

TREATISE ON BASIC PHILOSOPHY

Volume 8

ETHICS:
THE GOOD AND THE RIGHT

TREATISE ON BASIC PHILOSOPHY

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ETHICS *The Good and the Right*

MARIO BUNGE

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VOLUME 8

Ethics:

THE GOOD AND THE RIGHT

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GENERAL PREFACE TO THE *TREATISE*

This volume is part of a comprehensive *Treatise on Basic Philosophy*. The treatise encompasses what the author takes to be the nucleus of contemporary philosophy, namely semantics (theories of meaning and truth), epistemology (theories of knowledge), metaphysics (general theories of the world), and ethics (theories of value and right action).

Social philosophy, political philosophy, legal philosophy, the philosophy of education, aesthetics, the philosophy of religion and other branches of philosophy have been excluded from the above *quadrivium* either because they have been absorbed by the sciences of man or because they may be regarded as applications of both fundamental philosophy and logic. Nor has logic been included in the *Treatise* although it is as much a part of philosophy as it is of mathematics. The reason for this exclusion is that logic has become a subject so technical that only mathematicians can hope to make original contributions to it. We have just borrowed whatever logic we use.

The philosophy expounded in the *Treatise* is systematic and, to some extent, also exact and scientific. That is, the philosophical theories formulated in these volumes are (a) formulated in certain exact (mathematical) languages and (b) hoped to be consistent with contemporary science.

Now a word of apology for attempting to build a system of basic philosophy. As we are supposed to live in the age of analysis, it may well be wondered whether there is any room left, except in the cemeteries of ideas, for philosophical syntheses. The author's opinion is that analysis, though necessary, is insufficient — except of course for destruction. The ultimate goal of theoretical research, be it in philosophy, science, or mathematics, is the construction of systems, i.e. theories. Moreover these theories should be articulated into systems rather than being disjoint, let alone mutually at odds.

Once we have got a system we may proceed to taking it apart. First the tree, then the sawdust. And having attained the sawdust stage we should move on to the next, namely the building of further systems. And this for three reasons: because the world itself is systemic, because

no idea can become fully clear unless it is embedded in some system or other, and because sawdust philosophy is rather boring.

The author dedicates this work to his philosophy teacher

Kanenas T. Pota

in gratitude for his advice: “Do your own thing. Your reward will be doing it, your punishment having done it”.

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PREFACE TO
ETHICS

This book is about values, morals, and human actions. It is also about axiology (the study of value systems), ethics (the study of moral codes), and action theory. It is concerned with both private and public values, morals, and actions. In particular, it seeks to uncover the roots and functions (biological and social) of valuation and morality. As well, it attempts to sketch a value system, a moral code and a general plan of action that may help us tackle the dreadful problems of our time.

We live in dangerous times. For the first time this may be the last time. A thesis of this book is that we have been marching blindly to the brink lured by wrong values and guided by wrong morals. But it is also a thesis of this book that such wrongs can be righted through gradual global social reforms, and that we are still in time to do so.

If the above theses are true, then value theory, ethics and action theory are nowadays a matter of life and death rather than just subjects of academic interest. In other words, it has become vitally important to know not only what values, morals and action patterns are, but also which are the values and morals we should live by, and which actions we should take.

The classical philosophers are of little help to find plausible and useful answers to these questions, for they never faced the possibility of the extinction of the human species as a result of nuclear war or environmental degradation. Nor could they make use of contemporary social science to work on axiological, ethical or praxeological problems. Our predicament is unique, and so is our chance to extricate ourselves from it.

Before the 1960s most value theorists and moral philosophers used to dwell in an ivory tower: they specialized in metaethics, were generally indifferent to real life problems, and seldom committed themselves to any substantive views on values and morals. (Bertrand Russell was an exception, but few professional philosophers took him seriously. He dealt only with large issues and anyone could understand him. Worse, he was a maverick.)

This situation has changed dramatically over the past quarter-

century: value theory and moral philosophy have never been as alive as nowadays. Haunted by the spectres of nuclear war, environmental degradation, and social injustice, value theorists and moral philosophers have descended in droves from the ivory tower to the agora. On the whole this descent to social reality has been healthy: there is less hair-splitting and pointless analysis, less rhetoric and hypocrisy. But at the same time there is also more shameless defense of the supreme axiological blunder — the worship of possessions — and the supreme moral vice — selfishness.

The revival of value theory and ethics can be attested to by anyone who bothers to peruse the philosophical journals published in the course of the last few years. This revival is particularly welcome at a time when philosophy as a whole is at a low ebb — so much so that some philosophers have proclaimed its death while others have taken leave of reason. But the current flourishing of ethics may be an indicator of the general crisis of modern civilization, for people do not usually reflect on problems about values and morals until they face them, and nowadays most of us face them daily by the dozen.

This is the last volume of my *Treatise on Basic Philosophy*, on which I started to work two decades ago. It is consistent with the previous volumes, in particular with the naturalistic, dynamicist, emergentist and systemist ontology, as well as with the realistic and ratioempiricist semantics and epistemology formulated therein. However, the present book may be read independently of its companions.

Finally an autobiographical note. I began writing on value theory and ethics nearly three decades ago (Bunge 1960, 1961, 1962a). When I planned this volume I thought that writing it would be plain sailing. I was counting on my calculus of value (1973, 1975) and on decision theory, which I had applied to a political problem (1973). Fortunately, before I started to work on this book I realized the impossibility of a general value calculus, and I became disillusioned with decision theory (see Vol. 7, Ch. 5, Sect. 5.2). These disappointments forced me to take a fresh look at values, morals, and actions. This task proved to be more formidable than anticipated — and, by the same token, more rewarding too. I hope that my second thoughts on values, morals and action are an improvement on my earlier ones.

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My debt extends to a number of persons whom I never thanked enough while they were alive. Among them are the value theorists and moral philosophers Risieri Frondizi and Alfred Stern, both of whom I befriended in 1944 when I launched the philosophical journal *Minerva*, and whose courageous lives have been a model.

My greatest debt is of course to my parents. My mother Mariechen, who did her best to keep me on a short Lutheran leash, served a prison term at age 62 for conspiring against a military dictatorship. My father Augusto — physician, sociologist, writer, and congressman — combined an intense love of life and respect for nature with devotion to the public good and passion for social justice and liberty. Among other books he wrote one on moral and social philosophy: *El culto de la vida* (1915). He taught me through example that politics need not be dirty, and that it ought to be the arm of morality.