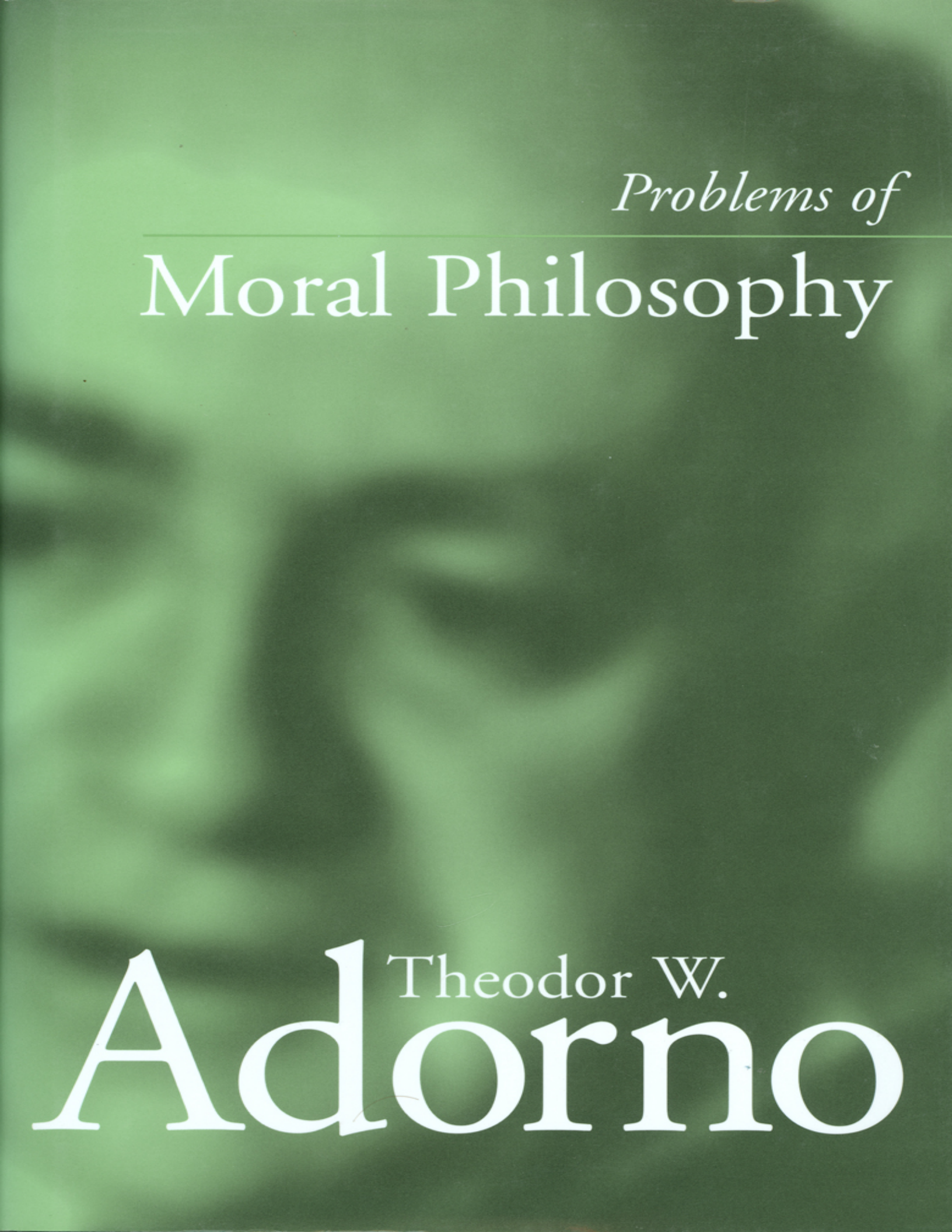
Problems of
Moral Philosophy
Theodor W.
Adorno

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PROBLEMS OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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LECTURE ONE
7 May 1963

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You have come in such large numbers to a course of lectures whose subject cannot be expected to exert an immediate attraction for young people that I have the feeling that I owe you something of an explanation and even an apology, and that I should warn you against excessive expectations. When you attend a course of lectures given by someone who has written a book on the good – or rather the bad – life,[1] it is reasonable to assume that you – or many of you, at least – have come in the hope that these lectures will teach you something about the good life [*das richtige Leben*]. And that you will be able to learn something from these lectures that will be of direct benefit to you in your own lives, whether in private, or in public, in other words, in your existence as political beings. The question of the moral[2] life is one that will be put, or so I hope, in the course of these lectures. The form it will take will be to enquire whether the good life is a genuine possibility in the present, or whether we shall have to make do with the claim I made in that book that 'there can be no good life within the bad one.'[3] An assertion, incidentally, that – as I discovered later – comes very close to one made by Nietzsche.[4] But in these lectures I shall not be able to offer you anything resembling a practical guide to the good life. And you for your part would be wrong to expect anything like direct, immediate help for your own immediate problems, whether private or political – and the realm of politics is very closely connected to the sphere of morality. Moral philosophy is a theoretical discipline and as such must always be distinguished from the burning

questions of the moral life. Kant, for example, insisted that it was not essential to have studied moral philosophy in order to be a decent or a good or a just human being.[5] Or I may cite a more recent statement that occurs to me. I am thinking of Max Scheler's book on ethics, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik* – a book diametrically opposed to that of Kant – where he distinguishes between ethics as an immediate – or what he terms a 'lived' – world view, of the kind expressed in epigrams, maxims and proverbs, and moral philosophy which has no direct connection with a lived reality.[6] The problems I shall be discussing here and which belong in the general horizon of your philosophical education are quite definitely those of moral philosophy as a theoretical discipline. So if I am going to throw stones at your heads, if you will allow the expression, it will be better if I say so at the outset than for me to leave you under the illusion that I am distributing bread. And if the bread that you hope to receive fails to materialize, this may mean that the stones I have thrown will miss, or – and this is my real hope – they will not turn out to be too terribly hard. For the theorems that I shall lay before you will not be too rigorously scholastic.

When I say that I hope that the stones will miss you or that they will not prove to be too terribly hard, I have something particular in mind that may in a certain sense help to re-establish that link with your own living interest. For even though I am quite clear in my mind that a course of lectures on moral philosophy can be of no direct assistance in your lives, I am no less convinced that you are justified in your desire to learn about the good life. The only problem here is that I do not in any sense feel authorized to hold forth to you about that. And precisely because I am aware that very many of you have great confidence in me, I would be extremely reluctant to abuse that confidence by

presuming to slip into – even if it were only through my lecturing style – the false persona of a guru, a sage. I should wish to spare you that, but I should also wish above all to spare myself the dishonesty of such a pose. Nevertheless, when I say that there will be a link to you and your vital interests, I would like to indicate what it will *not* consist in. For however justifiable your interest in gaining useful knowledge from a course of lectures on moral philosophy, there is nowadays a great danger of what might be termed an illicit shortcut to practical action. And we must make clear from the outset that moral philosophy has a necessary connection with practical action. In the various divisions of philosophy moral philosophy is customarily defined as practical philosophy, and Kant's chief work, one that is devoted to moral philosophy, bears the title of a *Critique of Practical Reason*. I must mention here *en passant* that the concept of 'the practical' should not be confused with the degenerate concept that has become current nowadays and can be seen in the way people refer to a practical person as someone who knows how to tackle problems and cope with the problems of life in a clever way. 'Practicality' here goes back to its philosophical origins in πρᾶξις and πράττειν and to the Greek meanings of doing, acting. In the same way, the themes of Kant's practical philosophy – in the second part of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the section dealing with the 'Transcendental Doctrine of Method' – are formulated in the celebrated question that is undoubtedly familiar to you all: 'What shall we do?'[7] According to Kant, who is, God knows, not the worst guide to the conceptualization of such problems, this question 'What shall we do?' is the crucial question of moral philosophy. And I would like to add that it is the crucial question of philosophy in general. For in Kant practical reason takes an unambiguous priority over theoretical reason,[8] and in this respect Fichte was less of

an innovator when compared to Kant than he imagined.[9] Today, this question has undergone a strange modification. I have found again and again that when carrying out theoretical analyses – and theoretical analyses are essentially critical in nature – that I have been met by the question: 'Yes, but what shall we do?', and this question has been conveyed with a certain undertone of impatience, an undertone that proclaims: 'All right, what is the point of all this theory? It goes on far too long, we do not know how we should behave in the real world, and the fact is that we have to act right away!' I am not blind to the motives behind this protest, particularly in the light of the atrocities perpetrated under the Nazis, and also of the difficulties of direct and effective political action in our own day, difficulties that lead people obsessively to put such questions as: 'Very well, if there are barriers everywhere and every attempt to create a better world is blocked off, what exactly are we supposed to do?' But the reality is that the more uncertain practical action has become, the less we actually know what we should do, and the less we find the good life guaranteed to us – if indeed it was ever guaranteed to anyone – then the greater our haste in snatching at it. This impatience can very easily become linked with a certain resentment towards thinking in general, with a tendency to denounce theory as such. And from there it is not very long before people start to denounce intellectuals. Golo Mann, for example, has attacked theoreticians and intellectuals in a whole series of publications – including one that is aimed at me personally, and especially my *Theory of Half-Education*,[10] the question of what 'half-education' is – and has argued in particular that you cannot really 'do' anything with theory.[11] This reproach about the uselessness of theory, this impatient need to hurl oneself into action without delay spells the end of any kind of theoretical work and contains within itself,

teleologically, as if it had been assumed from the outset, a relationship to a false, in other words, an oppressive, blind and violent form of practice.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I urge you therefore to exercise a certain patience with respect to the relations between theory and practice. Such a request may be justified because in a situation like the present – one about which I do not entertain the slightest illusion, and nor would I wish to encourage any illusions in you – whether it will be possible ever again to achieve a valid form of practice may well depend on not demanding that every idea should immediately produce its own legitimating document explaining its own practical use. The situation may well demand instead that we resist the call of practicality with all our might in order ruthlessly to follow through an idea and its logical implications so as to see where it may lead. I would even say that this ruthlessness, the power of resistance that is inherent in the idea itself and that prevents it from letting itself be directly manipulated for any instrumental purposes whatsoever, this theoretical ruthlessness contains – if you will allow me this paradox – a practical element within itself. Today, practice – and I do not hesitate to express this in an extreme way – has made great inroads into theory, in other words, into the realm of new thought in which right behaviour can be reformulated. This idea is not as paradoxical and irritating as it may sound, for in the final analysis thinking is itself a form of behaviour. In its origins thinking is no more than the form in which we have attempted to master our environment and come to terms with it – testing reality is the name given by analytical psychology to this function of the ego and of thought – and it is perfectly possible that in certain situations practice will be referred back to theory far more frequently than at other times and in other situations. At any rate, it does no harm to air this question. It is no

accident that the celebrated unity of theory and practice implied by Marxian theory and then developed above all by Lenin should have finally degenerated in [Stalinist] dialectical materialism to a kind of blind dogma whose sole function is to eliminate theoretical thinking altogether. This provides an object lesson in the transformation of practicism into irrationalism, and hence, too, for the transformation of this practicism into a repressive and oppressive practice. That alone might well be a sufficient reason to give us pause and not to be in such haste to rely on the famous unity of theory and practice in the belief that it is guaranteed and that it holds good for every time and place. For otherwise you will find yourself in the position of what Americans call a joiner,[12] that is to say, a man who always has to join in, who has to have a cause for which he can fight. Such a person is driven by his sheer enthusiasm for the idea that something or other must be done and some movement has to be joined about which he is deluded enough to believe that it will bring about significant changes. And ultimately, this enthusiasm drives him into a kind of hostility towards mind that necessarily negates a genuine unity of theory and practice.

Ladies and Gentlemen, what is at stake here is that you should be aware that Fichte's famous assertion that ‘morality is self-evident’ cannot be upheld, at least not in the way that Fichte intended at the time, even though the statement undoubtedly contains a grain of truth.[13] To be more specific, we may say that a particular historical conjuncture plays a role here. What I mean by this is that morality may very well appear to be self-evident in a world in which people feel themselves to be the exponents of a class in the ascendant, together with all the concrete ideals it wishes to make real, as was the case with the great bourgeois thinkers around the turn of the nineteenth century. The situation is quite different when every

important practice whose theory one tries to grasp has the unfortunate and even fatal tendency to compel us to think in a way that conflicts with our own real and immediate interests. So in these lectures what is at issue is that we should reflect on the problems of moral philosophy – and not that I should present you with any specific norms or values or whatever other ghastly terms may offer themselves. To put it in another way, the subject of moral philosophy today requires that we do not naively respond to such questions about how to lay down absolute rules about behaviour, about the relation between the general and the particular in reference to behaviour, and about the immediate creation of a moral good. Such questions cannot simply be accepted at face value, or as they appear to so-called feeling, which often may turn out to be a poor guide. Instead they must be raised to the level of conscious reflection, so far as that is possible. Moral philosophy in this sense means making a sustained effort – without anxieties or reservations – to achieve a true, conscious understanding of the categories of morality and of the questions that relate to the good life and practice in that higher sense, instead of continuing to imagine that this entire complex of issues must be excluded from the realm of theory on the grounds that it is practical. For when people take this latter view what it usually amounts to is that practice, which is commonly claimed to be superior to theory, and purer than it, is then taken over ready-made from some authoritarian source, whether it be the traditions of one's own nation or another prescribed ideology. And in consequence they never reach the point that in Kant's eyes constitutes the locus of right action, namely the moment of freedom in the absence of which the good life cannot even be properly conceived. Such a formulation of the task of reflecting on moral philosophy of the kind I have just given you, however fragmentary, would moreover be in tune with the present stage of advanced

psychological knowledge – that is to say, of psychoanalysis. For the essence of the latter is that ‘where the id is’, in other words, where the unconscious, where darkness rules, there ‘ego shall be’, in other words, there shall be consciousness.[14] Put differently, something like a true practice is only possible when you have passed through theory.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I should like to show you at this point, or rather I should like to express something that may well have occurred to you in a more or less well articulated form. This is the awareness that we cannot simply assert that all you need to arrive at correct practice is a correct theory. And those among you who have been kind enough to listen to me attentively will have observed that I did not in fact make any such claim. Instead, all I claimed was that there was a greater and more urgent need of theoretical intervention at the present time. On the other hand, it is no less true – and I believe that this must be asserted no less bluntly than the need for theory – that theory and practice do not slot into each other neatly, that they are not simply one and the same thing, but that – if you will forgive the hackneyed image – a kind of tension obtains between the two. Theory that bears no relation to any conceivable practice either degenerates into an empty, complacent and irrelevant game, or, what is even worse, it becomes a mere component of culture, in other words, a piece of dead scholarship, a matter of complete indifference to us as living minds and active, living human beings. This even holds good for art for, however mediated, however indirect or concealed it may be, such a link must nevertheless exist. Conversely – as I have already pointed out – a practice that simply frees itself from the shackles of theory and rejects thought as such on the grounds of its own supposed superiority will sink to the level of activity for its own sake. Such a practice remains stuck fast within the given reality.

It leads to the production of people who like organizing things and who imagine that once you have organized something, once you have arranged for some rally or other, you have achieved something of importance, without pondering for a moment whether such activities have any chance at all of effectively impinging on reality.[15] This brings me to a fundamental theme of moral philosophy, namely the distinction between norms that simply relate to the pure will, as Kant taught, and norms that in the course of reflecting on moral questions also include the objective possibility of being made real in practice, as Hegel maintained in opposition to Kant. This problem has been formulated as the distinction between an ethics of conviction [*Gesinnungsethik*] and an ethics of responsibility [*Verantwortungsethik*], and we shall have something to say on this subject at a later date.[16]

However that may be, and however inseparable these two distinct disciplines – theory and practice – may be, since after all they both have their source in life itself, there is one further factor necessary for practice that is not fully explicable by theory and that is very hard to isolate. And I should like to emphasize it because I regard it as fundamental to a definition of the moral. We may perhaps best define it with the term spontaneity, the immediate, active reaction to particular situations. Where this factor is missing, or we might also say, where theory does not wish in the last analysis to achieve anything, something like a valid practice is not possible. Moreover, one task of the theory of the moral is to set limits to the scope of theory itself, in other words, to show that the sphere of moral action includes something that cannot fully be described in intellectual terms, but also that should not be turned into an absolute. What I have in mind is something that should not be treated as if it were an absolute, but that must in fact stand in a definite relationship to theory if it is not to

degenerate into mere folly. Ladies and Gentlemen, I find it extraordinarily difficult to find words to describe this factor, and this is no accident, since we are attempting to describe in theoretical terms an element of morality that is actually foreign to theory – and so to describe it in theoretical terms is not without an element of absurdity. But I believe that we found a clue to it a little while ago when I was telling you about the concept of resistance, even though what I was saying then was that resistance today should be sought in the drive towards theory. For that something should be done is a belief held by everyone nowadays; what is found to be problematic is when someone decides not to do anything for once, but to retreat from the dominant realm of practical activity in order to think about something essential. Now what I wish to emphasize is the factor of resistance, of refusing to be part of the prevailing evil, a refusal that always implies resisting something stronger and hence always contains an element of despair. I believe that this idea of resistance, then, may help you best to see what I mean when I say that the moral sphere is not coterminous with the theoretical sphere, and that this fact is itself a basic philosophical determinant of the sphere of practical action.

Perhaps I can illustrate this with something I experienced, a very simple experience, in the first few months after I returned to Germany – it is now almost fourteen years ago – from emigration. I had the opportunity to make the acquaintance of one of the few crucial actors of the 20 July[17] and was able to talk to him. I said to him, 'Well, you knew very well that the conspiracy's chances of success were minimal, and you must have known that if you were caught you had to expect a fate far more terrible than death – unimaginably terrible consequences. What made it possible for you to take action notwithstanding this?' – Whereupon he said to me – you will all know his name, but

I do not wish to name him here – 'But there are situations that are so intolerable that one just cannot continue to put up with them, no matter what may happen and no matter what may happen to oneself in the course of the attempt to change them.'[18] He said this without any pathos – and I should like to add, without any appeal to theory. He was simply explaining to me what motivated him in that seemingly absurd enterprise on 20 July. I believe that this act of resistance – the fact that things may be so intolerable that you feel compelled to make the attempt to change them, regardless of the consequences for yourself, and in circumstances in which you may also predict the possible consequences for other people – is the precise point at which the irrationality, or better, the irrational aspect of moral action is to be sought, the point at which it may be located. But at the same time, you can see that this irrationality is only one aspect, because on the level of theory the officer concerned knew perfectly well how evil, how horrifying this Third Reich was, and it was because of his critical and theoretical insight into the lies and the crimes that he had to deal with that he was brought to the point of action. If he had not had this insight, if he had had no knowledge of the vile evil that prevailed in Germany at the time, he would quite certainly never have been moved to that act of resistance. But we then find that this other factor comes into play, the conviction – for whatever reason – that 'things cannot go on like this, I cannot allow this to happen, regardless of what might happen to me or others in consequence.' This will perhaps help to give you something of an idea of the complexities of what is meant by moral philosophy in a concrete instance. This feature that I have just described introduces something alien into moral philosophy, something that does not quite fit, precisely because as a theory moral philosophy tends to overlook such matters. It is difficult to express this, but

there is something shameful about my standing here in the comfort of a lecture room, making comments of this sort to you who are all sitting more or less comfortably in your seats, about situations like that of the men of the 20 July – which, God knows, have been the stage on which the moral dialectic of our age has been acted out. When you confront this with practice – and practice is when it hurts, when it really hurts – there is something cynical here that is hard to ignore. This cynicism can also be detected in the concept of moral philosophy as a theoretical discipline which I began by describing, simply because moral philosophy almost compulsively ignores this element that I have just described and that theory cannot accommodate. To that extent we might even say that because the moral involves action it is always more than thought, and that moral philosophy, the reflection on moral questions, stands in something of a contradiction to the object of its own reflections. Moreover, there are situations – and I believe that we find ourselves still living in such a situation – in which the contradiction involved in thinking about something when we should be doing something about it is especially flagrant. But on the other hand, this contradiction is not one we can simply ignore. And when I said to you that our task was to achieve a greater consciousness – and the task of moral philosophy today is above all else the production of consciousness – it was precisely such things that I had in mind. In other words, where we find contradictions, where we find ourselves unable to eliminate contradictions through the stratagems of theory or conceptual devices, what we have to do is to become conscious of them, to generate the strength to look them in the face, instead of arguing them out of existence by more or less logical procedures.

This sense of the inappropriate of which I have been speaking is particularly prominent in the terms ‘morality’

and ‘moral philosophy’ which, as you all know, were subjected to scathing criticism by Nietzsche, who may be said to have echoed a discontent with the terms which goes much further back in time. Only a few days ago, to my great surprise, I found the term ‘moralistic’ being used in a pejorative sense as early as Hölderlin, which shows that the problematic nature of the term goes right back to the age of so-called German idealism.[19] Morality derives from the Latin word ‘mores’ and ‘mores’ means, as I hope you all know, ‘custom’ [*Sitte*]. In consequence moral philosophy has been translated as ‘Sittenlehre’ [moral teaching] or ‘Lehre von der Sittlichkeit’ [doctrine of morality].[20] If we refrain from emptying this concept of custom of meaning from the outset, to the point where the word no longer conveys anything at all, we will doubtless be reminded of the customs that prevail within specific communities, i.e. among specific nations. What I would say is that the reason why the question of moral philosophy has become so very problematic today is that the substantial nature of custom, the possibility of the good life in the forms in which the community exists, which confront the individual in pre-existing form, has been radically eroded, that these forms have ceased to exist and that people today can no longer rely on them. And if we act as if they did still exist, this will only lead to the preservation of specific spheres of life in which a little of the old order still appears to have survived in a provincial form – as if this were in itself the guarantee of a good or moral life. The resistance to the term ‘moral’ as seen in ‘moralistic’, that you surely all feel, becomes explicable at this point. It is based on the fact that we all chafe at the narrow limitations imposed by prevailing ideas and existing circumstances and resent the assumption that these in some sense already embody the good life.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as a consequence of this there has long since been a tendency to smuggle in the notion of

ethics as a substitute for the concept of morality, and I once suggested that the concept of ethics was actually the bad conscience of morality, or that ethics is a sort of morality that is ashamed of its own moralizing with the consequence that it behaves as if it were morality, but at the same time is not a moralizing morality.[21] And if I may be frank with you, it seems to me that the dishonesty implicit in this is worse and more problematic than the blunt incompatibility of our experience with the term 'morality', an incompatibility that at least permits us to extend or otherwise build on what Kant or Fichte understood by the concept of the moral and thereby to arrive at more authoritative and harder insights. In contrast the concept of ethics in many ways threatens to dissolve – chiefly because of its connection with the so-called concept of personality. Ethos, the Greek word ἦθος, from which the expression 'ethics' is derived, is very difficult to translate. In general it is rightly rendered as 'nature' – it refers to the way you are, the way you are made. The more recent concept of 'character' comes very close to that of ἦθος, and the Greek proverb ἦθος ἀνθρώπον δαίμων – the ethos is the daemon, or we might call it the destiny, of man – points in the same direction. In other words, to reduce the problem of morality to ethics is to perform a sort of conjuring trick by means of which the decisive problem of moral philosophy, namely the relation of the individual to the general, is made to disappear. What is implied in all this is the idea that if I live in accordance with my own ethos, my own nature, or if, to use the fine phrase of our own time, I realize myself, then this will be enough to bring about the good life. And this is nothing but pure illusion and ideology. An ideology, moreover, that goes hand in hand with a second ideology, namely the illusion that culture and the adaptation of the individual to culture brings about the refinement and self-cultivation of the individual, whereas

culture stands opposed to moral philosophy and is actually open to criticism from that quarter. For all these reasons I believe it is better to retain the concept of morality, albeit critically, than to soften up and obscure its problematic nature from the outset by replacing it with the sentimental concept of ethics. But I think I need to spell out these last ideas more precisely in the next lecture to make certain that you all see what I mean.

NOTES

1 Adorno is referring to *Minima Moralia*. In the dedication to Max Horkheimer he writes: ‘The melancholy science from which I make this offering to my friend relates to a region that from time immemorial was regarded as the true field of philosophy, but which, since the latter's conversion into method, has lapsed into intellectual neglect, sententious whimsy and finally oblivion: the teaching of the good life. What the philosophers once knew as life has become the sphere of private existence and now of mere consumption, dragged along as an appendage of the process of material production, without autonomy or substance of its own’ (*Minima Moralia*, p. 15).

2 Conjectured substitute for ‘possible’ in the original.

3 *Minima Moralia*, p. 39. [Jephcott's translation reads: ‘Wrong life cannot be lived rightly.’ *Trans*.]

4 A comparable statement in Nietzsche could not be found. In Lecture 17 on 25 July 1963 Adorno again refers to this parallel, but adds ‘although it is phrased very differently’. Adorno presumably has in mind *Human, All Too Human*, I, nos 33 and 34.

5 See the *Groundwork*: ‘It would be easy to show here how human reason, with this compass in hand, is well able to distinguish, in all cases that present themselves, what is good or evil, right or wrong – provided that, without the least attempt to teach it anything new, we merely make reason attend, as Socrates did, to its own principle; and how in consequence there is no need of science or philosophy for knowing what man has to do in order to be honest and good, and indeed to be wise and virtuous’ (p. 69).

6 Scheler says: ‘A sharp distinction must be made […] in the whole field of ethics: between an ethics “practised and applied” by ethical subjects […] and groups of ethical principles that can only be derived from a methodical, logical procedure for which that “applied ethics” provides the material. That is to say, between the ethics of a natural, practical world view expressed in natural language (to which the proverbial wisdom of all times and places belongs, as well as all traditional maxims and the like) – and the more or less scientific, philosophical and theological *ethics* that is accustomed to “justify” that applied ethics and “ground” them in the highest principles, even though these “principles” do not need to be *known* by the subject of the applied ethics.’ Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik. Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus*. Now in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2, 4th edn, Berne, 1954, p. 321. [Translated by Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk as *Formalism and Non-Formal Ethics of Values*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill., 1973. *Trans.*]

7 See *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 635, A 805 / B 833, where Kant asks this question, albeit in the singular: ‘What ought I to do?’

8 Adorno goes further into the relation of theoretical and practical reason in Lecture 3 on 14 May 1963 (see pp. 25–8).

9 Adorno fluctuates in his view of Fichte's contribution to moral philosophy. The earlier course of lectures entitled *Problems of Moral Philosophy* of 1956/7 proceeds from Fichte's attempt ‘to synthesize [Kant's] theoretical and practical reasons. In the process practical reason is given precedence. ‘It can be recognized today that Fichte's development of Kant's line of thought contains an important kernel of truth: Today conduct worthy of human beings is one that is not blindly dependent upon external factors, that is not beholden to the concrete, that does not look to things for the fulfilment of its existential needs and that is inspired by the consciousness of what is human even while inhabiting a world overwhelmed by things’ (Lecture of 20 November 1956, Vo 1310; cf. also Lecture 11 of 4 July 1963, p. 115).

10 See Adorno's lecture to the Berlin Congress of German Sociological Society in May 1959, now in *GS*, vol. 8, pp. 93–121.

11 Adorno is referring to the essay ‘Dubious Knowledge’ in which Golo Mann replied to a lecture by René König that the latter had given in Munich in 1960 with the title ‘The Sociology of the 1920s’. ‘Mere knowledge, the striving for knowledge for its own sake, would never satisfy me. We find this even today among those whom Mr König calls *revenants* because their ideas of education stem from that period. Let us take Theodor W. Adorno, whose name he mentions, with his analyses that go no further than asking what things are, what is half-education, what is the theory of half-education today? I would say in reply that such an approach takes us nowhere. What I want to know is, how can we overcome

ourselves, how can we help others?' (Golo Mann, 'Fragwürdige Erkenntnis', in *Wissen und Leben*, the in-house journal of W. Kohlhammer Verlag, Stuttgart, 1960, no. 15, p. 13). Adorno also commented on Mann in a letter to Franz Böhm of 15 July 1963 in which he enclosed excerpts from an essay by Mann 'On Anti-Semitism' (from *Geschichte und Geschichten*, [History and Histories], Frankfurt am Main, 1961, pp. 169–201): 'Here, as agreed, are the passages from the works of Golo Mann. Needless to say, the comments on the Jew-free Bonn Republic reflect worse on him than the abuse he flings at me and which amounts to the assertion that a theorist is a theorist. I should like to emphasize that what concerns me in all this is not so much my own sensibilities as the unspeakable anti-intellectualism that is being proclaimed.'

12 Adorno used the English word. In his handwritten notes he remarked 'The *more uncertain* the practice, the more frantically it is sought after. The constantly recurring complaint: What shall we do? The joiner with a cause.'

13 This statement as formulated could not be found in Fichte. It is possibly a conflation of Fichte's position on ethics with that of Friedrich Theodor Vischer's assertion 'The moral is self-evident', from *Auch Einer*. *Eine Reisebekanntschaft*, Stuttgart, 1879, now available with an afterword by Otto Borst, Frankfurt am Main, 1987, p. 25.

14 Adorno alludes here to Freud's formula of cultural work: 'Where id was, there ego shall be'. Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, in *The Pelican Freud Library*, vol. 2, Harmondsworth, 1973, Lecture 31, p. 112. For Freud's conception of morality see also 'The Ego and the Id':

‘From the point of view of instinctual control, of morality, it may be said of the id that it is totally non-moral, of the ego that it strives to be moral, and of the super-ego that it can be supermoral and then become as cruel as only the id can be.’ In *The Pelican Freud Library*, vol. 11, Harmondsworth, 1984, p. 395.

15 These considerations underpinned Adorno's subsequent criticism of the student movement. Cf. ‘Marginalien zu Theorie und Praxis’, in *GS*, vol. 10.2, pp. 759–82, and also *Resignation*, ibid., pp. 794–9.

16 See Lecture 15 of 18 July 1963 and Lecture 16 of 23 July 1963. [This distinction goes back to Max Weber's early essay ‘Politics as a Vocation’. For an ethics of conviction what matters is remaining true to principle, ‘keeping the flame of pure intention undampened’, even where this might lead to harmful results. An ethics of responsibility, on the other hand, demands that the individual take full responsibility for the total consequences of his actions. Although Max Weber believed that the ‘genuine’ man would combine the two, he thought that only the ethics of responsibility was appropriate to the field of politics, regarding the man of conviction as ‘otherworldly’. H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1947, pp. 77–128. *Trans*.]

17 [This was the plot of 20 July 1944 under the leadership of Claus Graf Schenk von Stauffenberg and Carl Goerdeler. Although Stauffenberg managed to set off a bomb in Hitler's bunker in East Prussia, the plot failed, the leading conspirators were brutally executed and a wider circle of associates were ruthlessly hunted down. *Trans*.]

18 In the course of lectures entitled *Problems of Moral Philosophy* which he gave in the Winter Semester of 1956/7, Adorno did reveal the name (cf. Vo 1307), and he also noted it in the manuscript of the first lecture of the present series (cf. Vo 8799). He was talking about Fabian von Schlabrendorff (1907–80), a lawyer and, later, a judge in the Federal Constitutional Court. He had been an aide-de-camp to the Chief of the General Staff. He was arrested on the grounds of belonging to the circle responsible for the coup of 20 July 1944, but was acquitted in March 1945. [It may be added that he was tortured, but did not break down, and he refused to reveal the names of any fellow-conspirators. In his memoirs he claims that Roland Freisler, the leading Nazi judge, was holding his (Schlabrendorff's) file in his hand when the building in which the case was set down for hearing suffered a direct hit in an air raid, killing Freisler at once. *Trans*.]

19 Adorno probably has in mind a laconic aphorism handed down by Gustav Schwab. It is to be found in the Große Stuttgarter edition of Hölderlin's works, ed. Friedrich Beißner, vol. 4.1, Stuttgart, 1961, p. 293: ‘That man has a higher moral calling in the world can be learnt from the assertions of morality and is evident in many things.’ For the development of Hölderlin's critique of morality see especially his letter of 1 January 1799 to his half-brother Karl Gock (ibid., vol. 6.1, pp. 326–32), and also his *Entwürfe zur Poetik* [Sketches on Poetics] (Frankfurter Hölderlin edition, ed. Wolfram Groddeck and Dietrich E. Sattler, Frankfurt, 1979, vol. 14, p. 48).

20 [German has three terms – *Moral*, *Ethik*, and *Sitte*/*Sittlichkeit* – to cover the meanings given by ethics and morality in English. There is no fully satisfactory English equivalent for *Sitte*, whose meanings range from

custom, through (good) manners, to morality (for example, the *Sittenpolizei* are the vice squad). The overlap with *Moral* (morals, morality) compounds the problems created by the overlap between ‘morals’ and ‘ethics’ in English. Often no distinction need be made: Kant's *Metaphysik der Sitten* is regularly translated as ‘The Metaphysics of Morals’. On the other hand, Hegel emphasized the social roots of *Sitten* as the customs of a people, thus establishing the tendency to distinguish between (personal) morality (*Moral*) and (social) ethics (*Sitte*). In the light of Adorno's discussion of ‘ethics’ that distinction is ruled out here. *Trans*.]

21 In the earlier course of lectures entitled *The Problems of Moral Philosophy* Adorno had said: ‘The concept of ethics is much more popular than moral philosophy. It does not sound so inflexible, it appears to have loftier, more human connotations; it does not simply abandon human actions to the realm of chance, but contains the promise of something like a specific sphere of universality against which human behaviour can be measured. Ethics is bad conscience, conscience about oneself. It is the attempt to talk about conscience without appealing to the element of compulsion it contains’ (Lecture of 8 November 1956, Vo 1295).

LECTURE TWO
9 May 1963

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In my last lecture I promised that I would follow up in greater detail my hurried comments in the last few minutes on the concepts of morality and ethics. This is because we need to gain a better understanding of the general field we are about to explore and perhaps to make it easier to grasp the direction of the subject as a whole. You will recollect that the concept of morality is problematic above all because it has its origin in ‘mores’, in other words, because it postulates a harmony between the public customs in a country and the moral, ethically correct behaviour, the moral life of the individual. And I explained to you then that this harmony, or what Hegel called ‘the substantial nature of the ethical’, this belief that the norms of the good are directly anchored and guaranteed in the life of an existing community, can no longer be assumed today. The chief reason for this is that the community has now acquired such overwhelming power in its relations with the individual and that countless processes have forced us to conform so utterly that harmony can no longer be produced between our own individual destiny and what is imposed on us by objective circumstances. However, when I reflect on what I said to you last time by way of criticism of the concept of morality, I find it unsatisfactory because it does not really get to the heart of our feeling of discomfort with morality. The issue is not really the verbal, philological connections between custom [*Sitte*] and individual morality. What is at stake is rather what Simmel would have called the ‘cachet’ of the term morality. A philosophical concept like morality – and it is important that you should

understand this – is not simply identical with its pure meaning. Over and above that it has an aura, a layer of connotations which are not necessarily reducible to that meaning. And the concept of morality is in fact bound up with a particular notion of moral rigour, of conventional narrowness and conformity with a whole series of given ideas that have now become problematic. So if you reflect on the fact that in ordinary usage the terms ‘moral’ and ‘immoral’ have come to be associated with questions of sexuality and that these in their turn have long since been superseded by psychoanalysis and by psychology in general, you will have some general idea about the constraints that are at work in the concept of the moral. This has been articulated by Georg Büchner in a very profound and also witty passage in *Woyzeck* where the Captain rebukes Woyzeck, a man who radiates decency with every fibre of his being, for having an illegitimate child, and he goes on to oscillate between the assertion that Woyzeck is immoral and that ‘he is a good man’. When he tries to explain why Woyzeck is immoral he finds himself reduced to the tautology ‘that he is immoral because he lacks morality’. So in the Captain we find that this notion of morality has become completely separate from the idea of moral goodness. He sees absolutely no contradiction in claiming both that Woyzeck is a good man and also that he is immoral.[1] Nietzsche's entire objection to what is known as morality is based on ideas of this sort. If I were to formulate the matter in Nietzschean terms, I would probably say that the concept of morality has been severely compromised by the fact that, consciously or unconsciously, it carries around a lot of baggage in the shape of ‘ascetic ideals’. Furthermore, it is not really possible to find any justification, or at least any profoundly rational justification for these ideals; they are no more than a front behind which all sorts of more or less murky interests lie

entrenched.[2] This may perhaps give a clearer idea of the resistance we feel towards the word ‘morality’ nowadays than the connection with ‘custom’ which formed my starting-point last time and about which I should like to say more today.

This unwillingness to equate the moral with a restricted, narrow and superseded ascetic ideal is what has given rise to the attempts to replace the term ‘morality’ with that of ‘ethics’. I have already indicated to you that this concept of ethics contains the idea that people should live in accordance with their own nature, and that accordingly such a concept of ethics appears to offer something of an antidote to a morality that is forcibly imposed from outside. I have already suggested that this antidote is not without its own difficulties. At its simplest, this entire concept of ethics contains something that only emerged fully into the light of day with the theory of Existentialism – which essentially regards itself as an ethical, moral movement, albeit in a negative sense. For here the idea of the good life, of right action, is reduced to the notion that one should act in accordance with the way one is anyway. Hence by acting in accordance with one's ethos, one's nature, mere existence, the fact that one is ‘constituted’ [*geartet*] one way rather than another, becomes the yardstick of behaviour.[3] The roots of this belief can be traced, strangely enough, back to Kant, for whom the concept of personality – which however does have a rather different meaning in his writing, one we shall need to discuss in detail – appears for the first time as a crucial ethical category. I should like to observe at once that in Kant personality means something like the abstract, general conceptual unity of everything that makes up a person. Or we might say, personality refers to all the determinants of the acting human being that do not refer to the person as a merely empirical, a merely existing, natural being, but, following