceived. I do not deny that others in Ivan's position might improve as a result of greater moral endeavour. The same point could be made of the other two examples I have mentioned. I am also taking for granted that self-deception is absent in these cases ; that people are not appealing to assumed limitations in themselves to get out of doing what they could if only they tried. What I am insisting on is that people can come to the conclusion, rightly, that it would be foolish of them to try to be better than they are in certain respects. I am insisting that these pessimistic conclusions cannot be ruled out as signs of moral seriousness.

It may be argued that having given up trying to be better, people will no longer see any worth in the qualities and ideals they have failed to achieve. Cynicism may result from such failure, but it is not a necessary consequence of it. Pessimism about oneself is not incompatible with moral seriousness. This is difficult to accept if, like some moral philosophers, one holds that what a man believes to be decent is shown only in what he achieves. The unattainable good, for a serious person, is a constant comment on the little he has achieved. In the first example I considered, the minister of religion may see his fellow minister's sense of vocation as a judgement on his own. In that way, the life he admires becomes a source of humility in his own. The unattainable good, so far from being a moral irrelevance, is often, when recognised, the occasion for understanding, pity and compassion.

In many of the examples I have considered, it makes sense to say that but for certain limitations things might have been different. A lot of distress could be avoided if people had more moral or psychological insight. Things would be different in many relationships and vocations but for the limitations of the people involved. In the fourth and final context I want to consider, however, one cannot point to a limitation of character which accounts for things going in a certain way. I have in mind situations in which we say, "They didn't stand a chance", "Life

became too difficult for them", "Things went against them", where our reason for saying so is not any moral defect in those whom life has made its victims. I shall simply remind you of one striking example : Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. There is nothing in Tess's character which shows why she should end up being executed for murder. The interest of her parents in their likely descent from the D'Urbervilles, a noble family ; the fact that she is sent to claim kin to a nearby family who had simply appropriated the D'Urberville name and is seduced by Alec D'Urberville ; the early death of her illegitimate child. All these are things which happen to her despite herself. Her misfortunes continue when, after her marriage to Angel Clare, he cannot forgive her for what has happened, despite the fact that she has forgiven him a worse fault. Separated from her husband who leaves the country, her path crosses that of Alec D'Urberville again. After long persistence on his part and his assurances that her husband would never return, she agrees to live with him. Her sense of the wrong which has been done to her had made her indifferent to what happens to her in the future. When, however, Angel Clare does return, ready to admit that he has wronged her deeply, it is too much for her to bear. The course of her life seems to rise before her in mockery, and in anguished torment she kills Alec D'Urberville.

We want to say that life has been too cruel to Tess ; that it was too much to expect anyone to bear. We have no hesitation in giving assent to Hardy's choice of subtitle, *A Pure Woman*. The limits which life placed on Tess's endeavours occasion the following reflections by Hardy early in the novel : "Nature does not often say ' See ! ' to her poor creature at a time when seeing can lead to happy doing ; or reply ' Here ! ' to a body's cry of ' Where ? ' till the hide-and-seek has become an irksome, outworn game. We may wonder whether at the acme and summit of the human progress these anachronisms will be corrected by a finer intuition, a closer interaction of the

social machinery than that which now jolts us round and along ; but such completeness is not to be prophesied, or even conceived as possible".¹

There is something approaching an attempt at such completeness in the three theories in contemporary moral philosophy that I outlined earlier. They present a picture of ordered moral priorities and optimism. There is little indication of "the social machinery which jolts us round and along". I have sought to correct this picture by providing reminders of some limits to moral endeavour. It may well be true that where paying attention to moral considerations is concerned, the reapers are relatively few, but it should not be assumed that a ready-made harvest awaits those who attempt to reap, that success inevitably crowns the endeavours of men of good will.

IV

In this lecture I have mentioned four contexts in which some limits to moral endeavour can be found : moral dilemmas, situations which limit what is morally possible, limitations in character which curtail moral endeavour, and circumstances in which life's burden has become too heavy for a person to bear. What if these contexts are ignored by moral philosophers and others who may write on such subjects ? The consequences may be far-reaching. By ignoring such cases the very notion of moral endeavour has new limits set on it ; the concept of moral endeavour is itself changed. One might want to say that ignoring such cases brings about a decline in our conceptions of moral endeavour. Yet, even without making any moral judgement one can speak of a limiting of our conceptions. If certain ways of regarding moral problems and difficulties are constantly ignored, misunderstood or misrepresented, those ways will sooner or later cease to be part of our conceptions of moral problems and difficulties. The contexts I have mentioned can be considered in the light of this conclusion.

¹Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Macmillan & Co., pp. 53—54.

If the kinds of moral dilemma I mentioned are not taken into account, people will fail to see why anyone should regard such dilemmas as tragic ; why anyone should feel, even after arriving at a decision, acting on it and not wanting to repudiate it, that he still has blood on his hands. The idea of a dilemma would gradually change to what it has already become for some, namely, a question of establishing priorities among competing claims, and of going forward with confidence and without a backward glance once that priority has been established. To continue to feel remorse in such situations, it will be said, is to be in the grip of what some psychologists have condemned as 'unproductive guilt'. The moral house can always be put in order.

Consider what might happen in a society where, increasingly, the limitations of character and the situations which limit moral endeavour which I have mentioned are not recognised. It is probable that the idea that there must be a solution to every difficulty would become even more prevalent than it is already in certain circles today. If this were to happen, the very idea of what a difficulty is would have changed in important respects. Difficulties would now be regarded as signs that something had gone wrong, in much the same way as a flaw in a product shows that there is something wrong in the techniques of production. In a society where difficulties are thought of in this way, there is also likely to be much talk of "success" in personal relationships, and many formulas offered to ensure such success. In such a context, it is not hard to see how friendship, for example, could become a commodity and the provision of it a skill. Even now a social worker can give the advice "that it is the duty of a social worker to establish a relationship of friendship with her clients ; but that she must never forget that her first duty is to the policy of the agency by which she is employed".¹ It is

¹I owe this example to Peter Winch. See *The Idea of a Social Science*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958, p. 123. The quotation is from Penelope Hall's *The Social Services of Modern England*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955

also easy to see in such contexts how the cardinal sin would be refusal to be helped, since this would be described as pride or anti-social behaviour.

Furthermore, in a society where "success" is the key word, the notion of living with insuperable difficulties is likely to decline. This is seen most clearly in changing conceptions of marriage. I deliberately emphasise extreme cases. When marriage vows are thought of as eternal and unbreakable, difficulties, when they arise, must be met in terms of them and, if needs be, lived with despite the cost. When such difficulties are regarded as things to be helped, coped with, ironed out, their persistence might well be regarded as proof that an experiment in co-habitation has failed. The vows which once were eternal may become, as they have for some, the tentative terms of reference for a trial period.¹ Similarly, if success and achievement are emphasised to the exclusion of all else, a sense of tragic inevitability such as that depicted by Hardy is likely to diminish. Life can only be too difficult, it will be said, for those who fail to take advantage of the services and help at hand. It is not hard to see how such ideas would have a direct effect on what people think of pity and compassion.

The changes in moral beliefs I have noted are simply some of those one would expect if the ignoring of the limits to moral endeavour, already present in our society, became more widespread. It is not the task of a philosopher to make moral judgements on such changes. It is his task, however, to take account of the variety of moral beliefs people hold, since recognition of, or failure to recognise, this variety can affect one's understanding of the nature of moral beliefs. For example, emphasising this variety would be one way of bringing out the confusion involved in the fashionable practice of describing newly-acquired moral views as freedom from inhibition and the casting off of old taboos.

¹Of course, I am not denying that there are a host of intermediate cases about which different things would have to be said.

My complaint in this lecture has been that the varieties of moral endeavour have not been paid enough attention in contemporary theories of ethics. These theories have attempted to be altogether too tidy and all-embracing. The character they have unwittingly portrayed is that of a moderately decent man, fairly content and at home in his world, whose achievements are solid enough if not particularly inspired. Yet, even such a man, as he goes on his orderly way, needs to recognise more than he or his philosophical creators realise at the moment, namely, how much luck, good fortune and external circumstances need to favour him in order that he might enjoy his modicum of success. It might be argued that even where a man is favoured with freedom from the kind of limits to moral endeavour we have discussed in this paper, he needs to be aware of the possibility of such limits in order to understand the endeavours of others, and in order to have a proper sense of his own. There may come a time when moral ideas are such that this will no longer be true, but such a time has not come yet. Therefore, a conceptual analysis of the relations between moral considerations and human conduct must take account of the limits to moral endeavour. This lecture has tried to make a contribution to this end.

Hardy, referring to the limits which circumstances placed on Tess's moral endeavours, complains ironically that "why so often the coarse appropriates the finer . . . the wrong man the woman, the wrong woman the man, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order".¹ Hardy, of course, was not looking for explanations. Any sense of order which would have been satisfied with one would be defective just for that reason. It is certainly not the task of philosophy to explain away the limits to moral endeavour, but to display them in all their variety and to bring out their character. I have suggested that phil-

¹Op. cit., p. 91.

osophy itself has a responsibility in doing this, since, as I have tried to show, failure to do so can itself contribute to a limiting of our understanding of moral beliefs. Philosophy often speaks of things which have a reality independent of philosophy. This is certainly true of moral philosophy. Thus, limitations within philosophy can lead to limitations in our ideas of things which are outside philosophy, not least among them being our ideas of moral endeavour.

LIBRARY



UNIVERSITY OF WALES
SWANSEA