III. ETHICAL DISAGREEMENT AND OBJECTIVE TRUTH
CARL WELLMAN

MATTERS of morals, like matters of taste, are notoriously subject to personal and cultural differences. The patriotic soldier and the religious pacifist argue vehemently about whether one ought to fight for one’s country. Parent and child are almost deeply involved in disagreement over what is best for the child. Such disagreements on value and obligation are magnified as soon as the ethical convictions of different societies are compared. When anthropology reports the breadth and depth of ethical disagreement, it is easy to conclude that everything in ethics is relative in a sense that excludes any claim to objective truth.

Common as this argument is, one may wonder about its cogency. Just what is the connection between agreement and truth? At first glance, there is none at all. A conclusion is not shown to be true in any objective sense by the fact that people can be made to agree on it by hypnosis, emotional rhetoric or some other form of non-rational persuasion. Nor are we required to withdraw the claim to objective truth just because someone who is ignorant of the relevant facts or too stupid to follow our reasoning disagrees with us. Giving a rational justification for the claim to truth seems to be one thing; persuading others to agree seems to be quite another. It is tempting to say that the claim to truth does not presuppose agreement in any way.

But this will not do. There must be some sort of logical connection between truth and agreement because to claim that a statement is true is to claim that anyone who disagrees with that statement is mistaken; it is precisely at this point that the truth is objective. To concede that others might disagree without error is to abandon the claim to objectivity and reduce one’s utterance to a subjective expression of personal feeling or whim. Now imagine that another person could continue to disagree with one even though he were fully aware of every relevant consideration and fully alive to its logical bearing upon his conclusion. On what ground could one continue to claim truth for one’s own statement and insist that the other person must be mistaken? One has no reasons left to advance to the person who already possesses every reason and no logical criticism to show the perfect reasoner that he has drawn the wrong conclusion from these reasons. Thus the claim to truth does presuppose that there would be no disagreement among fully informed and completely rational men. This kind of disagreement, at least, would undermine any claim to objective truth. Let us, then, see what kinds of disagreement there are in ethics and whether any of them compel us to withdraw the claim to truth.

1. DISAGREEMENT ON ETHICAL CONCLUSIONS

Although the reports of returning anthropologists are often curious and striking, the existence of ethical disagreement is most deeply driven home to a person when he finds that someone whom he respects differs from him on some serious moral issue. It can come as a shock to a respectable citizen to hear his priest approve civil disobedience as morally good. If a colleague whom I have found to be practically wise on past occasions suggests that I have treated some student unjustly, I cannot ignore his moral judgment simply because I disagree with it. The fact of disagreement about value and obligation cannot be denied.

What can be denied is the bearing of such disagreement on the claim to objective truth. After all, we often disagree about ordinary factual statements such as “there were over thirty people at the party last night” or “it is sure to rain tomorrow,” but we do not take this as evidence that there is no truth or falsity in numerical reports or weather predictions. Even competent scientists may disagree about some proposed hypothesis, but almost everyone would grant that the hypothesis is objectively true or
false nevertheless. The mere existence of disagreement does nothing to undermine the claim to truth, as the examples of ordinary factual beliefs and scientific hypotheses show.

Why should it be supposed that disagreement in ethics is any more of a threat to objective truth? Well, it is often alleged that there is more disagreement in ethics. This may well be the case, although it is hard to be sure. For one thing, there is no obvious unit for measuring disagreement. One might count the number of statements in dispute or count the number of occasions of dispute or even the number of disputants. It is not clear what kind of statistics would prove that there is more ethical disagreement than factual disagreement. For another thing, those who allege that there is greater disagreement in ethics rely more on our general impression of disagreement than on any objective measures of actual dispute. But this may indicate only that we are more impressed with ethical disagreements because these are of practical importance. There may be all sorts of factual disagreements that are generally ignored because nobody cares about them.

Even if it is true that there is more disagreement in ethics than in factual belief or scientific theory, what does this prove? If factual statements can be true in spite of some disagreement, it is hard to see how more disagreement would prove that ethical statements are completely lacking in objective truth. Presumably the proper conclusion to draw from the greater degree of disagreement in ethics is that ethical statements have a lesser degree of truth. But how can the truth be a matter of degree? What could it mean to claim that a statement is just a little bit true? If rational criticism is possible, then the statement is either true or false, either rationally justified or rationally unjustified; if rational justification is impossible, then the distinction between truth and falsehood simply fails to apply at all. The claim to truth is either to the point or out of place; it cannot be only slightly on target.

The serious threat to objectivity in ethics does not come from the mere existence or even the degree of ethical disagreement, but from its persistence. What leads philosophers to deny that rational justification is possible in ethics is not that people disagree about their ethical conclusions in the beginning or that they disagree so often, but that their disagreement persists even after prolonged reasoning with one another. This inability to achieve agreement by rational methods would not bother us if it were clear that some of the parties to the dispute were uninformed or irrational, but the hard fact is that eminently reasonable men may continue to disagree on ethical issues even after each has considered carefully every reason advanced by the other in support of his conclusion. When no amount of reasoning leads rational men to agree on which ethical conclusion is true, how can it still be claimed that there is an objective truth in ethics?

To begin with, it is important to recognize that this characterization of the persistence of ethical disagreement is inaccurate and misleading. It is inaccurate to say that "no amount" of reasoning leads rational men to agree on their ethical conclusions because this implies that the largest possible amount of reasoning has been completed. However, the process of rational criticism, in which reasoning is embedded, has no limit; it is an open-ended process of discussion and reflection. No matter how long this process of challenge and response has gone on, it could go on longer. It is more accurate to say that even very prolonged reasoning fails to lead rational men to ethical agreement, but even this is misleading. It is only half true that prolonged reasoning does not bring agreement. Granted that on many occasions this is true, there are many other occasions on which reasoning does produce agreement. What we actually find, then, is that some ethical disagreements persist in the face of reasoning and that some are resolved.

Does this partial persistence of ethical disagreement rule out the claim to objective truth? To claim that a statement is true, if my analysis is correct, is to claim that all completely rational men who are fully aware of all relevant considerations would agree to it after indefinite criticism. Thus the claim to truth does presuppose agreement, but the agreement it requires is an ideal agreement to emerge from the process of rational criticism carried on for an indefinite time among an indefinite number of reasoners. There is always a logical gap between the result of actual reasoning among a limited number of imperfectly rational men through a limited period of time and the ideal agreement projected by the claim to truth. Therefore, the actual persistence of ethical disagreement does not refute the claim of ethical statements to objective truth,
for the agreement presupposed by this claim is an ideal agreement that might emerge if only the process of reasoning were continued farther.

2. Disagreement on Ethical Premisses

Must we simply wait and see whether agreement emerges at the end of time? Not at all, it may be argued, for it is clear in advance that no prolongation of reasoning could possibly produce complete ethical agreement. This is because there can be no reasoning without reasons, without premisses to support the conclusions drawn, and we lack the premisses required to settle many of our ethical disputes. If the process of giving reasons is to resolve a disagreement, then those who disagree on their ethical conclusions must at least agree on their ethical premisses. If one party to the dispute appeals to premisses that are not accepted by the other parties to the dispute, then he has not managed to justify his position rationally; he has virtually begged the question. Moreover, it is logically necessary that among the reasons required to justify any ethical conclusion must be an ethical principle, a universal generalization about value or obligation. For example, "It is an act of killing a human being" is a reason for "capital punishment is wrong" only if it is assumed that "an act of killing a human being is always wrong." It follows that the process of reasoning, no matter how much farther it is continued in time, can resolve our disagreements on ethical conclusions only if we already agree on our ethical principles. But we surely do not agree on our ethical principles. The hedonist and the ascetic disagree on the value of a delicious meal just because they disagree about whether pleasure is always intrinsically good. The pacifist cannot rationally justify his moral conclusion to the militant citizen because he cannot get that citizen to agree that killing is always morally wrong. Given our disagreement on ethical principles, a fact established by everyday observation and anthropological research, it can be argued that we lack the agreed premisses needed to resolve ethical disagreement by further reasoning.

In the end it is true that reasoning can produce agreement only if it can start with agreed premisses, or at least premisses about which there is no disagreement. But these premisses are a logical starting point, not necessarily the temporal starting point. It is not required that the parties to a dispute agree at the beginning of their debate upon all the premisses to which they will appeal during their discussion; for if one offers a reason the other rejects, they can continue their reasoning until this disagreement about premisses is resolved. Thus, the undeniable fact that we now disagree on our ethical principles does not prove that we cannot settle our ethical disputes by rational means. We may be able to reach agreement on our ethical principles by further reasoning. Then, at some future point in time, we will have the agreed premisses we need to justify rationally the claim to truth of our ethical conclusions.

But, it may be objected, at least we must now agree on our ultimate ethical principles, our most general principles of value and obligation. We cannot reach agreement on ultimate principles by further reasoning precisely because they are ultimate; they are the premisses from which all less general principles and all particular ethical conclusions can be deduced, but they cannot be deduced from any more general or fundamental principles. Therefore, our logically first principles must be temporally first also.

Plausible as this objection is, it is mistaken in two respects. First, it insists that what is logically first must be temporally first. But why must the logical starting point of reasoning be the temporal starting point also? Simply because what is logically first cannot, by definition, be inferred from any reason and cannot, therefore, emerge from later reasoning. This argument presupposes that the only way to acquire new premisses for reasoning is through reasoning, that our stock of ultimate reasons is fixed and constant throughout all time. But an empiricist, like myself, cannot admit this. I hold that our ultimate grounds for factual beliefs are experiences. Hence, as we have new experiences we are acquiring additional first premisses for our reasoning. Moreover, as we live our lives we acquire new beliefs and attitudes, including general beliefs and attitudes, as well. These may also function as first premisses in our reasoning as long as they are not challenged. Because our supply of reasons, of premisses to which we can appeal in rational justification, is constantly growing, it is not the case that the logically first premisses to which we will appeal in the course of our reasoning must be accepted in common at the beginning of our discussion.

Second, the objection presupposes that the first premisses of ethical reasoning must be those most
general ethical principles from which all more specific principles and individual ethical judgments can be deduced. If all ethical reasoning were deductive, this might be so. But some ethical inferences are inductive; they confirm or disconfirm ethical generalizations by applying them to particular cases. Ethical principles are hypotheses to be tested by the same kind of reasoning that verifies or falsifies hypotheses in the empirical sciences. Ethical principles need not be logically first, unproved premises from which every ethical conclusion is proved. They can themselves be ethical conclusions established by inductive reasoning from individual judgments of value and obligation.

Even here we are not down (or up) to the first premises of ethical reasoning. Individual judgments of value or obligation can be conclusions inferred from factual descriptions of the individual objects or acts to which they refer. Thus the value judgment "this is a good book" might be justified rationally by citing the facts that it is an exciting, interesting and informative story about North Africa. Again, "I ought to return this book tomorrow" might be validly inferred from "I promised to return this book tomorrow and, although I have not finished reading it, the owner needs it tomorrow and has declined to extend the period of its loan." I call this kind of reasoning "conductive" because typically, although not always, it draws together several independent facts about an individual object or act in order to arrive at some conclusion about it. Since these inferences cannot be interpreted as enthymematic deductive arguments, they do not presuppose any general principles of value or obligation; they infer individual ethical conclusions from purely factual premises. The logically first premises of ethical reasoning are not ultimate ethical principles but factual statements and the experiences on which these are grounded. Therefore, unless one wishes to abandon the objective truth of factual statements, one cannot attack the claim to truth in ethics by arguing that we lack the premises from which to reason our way to ethical conclusions.

3. Disagreement on Ethical Reasoning

My refutation of the attack on the objective truth of ethical statements based upon our disagreement on ethical principles does, of course, presuppose the objective validity of ethical arguments, including the inferences from factual statements to ethical conclusions. Philosophical doubt about the objectivity of ethical arguments, especially conductive inferences, can arise from the fact that we so often disagree about whether such arguments are valid. It is important to notice precisely what sort of disagreement is the basis for this sceptical challenge; it is disagreement about the validity of ethical arguments. This is not ethical disagreement in the usual sense, not disagreement about this or that ethical statement. What is in question is the logical transition from one or more statements (the premises) to another statement (the ethical conclusion). On this logical question there is as much disagreement as on the truth of the premises or of the conclusion. Does the fact that one consciously risked one's life, quite apart from the wisdom of one's act, imply any moral goodness in that daring act? In reasoning about what the agent ought to do, does the fact that the agent promised outweigh the fact that to keep his promise would now be markedly inconvenient? The sceptic's view is that such ethical arguments cannot claim objective validity because we disagree so radically about their logical correctness.

It would be idle to deny that we do very often disagree about whether a conductive ethical argument is valid. This disagreement seems to be in sharp contrast to our almost universal agreement about the validity or invalidity of any proposed deductive argument. But it is not amiss to point out that we do not always disagree about conductive reasoning, nor do we always agree about the validity of deductive reasoning. No doubt there is much more disagreement about conductive than about deductive inferences, but this is a difference in degree and not in kind. Just how this difference in degree is supposed to prove that deductive arguments always have validity-value and that conductive arguments never have it will not be easy to explain.

The adequacy of any attempted explanation will hinge upon the precise nature of the claim to logical validity. On my analysis, to claim that an argument is valid is to claim that it will persuade all fully rational men after indefinite criticism; conversely, to claim that an argument is invalid is to claim that it will persuade no fully rational men after indefinite criticism. Hence, the claim to validity, like the claim to truth, does presuppose agreement in the end. Truth and validity are objective claims, rather
than expressions of personal feeling or mere whim, just because they claim acceptance by all rational men. Nevertheless, they are ideal claims because the universal acceptance they claim is an ideal agreement to be reached only after infinite criticism and only among fully rational persons. Therefore, actual disagreement among imperfectly rational men after a limited amount of reasoning does not rebut the claim to validity any more than it refuted the claim to truth.

The fact of existing disagreement on some ethical argument need not undermine its claim to validity, for it might be possible to reach agreement by further rational criticism. It might, for example, be possible to establish the validity of one argument by a second-order argument referring to it. Or someone might come to feel the validity of an ethical argument after having its point explained to him. Conversely, those who begin by disagreeing about the logical status of an argument might come to agree on its invalidity after someone has revealed an ambiguity in its language or has presented an analogous argument that is clearly invalid. Disagreement about the validity of an ethical argument before it has been critically discussed and carefully rethought, or even after prolonged criticism and reflection, does not show that agreement will not emerge from continuing the process of challenge and response. No actual disagreement at any given point in time rules out the ideal agreement projected at the ideal limit of reasoning through indefinite time.

Moreover, not everyone who disagrees will count, even at the end of time. The ideal agreement projected by the process of rational criticism is an agreement among ideally rational men, among persons who are capable of reasoning and are exercising their capacity to the fullest. What is claimed is that the argument will persuade all competent reasoners. Thus the dissent of persons incapable of reasoning, like the insane or feeble-minded, or of rational men not now reasoning at their best, like the inattentive or angry person, does not count against the claim to validity. If we find that someone who rejected an argument at first accepts it after further discussion and reflection, we judge that he was not really reasoning when he originally disagreed. If we find that prolonged challenge and response fails to overcome his disagreement with the rational community, we judge that the dissenter is irrational. In the end, disagreement does not show that rational men disagree about ethical arguments but that one who disagrees is not rational. In this way, the fact of actual disagreement drops out of the picture because the one who disagrees with the consensus of rational men is dropped from the critical community.

4. Psychological Differences

The possibility of disagreement does not drop out of the picture, however. The fact that we disagree on our ethical conclusions, our ethical premises and our ethical reasoning does not refute the claims to objective truth and validity in ethics because the possibility always remains open that agreement would emerge from a continuation of the process of critical discussion and thinking. On the other hand, the possibility that the end result would be disagreement also remains open. Is there any reason to project an ideal agreement rather than an ultimate and irresolvable disagreement as the eventual result of critical discussion among human beings? If not, then the claims to ideal agreement implicit in the claims to objective truth and validity are arbitrary and without rational justification. If the sceptic cannot disprove them by pointing to the fact of actual ethical disagreement, he can undermine them by pointing to the possibility of ideal ethical disagreement.

Some ethical sceptics even argue that we now know that ethical agreement could not emerge from an indefinite continuation of the process of critical reasoning. What would be required for the community of human beings to reach agreement by reasoning? First, they must be able to appeal to shared reasons. If they have no reasons to which they can appeal when they disagree, then they cannot reach agreement by reasoning; if these reasons are not shared, if one party to the dispute rejects a premiss offered by another party, then the appeal to reasons does nothing to ensure agreement. I have argued that the first reasons for our ethical conclusions are factual statements and the experiences on which our factual beliefs are grounded. Thus, human beings can reach agreement through the process of reasoning only if there is something like a shared way of experiencing, only if human beings experience themselves and their environments in a similar way. Second, reasoning from similar experiences would lead human beings to agree on their ethical conclusions only if they infer the
same conclusions from their shared premises, only if appeal to shared beliefs and experiences persuades them of the same ethical conclusions. Thus reasoning can produce agreement only if human beings think alike in the sense of being persuaded by the same considerations. In this way, the epistemological claim to objective truth presupposes the psychological claim that human beings have similar experiences and think in a similar way. Since modern science shows us that this psychological uniformity is nonexistent, it is argued, we can now know that the claim to truth is out of place in ethics.

Two sciences allegedly establish the fact that there is no common human nature, no way of thinking and experiencing shared by all men. Anthropology has demonstrated that the way in which a person experiences himself and his world and the way in which he infers his conclusions are both the product of enculturation. The colors one sees and the odors one can discriminate depend upon the color and odor concepts one has absorbed from one's culture by learning its language, and the persuasiveness or unpersuasiveness of arguments presented to one depends upon the habits of reasoning customary in one's society. Psychology, moreover, has firmly established the range and depth of individual differences in perception and thought. Of particular relevance to ethical disagreement are individual differences in physiological drives and emotional temperament. How could reasoning overcome the different attitudes toward pre-marital sex of the college student with an intense and ungratified sex drive and his parent whose desire for sex has become weaker with age and is periodically reduced by marital intercourse? What factual considerations could be sufficient to resolve the disagreement between a self-confident personality and an emotionally insecure person about whether one ought to choose a job offering great opportunity at high risk or a position offering security, limited responsibility and modest reward? The sceptic argues that no amount of reasoning could overcome existing enculturation and individual differences. Not only is there no reason to project any ideal agreement at the end of critical discussion among human beings, there is every reason to believe that ethical disagreement will persist until the end of time, or even longer.

The fact that the way in which a person experiences his world and infers his conclusions is determined by his enculturation cannot be denied. But this fact does not in itself prove there is no human nature shared by all men, for there may be two factors determining how a person experiences and thinks. The way in which an individual experiences and infers may be jointly determined by the interaction between his culture, that he may share with other members of his society but not with all human beings, and his innate psychological constitution, that he may share with all men in all societies.

On the other hand, the fact that they share an innate human nature, if it is a fact, is not sufficient to ensure that all men do or could experience and think alike if their experiencing and thinking are also conditioned by enculturation and if cultural differences are insurmountable. The anthropological evidence is, however, that cultural differences can be overcome. Cultural assimilation is as much an established fact as is cultural variation. When two societies merge, when one conquers the other, for example, their two cultures tend to merge also. Even when independent societies interact, there is often cultural borrowing of one from the other or a mutual cultural adaptation. Moreover, when individuals enculturated by different societies meet, it is often the case that they learn from one another and, to a limited extent, overcome their cultural differences. In fact, if this were not possible, it would be impossible for an anthropologist from one society to go into another society and come to understand its language, its culture and its way of life. Finally, it should be pointed out that one way in which cultural differences can be overcome is by reasoning, by rational discussion between representatives of different cultures, particularly if critical challenge and response is supplemented with shared experiences in both societies. Although the fact that the way in which a person experiences and thinks is determined by enculturation does prove that there does not now exist a universal community of human beings all of whom experience and think alike, it does not prove that such a critical community could not come into existence through the processes of cultural assimilation and critical discussion.

The existence of individual differences in perception, thinking, feeling, drives and temperaments remains. Does this rule out the possibility that ethical agreement would emerge from rational discussion between individual human
beings? Well, the natural sciences, including the science of psychology, are presumably empirical; that is, the ultimate grounds for the claims of objective truth in science are human experiences. Individual differences are not limited to factors like drives and attitudes of particular relevance to ethics; they also extend to the sensory perceptions upon which the sciences are based. If our individual differences in perception do not force us to reject the claim to truth in science, including the science of psychology that establishes the existence of such differences, then our individual differences in attitudes, drives and temperament do not necessarily force us to retract the claim to objective truth in ethics.

The psychological truth about individual differences does, however, prevent us from asserting that all men experience and think in the same way. Not only do individuals from different cultures perceive and infer differently, but any two individuals from the same society differ in their ways of experiencing and drawing conclusions. In fact, the same person perceives himself and his world or weighs the pros and cons in moral decision quite differently on different occasions. Given such individual differences, how is it possible for the process of rational criticism between individuals and reflective thinking within the individual to project an ideal claim to truth upon which all men would agree in the end?

It is not possible, or at least not rationally justified, to project any truth upon which all men would agree after indefinite reasoning. We cannot expect irrational or nonrational persons, the insane or feeble-minded, to agree with the consensus of the critical community. But the disagreement of abnormal persons is no threat to the claims to truth and validity, for these claim only a limited agreement. To claim that a statement is objectively true is to claim that it would be accepted after indefinite criticism by all men who experience and think in the normal way and who are fully aware of all relevant considerations. To claim that an argument is objectively valid is to claim that it would persuade after indefinite criticism every man who thinks in the normal way and who has or accepts its premises. Therefore, it is not required that there be any universal way of experiencing and thinking common to all human beings; what is required is that there be a normal way of experiencing and thinking among human beings.

Are the psychological facts about individual differences incompatible with the existence of a normal way of experiencing and a normal way of thinking among human beings? I do not believe so, provided normality is understood properly. What is normal in human experience and inference must not be taken to be what is common or shared, something possessed by all normal human beings and lacking in all abnormal ones. What is normal is a statistical norm, a typical way of experiencing or thinking constructed out of individual differences. Such a statistical normality can be said to exist provided individual differences tend to cluster about some median or mode. The existence of individual differences is quite compatible with the existence of a normal way of experiencing and thinking since these differences tend to fall into a bell curve of normal distribution when plotted upon a graph. If my arguments are cogent, the anthropological facts about enculturation and the psychological facts about individual differences do not prove that there is no normal way of experiencing and thinking in the human community.

On the other hand, my arguments do nothing to prove the positive conclusion that there actually is any such normality among men. I suggest, with considerable hesitation, that there are two reasons to believe that there is a normal way of experiencing and thinking. First, the science of psychology can generalize about the experience and thought of human beings. To be sure, psychology has not managed to establish as interesting or precise scientific laws about men as one might wish. Still, there is a science of human psychology that does generalize about the mental states and activities of human beings. Although this does not imply that all men are alike in all psychological respects, it does imply that their differences in sensing, feeling, thinking and acting fall into specific normal patterns that can be scientifically known. Second, the fact of human communication implies that most human beings experience and think in a normal way. If there were no psychological similarity between human beings, they could not come to learn each other's languages or understand each other's utterances. Since there are public languages, there must be enough similarity between the thinking and experiencing of individual men for these languages to exist. Therefore, I believe that there actually exist a normal way of experiencing and a normal way
of thinking among human beings. It is on this basis that I claim that the process of critical discussion among human beings would, if carried on far enough, result in a critical community that agrees on the objective truth of its conclusions, including its conclusions about value and obligation.

5. Disagreement about Ways of Thinking

The process of criticism, of challenge and response between human beings, projects an ideal of objective truth, of statements and beliefs upon which all the members of the critical community would come to agree; but this community and its claim to truth are limited to those who think in the normal way. This reminds us that there are people who think in abnormal ways, who stand outside the critical community either by choice or because they have been ejected from it. Suppose that the outsider repudiates the normal way of thinking and claims that his abnormal way of thinking is better or the only correct way of thinking. What justification can a person possibly have for thinking in the normal way rather than in some other way?

This is not a purely academic question, for it is possible, within limits, to control how a person thinks. The administration of LSD seems to modify thinking so that practical results of action are considered unimportant and present feeling is disproportionately weighted. It might be possible to produce a pill analogous to a tranquilizer or to perform an operation similar to a prefrontal lobotomy so that the subject would think the harmful consequences of an action entirely irrelevant to judgments of right and wrong. It also seems possible to indoctrinate people to think in very different ways, as ascetic training in some monasteries and the Nazi training of their SS troops illustrate. Although we might be tempted to brand this brainwashing, they may reply that it is moral education. Since a person can choose his way of thinking, the reasonable man may wonder what justification he has for thinking in the way he does.

Why think in the normal way? Basically, my answer is that thinking in the normal way is required for rationality, since the claim to validity is restricted to the community of normal thinkers. One must be rational in order to reason, and one should reason in order to arrive at the truth. But this answer seems to beg the question, for the truth is the ideal outcome of valid reasoning and validity is defined in terms of thinking in the normal way. Let us imagine another way of thinking, some abnormal psychological pattern. A consideration that is persuasive for the normal person might not be persuasive for the person who thinks in this abnormal way, and vice versa. This different way of thinking might even project its own epistemological ideals. The "valid" argument would be one which is persuasive after criticism for everyone who thinks in this abnormal way. "Reasoning" would be using and following valid arguments. The "truth" would be whatever conclusions are supported by the weight of reasoning. Now if the rational man can argue that his way of thinking is an indispensable means to the truth, the relational man can reply that his very different way of thinking is an indispensable means to the truth. How can one judge one justification more adequate than the other without begging the question?

My suggestion is that we try to show that one should pursue the truth rather than the truth. The rational justification for seeking the truth is that the truth is immensely valuable, both intrinsically and instrumentally. Now is the truth more or less valuable than the truth? Is the set of convictions that would arise from reasoning more or less valuable than the set of convictions that would emerge from reasoning? Until we know what the truth is, what convictions would arise from reasoning, we will find it hard to estimate its value. Can we predict, even roughly, what the truth will be? This depends upon whether we have any way of predicting precisely how the pill, the operation or indoctrination will modify a person's way of thinking.

If we cannot specify just what the alternative way of thinking would be, then we have no way of knowing what the truth would be. Under these circumstances, the choice of whether or not to think in the normal way is the choice between thinking in a way that has proved valuable and thinking in another way of unknown value. The latter alternative would be a blind guess, a stab in the dark, and experience shows that blind choices are most unreliable means to achieve anything worthwhile. Therefore, under these circumstances the reasonable thing to do is to continue to think in the normal way. Still, the imaginative person may be haunted by the thought that there might be a better way of thinking. Can we somehow prove that the nor-
mal way of thinking is the best of all possible ways? I do not see how. Therefore, I would justify the normal way of thinking in this case only by arguing that it is more reasonable to choose a known good than to choose something of entirely unknown value.

Suppose, on the other hand, that it were possible to predict the nature of the alternative way of thinking. We do, in fact, have considerable knowledge about certain sorts of abnormal thinking, such as that of the feeble-minded, the neurotic, the drunk and the drug taker. Under these circumstances, the nature of the choice is different, for one might be able to predict the nature of the truth and, consequently, to make some estimate of its value. To see what form such a decision might take, let us consider one or two possible kinds of reasoning.

Imagine, for example, that by performing some operation or administering some drug we could change a person so that he becomes completely unsympathetic. He does not hate all other people, but he is completely indifferent to their welfare. It seems to me that this would alter his conclusions about what he ought to do. Since he would no longer be moved by the welfare of others, he would not consider it relevant to his decisions. Accordingly, he would never come to the conclusion that he ought to sacrifice his own lesser welfare for the greater good of others. This new way of thinking promises at first glance to be profitable. Might it not be better for a person to choose to reason in this way rather than to reason in ours?

It makes a big difference precisely what alternative one has in mind. One might be choosing to change everyone's way of thinking or to change only one's own way of thinking. If some world dictator were to modify the thinking of all human beings so that all became completely unsympathetic, this would create new intersubjective ideals of reasoning and the truth. But this result would be most unfortunate. The situation might not be quite as bad as the war of all on all described by Hobbes, but surely it would be far worse than the present lot of man. Cooperation would be made more difficult and mutual help would be much less; remove all compassion from human nature and the life of human beings would lose much of its value. Therefore, it is better for all of us to think in the normal way rather than to reason in this new way.

But the contemplated alternative might be rather different. One might be choosing to become unsympathetic oneself while leaving the thinking of other human beings unchanged. This alternative seems more promising, especially if one imagines, like Thrasy machus, that one can use the altruism of others for one's own selfish purposes. Nevertheless, this choice turns out to have some undesirable consequences. First, critical discussion would be curtailed. One might still discuss purely factual issues with others, but just in those areas where one's own thinking was different from theirs there could be no critical community. Their standards of validity would be irrelevant to one's own arguments that claim validity instead, and they could not be expected to recognize the validity of one's ethical arguments. This means that the individual would have to think things through for himself without the aid of critical discussion to help him arrive at the truth. Second, is one supposed to communicate one's conclusion to others or not? If one does, others will probably be shocked; they will probably respond with disapprobation, retaliation, and even indoctrination. These responses would detract considerably from the good life. On the other hand, to continually keep one's conclusions to oneself imposes upon one the constant strain of pretense and robs one of the communication so important to a social animal like man. Finally, is one supposed to act on one's newly discovered truths? If not, the promised advantage of never having to sacrifice one's own welfare for others vanishes; but if one does act on one's new ethical convictions, one will find oneself in conflict with those about one. This does not promise a very desirable life, either. My conclusion is that the choice of selfish reasoning in preference to normal reasoning is so bad as to be unjustified. If this is the alternative, one ought to choose to think in the normal way.

In reaching this conclusion, however, I have been using the normal utilitarian standards of right and wrong. This suggests a very different kind of reasoning. Suppose we change the subject's thinking so that he ceases to pursue value and shun disvalue; he now considers good results a reason against doing an action and disvalue created a reason for acting. This new form of reasoning might establish the moral truth that one ought always to choose what we would condemn as the worst of all possible acts. Should one choose to think in this abnormal way?
This sort of reasoning would probably lead to ethical conclusions just the opposite of the normal ones. If human beings continue to act on their ethical convictions, the results would be universally harmful. I argue that this proves that we ought not to reason in this way, that it is far better to think in the normal way than to think in this alternative way. But I am assuming, as I have in all my pragmatic arguments, that one ought to pursue value and shun disvalue. From the standpoint of the relational man, my conclusion, rational as it is, must be condemned as completely and perversely irrational. Using reasoning to determine how one ought to think, any relational man will conclude that the harmful consequences of reasoning are just what recommend it. How can this disagreement be resolved without begging the issue?

At this point it is crucial to distinguish two very different questions. One might ask "why continue to reason rather than changing to reasoning?" or one might ask "why reason rather than reason now?" The question "why continue to reason?" poses a genuine problem whenever there is available some way to change one's way of thinking. It is this question to which I have been addressing myself. The rational justification for continuing to reason rather than choosing to reason in the ways I have described is that the truth that results from reasoning is very valuable and the truths that result from reasoning are either of unknown value or very much less good or very harmful.

But in giving my pragmatic justification for continuing to reason I am now using reasoning. This suggests the question "why reason rather than reason right now?" This question has no answer, but it needs none since it poses no real problem. There is no choice whether or not to reason now. The normal man simply finds himself thinking in the normal way, at least normally. Although he can choose to think differently in the future, he cannot choose to think differently in the present, right now. The rational man does not beg the question when he now decides whether to continue reasoning by using reasoning because there is no question to beg when we get down to the way one now thinks. Here we are down to bedrock, not convention but human nature. All reasoning and all justifying rises from the rock of actual human thinking, but this rock itself stands in need of no rational justification.

6. Conclusion

It is often argued that ethical statements cannot be objectively true because we disagree so often and so radically in ethics. To assess this sceptical argument we must distinguish the various kinds of ethical disagreement and determine precisely how disagreement might undermine the claim to objective truth. Our disagreement on ethical conclusions, on judgments of value and obligation, is no serious threat to the claim to truth because it is quite possible that this kind of disagreement can be overcome by further reasoning. Our disagreement on ethical principles, fundamental as it is, does not prove that we lack the premises required to rationally justify our ethical conclusions because the ultimate reasons for our ethical conclusions are not ethical principles but factual statements and the experiences on which our factual knowledge is grounded. Our disagreement on ethical reasoning, especially on the validity of conductive inferences from factual descriptions of individual objects and acts to judgments of value or obligation of them, does not show that our ethical conclusions cannot be justified by objective reasoning because it remains possible that the critical community can come to agree on the validity of ethical arguments by continuing the process of rational criticism indefinitely in time. The crucial challenge to objective truth in ethics is not that we actually disagree on ethical conclusions, premises or reasoning, but that ethical disagreement would or could remain at the ideal limit of an indefinite process of criticism. I have argued that the critical process of challenge and response tends toward agreement rather than disagreement because there is a normal way of experiencing and a normal way of thinking among human beings. The most radical sort of ethical disagreement would be disagreement on whether one ought to think in the normal way. One can give a rational justification for continuing to think in the normal way by showing that this is the means of arriving at the truth, which is very valuable; one need not justify thinking in the normal way now because one has no choice as to how one thinks at the present time. My conclusion is that no kind of ethical disagreement undermines the claim to an objective truth in ethics. This is not to prove that judgments of value and obligation are objectively true or false; it is only to refute the
sceptical argument from actual or possible ethical disagreement. It is philosophically important to refute this argument because it is so often used and accepted and so seldom examined critically either by those who accept it or those who reject it.

Washington University

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