



An Enquiry into Goodness.

Review Author[s]:

R. M. Hare

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of language with the damaging consequences he alleges. But one may feel very much more sympathy with another thought of Mr. Pole's, namely that what Wittgenstein calls 'philosophy' is not the whole of what philosophy is or ought to be, that the subject is one "where various large alternatives remain permanently open". Wittgenstein said that the subject he was dealing with was one of the heirs of the subject which used to be called 'philosophy'. I do not know whether he really thought it had co-heirs, or might itself have descendants.

P. F. STRAWSON

Il metodo della filosofia. By GIOVANNI VAILATI. (Bari: Editori Laterza. 1957. Pp. 225. Price L.900).

Our picture of Italian philosophy has been seriously distorted by two historical accidents: first, that Giovanni Vailati was born as early as 1863 (three years before Croce), and second, that he died so young (in 1909, at forty-six). That his friend and follower Calderoni died in 1914 at the age of thirty-five has also contributed towards the impression generally current outside Italy that Croce and Gentile are representative of all modern Italian philosophy. Vailati believed in philosophy as analysis or methodology, without social and political overtones; he worked on the history and philosophy of science and on mathematical logic; he distinguished between real problems and pseudo-problems and said that the difference was concealed by "similarity in verbal form or in grammar"; and propounded a theory of meaning being dependent on the relevance of some particular experience. But it was too early for these ideas to catch on; moreover, after a series of subordinate posts, he abandoned university life, to teach in schools and technical institutes; and though he wrote a vast number of articles and reviews, he never attempted to write a book. He called himself a 'pragmatist' in honour of C. S. Peirce, but his 'pragmatism' was mainly a matter of a methodical approach to philosophy, of following some rules, and had nothing to do with the views commonly understood by this label. The neglect into which the small group of Italian pragmatists have hitherto fallen—other associates besides Calderoni were E. Regalia, E. Juvalta and L. Limentani—is indicated by their failure to get a mention in Passmore's *100 Years of Philosophy*, where (p. 121) the Jamesian Papini is regarded as the central and only significant figure of pragmatism in Italy.

An account and explanation of this state of affairs has been given in English by Signor Rossi-Landi in *The Listener*, Jan. 10th 1957, under the title, "The Knife-grinders"; he has now done much to remedy it for readers of Italian by issuing this selection of Vailati's essays in a cheap and handy form with a general introduction, a short biography, an adequate bibliography, and an index of authors mentioned which contains additional information. (For those who preferably read languages other than Italian, and wish to sample, I give references further below to some translations.) The eleven essays included are: 1. Ricerche di Storia delle Scienze; 2. Questioni di Parole; 3. Causa ed Effetto nelle Scienze Storiche; 4. Definizione della Matematica; 5. Paradossi in Filosofia; 6. Tropi della Logica; 7. Caccia alle Antitesi; 8. Conoscere e Volere; 9. Ricerca dell'Impossibile; 10. Pragmatismo e Logica Matematica; 11. Linguaggio e Contrasti Illusori. All these have of course appeared already, in the massive posthumous volume of *Scritti* (967 pp.), Florence and Leipzig 1911, published by subscription; but this is neither easy nor cheap to obtain, besides being cumbersome to use. Everyone with a serious interest in Italian philosophy who does not possess the *Scritti*, and perhaps some who do, will want to buy the present convenient collection.

Some versions in other languages:

English: 6. in *Journal of Philosophy* 1908. 7. *ibid.* 1907. 10. in the *Monist* 1906. There is also "A Study in Platonic Terminology" in *Mind* 1906, 473-85.

French: 5. in *Revue de Philosophie* 1905; *Scritti*, 555-60. Also an essay on the deductive method in *Revue de Métaphysique et Morale* 1898, 677-703; and "De quelques caractères du mouvement philosophique contemporain en Italie", *Revue du Mois* 1907; *Scritti*, 753-69; both these are French originals.

The editor has since carried out the promise made in the book, of a full bibliography, in his "Materiale per lo studio di Vailati" in *Rivista Critica di Storia della Filosofia* 1957, 468-85, and 1958, 82-108.

ROLAND HALL

An Enquiry into Goodness. By F. E. SPARSHOTT. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press. London: O.U.P. 1958. Pp. xiv + 304. Price 45s).

This is a very difficult book to assess. Professor Sparshott is both extremely well-educated philosophically, and fortunate in the possession of a fluent, lucid and witty

style of writing. For example: "Damn it, one feels like saying, you *know* what I mean by 'meaning'; or if you don't, I can't be bothered. And this attitude becomes neither a philosopher nor a gentleman" (p. 63). He says of his book, "Perhaps it should be called a ramble through a private world of thought" (p. 4); and applies to it the epithets 'wayward' and 'discursive'; but in this he does himself an injustice, for in fact the arrangement of the work is both logical and very well flagged with sub-titles and decimal section-numbers. It is, however, a great deal more than "an enquiry into goodness", and the "remarks on the nature and scope of such enquiries" occupy nearly half the book—many might say the better half. There can be few topical problems about philosophical method which do not receive, somewhere in the book, an illuminating and penetrating comment. The author has evidently the kind of mind that sees readily the connexion between one philosophical problem and another, and does not like to leave it unexamined. But he succeeds very well in making the scale of his treatment of a question proportionate to its importance for his main subject. And he has made very good use, in his ethical investigations, of considerations from outside ethics, and often even from outside philosophy—for example, he has many illuminating quotations from anthropologists.

The analysis which he gives of 'good' is as follows: "To say that *x* is good is to say that it is such as to satisfy the wants of the person or persons concerned" (p. 122). This analysis is proposed at the beginning of the central section of the book, and the next eighty pages are devoted to its explanation, qualification and defence. Since the analysis is of a type against which there are commonly thought to be obvious objections, it is only fair to point out that Professor Sparshott uses this formula more as a peg on which to hang his account of 'good' than as the irreducible distillation of that account; he says: "The formula is nothing, the use made of it everything. It has been, at the very most, a tool of interpretation and not an interpretation in itself; and it is not clear that no other tool could have served" (p. 292). In developing this formula he contrives to introduce qualifications which are intended to meet some of the natural objections; and these qualifications make his theory harder to controvert—or even to get to grips with. According to their temperament, readers will either fret at the elusiveness of the argument or admire the pains taken to do justice to all possible sides of all possible questions.

The chief qualifications to the formula have to do with the expressions 'wants' and 'concerned'. 'Wants' is said to be ambiguous, meaning either 'desires' or 'needs'; and this ambiguity transfers itself to the word 'good' itself. The assessment of the desires or needs of a person is a task to whose elusiveness Professor Sparshott does moderate justice. Yet I was left with the impression that he had been sitting on the fence. For at some points he seems to be maintaining that the desires and the needs of a person can be "objectively" (his word) determined, whereas at others he seems to be parrying objections by making this impossible. The truth is (as I think he would agree) that the "objectivity" of a statement that something is good varies from one context to another; in contexts in which 'good' has a tolerably settled descriptive meaning it can be quite obvious what are the desires and needs of the persons concerned; in others (he quotes the case of an artist talking about his own painting) this question can only be settled "subjectively" by the speaker. The question "What do I want?" is surely a paradigm case of a "subjective" question; and attempts to turn it into an "objective" one (by analogy with the *different* question "What does *he* want?") lead only to a breakdown of the objectivist-subjectivist distinction (a breakdown which is on other grounds much to be desired).

The same kind of indeterminacy is acknowledged by Professor Sparshott to exist with regard to the identity of "the persons concerned". Yet, when all this has been said, is it not misleading to insist, as he does, that goodness is a "quality"? It is true that nothing much hangs on this verbal question, and that it is possible to use the word 'quality' in such a way that goodness is one; yet all the same the effects of his insistence may be to make people think that he has shown goodness to be a quality in some stronger sense than is the case; and the kaleidoscopic scintillations of his argument serve only to dazzle. Thus, he admits that goodness is different from other qualities in the following ways: "Questions of goodness are not, like questions of yellowness, mere questions of classification, but are grounds for decision"; and "There is a sense in which 'what's yellow about' a thing is constant. . . . But there is nothing whatever in common between what makes a good car good and what makes a good apple pie good"; and "The good-making features which might be cited in a reply to 'What's good about it?' could form no part of a definition of goodness". Yet he goes on to say, "If there is one factor more than any other which has made me decide in favour of calling goodness a quality, it is this: to call something good is to say something about that thing—to state a fact about *it*, and not about the speaker, or about society, or about any other person or thing" (pp. 128-130). This is as near as so dexterous a writer can get

to contradicting himself ; for if being good is being such as to satisfy the wants of the persons concerned, and if what makes a thing good varies from one thing to another according to the wants of the persons concerned, is it not downright *suggestio falsi* to say that in calling a thing good we are stating a fact about it and not about any other person or thing ? Yet, characteristically, Professor Sparshott redresses the balance in the next sentence by saying, "It is distinguished from 'standard' qualities by two facts : that the features of x referred to by 'is such as to . . .' are not the same in all cases, and that the accuracy of the account following those words is not discernible from the direct scrutiny or testing of x alone".

The same readiness to be all things to all men appears in a remark which he makes about needs. He says "To speak of a need is to speak of a deficiency which is really there for everybody to recognize ; and to imply that everyone 'ought' to recognize it" (p. 135). The inclusion of the word 'ought' in this definition, and thus in the definition of 'good', is, if intended seriously, enough to preserve the evaluative character of the latter, and thus parry accusations of naturalism. But, if intended seriously, there is only one way of reconciling it with what he says elsewhere about goodness being a quality, if *that* is intended seriously ; and that is by giving a fully descriptive account of 'ought'. But when he does come to give an account of 'ought', he confesses to a strong temptation to accept the account which I myself give in *The Language of Morals* (which is avowedly prescriptive), and ends up, "If one rejects Mr. Hare's account of 'ought', I see no alternative to regarding it as an irreducible concept and an undefinable term. Perhaps one such term would add tone to this book" (p. 247). If *this* is intended seriously, we must suppose that in his view the definition of 'good' is tied, *via* that of 'need', to 'ought' ; and so his analysis regresses, either to old-fashioned non-naturalism, or to the much derided prescriptivist Hare.

Professor Sparshott's chief dispute with the latter (and with the Oxford Dictionary) is that he denies that the function of commendation is "essential to the word 'good'" (p. 212). He uses in this dispute the following argument : "To say that something is good . . . is no doubt almost always to commend it ; but in form such a statement does not differ essentially from other factual statements. Commendation . . . needs no special vocabulary" but may be carried out by a variety of means. A similar argument would show that the function of entering into an undertaking was not 'essential to' the words 'I promise' ; for can we not enter into undertakings by many other means than saying 'I promise' ?

Although there are other arguments, too, with which one might quarrel, yet, treated as an "album", the book has considerable merits ; those who browse in it will pick up a lot of useful instruction. But they will not find a clear-cut train of reasoning, by trying the validity of which they can penetrate one stage deeper into the problems of ethics. So, on the whole, and judging it by this criterion, I am inclined to rate the book less highly than *Principia Ethica*, of which Professor Sparshott writes : "Moore is thus sunk in a most complicated confusion, and one is at a loss to explain the great reputation of his book, if not by ascribing it to its timely iconoclasm, its hectoring tone and the appearance of logical inevitability which its manner seems designed to suggest".

R. M. HARE

Essays in Moral Philosophy. Edited by A. I. MELDEN. (Seattle : University of Washington Press. 1958. Pp. xii + 216. Price \$4.50).

In this book eight philosophers of the English-speaking world deal with some live problems of moral philosophy. It is a splendid collection of original essays and the editor, Professor Melden, has done a good job.

Professor Melden in his Introduction says that the contributors are trying to uncover "the logical connections between our everyday moral concepts". Some of them, however, are doing more than this. Thus Mr. Urmsen in "Saints and Heroes" argues that "the trichotomy of duties, indifferent actions and wrongdoing is inadequate. There are many kinds of action that involve going beyond duty proper, saintly and heroic actions being conspicuous examples of such kinds of action". He does not merely argue that obligation is not necessarily coextensive with morality, a point made by Professor Hart too ; he recommends that we should preserve talk of saints and heroes and tries to justify this talk and to accommodate it in a theory "adequate to the facts of morality", a Utilitarian theory, as he suggests. This is not a disinterested conceptual analysis, nor is it intended to be ; it is an essay in the metaphysic of morals. The kind of method Urmsen uses, partly an examination of ordinary uses of language and ordinary moral thinking, and partly critical reflection on the criteria for the justification of a moral code, can be used not only, as in this case, to justify an already current distinction, but also as an instrument of moral reform.