Chapter 2
Proposition Types

The Descriptive/Moral Distinction

Think back to the Harold and Horace argument. Once I had laid it out and put in a missing piece, we had three component propositions that formed the argument. These were:

> Hitting people is wrong.
> Harold hit Horace.
> So,
> Harold did something wrong.

As I remarked at the time, these propositions are not all of the same sort. The second one is a proposition about what the world is like (or, at least, that bit of it formed by Harold and Horace). It purports to *describe* an event – the hitting of Horace by Harold. Put another way, it is trying to report the facts of the matter, to say what was occurring. The other two are different. They are not trying to tell you any claimed fact about the world; rather, each is a moral judgement. Have a look at the last proposition first. As with the second proposition, it is talking about Harold but it is *not* telling you something (supposedly) true about him in the matter-of-fact manner of the second. Rather, the author *morally appraises* a particular action of Harold's as *wrong*, as not being what he should have done. In this third proposition, the author expresses moral disapproval of Harold hitting Horace (for it is obvious from the context that the 'something' in question was the hitting). The third proposition is a *particular* moral value judgement of a *particular* event. The first proposition is not. Rather, it is a *general* moral principle being advanced (and appealed to in guidance of the judgement of the Horace and Harold event). Although I trust that it is clear enough what the difference between the two is, what I wish to emphasize for present purposes is not this difference between the first and third propositions but their similarity as moral propositions and their difference to the fact-claiming descriptive nature of the second proposition.

Getting this difference clear is the major business of the chapter – propositions of these two sorts are central to discussions of professional ethics.

The distinction has a number of labels in the philosophical literature, none of them terribly satisfactory. As you might come across them, I will run quickly through a few before fixing on one for us to use. Anyway, running through them will approach the distinction from several different angles, thus, hopefully, helping to fix it in your mind.

One common tag for the distinction is 'the is/ought distinction'. I hope you can see the point of the label. That Harold hit Horace is purportedly something that *is* the case. Or, more precisely, *was* the case – but tense is beside the point here, we can hardly operate with the clumsy 'is-was-will be/ought' label for the distinction! Compare this second proposition with the third one – that Harold did something *wrong*. Here the proposition is not telling you what *is* (or was) happening, it is passing moral judgement upon what happened. Although the word used to express the judgement is 'wrong', not 'ought', it would be easy enough to rewrite it saying 'Harold did what he ought not to have done' (not quite the same in meaning but close enough for now anyway). Of course this is 'ought *not*', not 'ought'. But, as before, we are hardly going to operate with the clumsy 'is-is not/ought-ought not' to cater for negatives. Given that one ignores tense, and does not fuss about negatives, and realizes that most propositions of a moral sort which are expressed using language other than 'ought' can be translated into that sort of language, and so on, the 'is/ought' tag is a useful enough one. However, it is not one I choose to use.

Another common tag is 'descriptive/normative'. 'Descriptive' because propositions like the second one are trying to *describe* what the world is like (or some aspect of it). 'Normative' because moral principles are taken to establish a standard for behaviour, they are taken to be action-guiding, or directing, and your moral judgements about particular actions are made by reference to their conformity or otherwise to your moral standards. Have a look at our little Harold and Horace argument above and you will see just that sort of thing going on – so, not a bad tag. Nonetheless, the tag is a little bit awkward in that some so-called *descriptive* propositions will not actually succeed in describing at all. Try: 'The moon is made of green cheese' – this is simply false; it is not succeeding in describing what the moon is like. Perhaps, if spoken by some naive person, it could be thought of as an *attempt* at describing the moon, as a *putative* description but it does not actually describe anything. I suppose we could modify the tag so that it was 'putatively descriptive/normative' but clumsiness is setting in fast here. Also, 'normative', although a word in general usage, is not all that frequently employed by undergraduates. So, I will not be using this tag for the distinction either.

A third tag is 'empirical/evaluative'. 'Empirical' basically means: known through the senses (either directly, as in knowing that one has a cup in one's hand, or indirectly, as in knowing some quite general law of science on the basis of experiment and observation). One trouble is that, again, this is hardly a word robustly present in your vocabulary. Another is that I will be wanting to lump into this 'is, descriptive, ...' half of our distinction some propositions that are implausibly thought of as *empirical*, ones like: 'Jesus loves me', 'There is life after death', 'Gertrude has extra-sensory perception' and so on. 'Evaluative' is OK except that we do not just make *moral* evaluations, the word is used more widely than that. I might look at the clouds and say: 'My evaluation of the cloud patterns is that it will rain before dawn'; nothing very moral/ethical about that. We also talk of *aesthetic* evaluations, say of a painting by an art critic. Again, I will not

use this tag. (Sometimes you will see crossbreeding of the previous two tags to get 'descriptive/evaluative'; I will not bother to comment upon such hybrids.)

A fourth tag is 'fact/value'. One trouble with this is similar to what has been mentioned above concerning 'evaluative'. We tend to think of 'values' as covering more than just *moral* values. Another is that 'fact' has the connotation of proven truth. One tends not to use it for propositions that one is hesitant about. So, for instance, the proposition: 'there is intelligent life somewhere else in our galaxy' is rather speculative and it grates to put it in a basket labelled 'fact'. Yet, in this book, I do wish to be putting into just *one* basket any proposition which is, however tentative, an *attempt* at describing the world out there, trying to say what reality is like. (This is whether such an attempt is successful or otherwise and whether it is guesswork or proven by some body of evidence.) So, I am a bit unhappy with this common tag for our distinction as well.

There are other candidates in the literature but they are even more troublesome or obscurely technical and I will not bother you with them. So, if all of the labels in the literature have their problems, what will I use? What I want is a not too technical, not too misleading tag that is fairly crisp and short. Nothing is without problems and, with misgivings, I am simply going to employ the tag: '*descriptive/ moral*'. I know in advance that this will muddle some students but it's the best I can think of. Let me flag some possible misinterpretations in the hope that, having explicitly noted them, you might avoid muddle. First, I direct you to my comments about failed descriptions above. The way I will be using the tag 'descriptive', even a failed description like 'the moon is made of green cheese' will count as descriptive. Think of 'descriptive' as shorthand for 'putatively, or attempting to be, descriptive' if you like. Second, although 'moral' cuts the field of misinterpretations down a bit from that present with 'value' or 'evaluative', there is one worry with it. We tend to use 'moral' in two ways. In one, the contrast for moral is *im*moral. 'Moral' is used as a synonym for 'good' as opposed to bad. Example: 'Murgatroyd is a very moral person'. In the other, the contrast for moral is *non*-moral (or, as it is less commonly put, *a*moral). Here, the idea of 'moral' is that the proposition is something or other to do with goodness and badness, right and wrong and so forth – 'morally-loaded' if you wish. Example: 'The discussion then moved on to moral issues'. In contrast to moral in this sense, the idea of something being *non*-moral is that something non-moral is morally neutral, or nothing to do with morality. So, whether I brush my teeth with a blue toothbrush or a green toothbrush is, as far as I can see, without any moral implications at all. It is not moral, but not in the sense that it is immoral, it is a *non*-moral activity. As I will be using the term, a moral proposition will be one that is something or other to do with morality; the contrast will be with *non*-moral. That means that, whether some proposition that you are analysing judges some activity in a way you agree with or not, so long as it is a morally-loaded proposition, one making a moral judgement (as opposed to one having nothing to do with morality), you will be categorizing the proposition as moral, not descriptive. So, even if you think abortion is immoral, you will be classifying the proposition: 'abortion is ethically right' as a moral proposition.

Our task at this stage is merely to reliably categorize propositions into types, not to make our own moral value judgements on the issues.

Wading through all of the above will have given you some feeling for the nature of the distinction that I want you to get clear here. However, I know from experience that it can take a while to get things straight so I will try to reinforce the above with some examples before moving on to other things.

Key Ideas

Moral Propositions express the author's moral judgement about what is right or wrong, should or should not occur and so on.
Descriptive Propositions express the author's claim about what the world is like.

Some Examples

In the following examples, the 'D' propositions are descriptive and the 'M' propositions are moral. See if you can understand explicitly why each proposition is categorized as descriptive or moral. What I am trying to foster is greater awareness of your use of language than is common for most people.

D1 Most teachers think that positive reinforcement is the most ethical form of behaviour control.

D2 No teachers employ positive reinforcement.

D3 Positive reinforcement has no effect on behaviour.

M1 No teachers should employ positive reinforcement.

M2 It is only morally proper to employ positive reinforcement if the individual in question is too young to understand the worth of some activity.

M3 It is usually wrong to bribe someone to do something.

D4 All patients wish to be told the truth about their condition.

D5 Sometimes telling a patient what is wrong with them lessens their chances of recovery.

M4 Patients should always be told the truth about their condition if it is clear that that is what they want.

M5 It is more important for someone to recover from illness than it is for them to know what is wrong with them.

D6 All Clients expect their counsellor to treat anything they say in a counselling session as 'in confidence'.

D7 If a counsellor reveals the contents of a counselling session in response to a police request, then their client can sue.

M6 Counsellors should be able to make their own professional judgements as to when it is proper for them to reveal the contents of a counselling session to a third party.

M7 Preventing crime is not more important than respecting a client's trust that what is said to a counsellor will not be revealed to anyone else.

D8 The price of some scientific knowledge is animal suffering.

D9 It is impossible to prevent some scientists carrying out stem cell research even if it is made illegal.

M8 No knowledge is worth having if its price is animal suffering.

M9 Stem cell research is immoral.

The 'D' prefixed propositions are descriptive propositions, they *purport* to describe what reality, or some aspect of it, is like. That some of them fail in this task (D2, for instance, is false) does not stop them being descriptive propositions, propositions of the sort that one would use to *attempt* to describe the way things are.

The 'M' prefixed propositions, on the other hand, are not ones trying to describe to you some fact about the world (or, at least, they are not doing this in a straightforward way; there are some subtle theoretical issues here which I will ignore for present purposes; we will discuss them in Chapter 9). Rather than making a proposition trying to describe how something *is*, they propose morally how it *ought* (or ought not) to be, they make a moral judgement as to the rightness or wrongness of some state of affairs. The current task is be able to detect that they are moral (as opposed to non-moral) regardless of whether you agree with them or not.

Sometimes, you will find it easy enough to work out what is what. But sometimes it will be more vexing and difficult. Basically, this is a matter of practice and coaching and feedback from your tutor. There are some techniques that will help you, though, and I turn to these in the next section. But before I do, it might be helpful if I 'think aloud' and talk my way briefly through why I categorize my examples as I do. I will also take the chance to begin attuning you to some subtleties that will be revisited in later chapters.

Analysis of the Examples

D1 Most teachers think that positive reinforcement is the most ethical form of behaviour control.

My guess is that many of you would have allocated this as a moral proposition. What might have caught your eye is the phrase 'most ethical'. In deeming something to be the most ethical form of behaviour control, surely one is morally approving of it? This last point is correct; but note that it is *not* the speaker of D1 who's passing that sort of judgement. All the speaker is doing is reporting the judgements of *other* people. The speaker is *describing* the thinking, in particular the moral thinking, of most teachers (or trying to, she may have things muddled). It is a descriptive proposition *about* the moral views of others; the speaker is expressing none of her *own* moral views about positive reinforcement.

D2 No teachers employ positive reinforcement.

The proposition is false but in terms of our system of categorization it counts as a descriptive proposition. The speaker is *attempting* to describe the behaviour of teachers, just failing to do so correctly.

D3 Positive reinforcement has no effect on behaviour.

Much like the previous one: in terms of our categories, this is a descriptive claim, just one that is false (as far as I know, positive reinforcement does have an effect in many cases).

M1 No teachers should employ positive reinforcement.

In this case, unlike the first one, we are getting the *speaker's own* moral judgement (note the word 'should' of which more in a moment). The speaker is saying what, in his view, a moral duty of teachers is.

M2 It is only morally proper to employ positive reinforcement if the individual in question is too young to understand the worth of some activity.

Again, the speaker's own moral views are being expressed, it is not a report of the views of others and the views expressed are moral ones – note the words 'morally proper'. All that is different to the previous one is that it is a slightly more complex conditional proposition (note the 'if').

M3 It is usually wrong to bribe someone to do something.

This is fairly straightforwardly a moral proposition; the only thing to note is the mild complexity of the proposition given the word 'usually'. Presumably the author is suggesting that there would be occasions, or circumstances, where she would morally approve of bribery.

D4 All patients wish to be told the truth about their condition.

This is a straightforward descriptive proposition where what the author hopes to describe are the wishes of other people – in this case, patients. It is worth noting how sweeping and exceptionless the claim about them is ('all ...'). Almost certainly, this proposition is false as I imagine there are exceptions. It being false does not, you will recall, stop it being categorized by us as descriptive.

D5 Sometimes telling a patient what is wrong with them lessens their chances of recovery.

Yet another fairly obviously descriptive claim. Note the 'sometimes': unlike its predecessor, this claim is un-sweeping and rather restricted in its claimed scope of application. One last thing: although the word 'wrong' is used it is not a moral use of the word. What is under consideration is telling a patient what illness, injury and so on they have, not their moral faults.

> M4 Patients should always be told the truth about their condition if it is clear that that is what they want.

The speaker is saying what should occur and it's fairly obviously a moral 'should' (there are other, non-moral, uses of the word as we will shortly see). The only thing to note is that, as with M2, the moral proposition is conditional (note the 'if').

> M5 It is more important for people to recover from illness than it is for them to know what is wrong with them.

Again, a moral proposition expressing the author's views as to what is more important (morally speaking) out of illness recovery and knowledge of the nature of one's illness.

> D6 All Clients expect their counsellor to treat anything they say in a counselling session as 'in confidence'.

As with some earlier ones, the author is attempting to describe the psychology of other people so, a straightforward descriptive claim. Again, note how sweeping the claim is ('all').

> D7 If a counsellor reveals the contents of a counselling session in response to a police request, then their client can sue.

A descriptive proposition claiming to tell us what the law is concerning the confidentiality of counselling sessions (even when the breach of confidence is in response to a police request). As with some earlier ones, note the conditional nature of the proposition ('if …, then').

> M6 Counsellors should be able to make their own professional judgements as to when it is proper for them to reveal the contents of a counselling session to a third party.

This is on the same general topic as the previous one but, in this case, we are not being told what the speaker's ideas are about what the law is, we are getting the speaker's own moral views as to what is right and what is wrong (note the moral use of the word 'should'). Note that there is nothing inconsistent in agreeing with this proposition and with D7. One might agree that people legally can sue and

think that this is a bad law and that a morally better situation would be allowing counsellors to exercise professional discretion in the matter. In short, what is legal is not the same idea as what is morally good.

> M7 Preventing crime is not more important than respecting a client's trust that what is said to a counsellor will not be revealed to anyone else.

As with an earlier one, a comparative moral value judgement about what is more important than what.

> D8 The price of some scientific knowledge is animal suffering.

This is a straightforward descriptive proposition that you will simply not get some items of scientific knowledge unless there is some animal suffering. Presumably what is in mind is that the suffering of some animals (those used in experiments, say) is a necessary part of the process that leads to that knowledge. Note that it is neutrally descriptive and we simply cannot tell whether the author thinks the price is (morally) worth paying or not.

> D9 It is impossible to prevent some scientists carrying out stem cell research even if it is made illegal.

This is a descriptive proposition which expresses the speaker's views as to our chances of eliminating such research by legal banning. You may agree with the proposition or you may be more optimistic (or is it pessimistic?) concerning the power of the law but your agreement or disagreement is irrelevant to the task of allocating it as a descriptive claim.

> M8 No knowledge is worth having if its price is animal suffering.

In this case, however, we are definitely getting the author's own moral views; note the word 'worth'.

> M9 Stem cell research is immoral.

This is pretty obviously to be categorized as a moral proposition; note the use of 'immoral'.

Further Detail on the Distinction and Some Clue Words

Clue Words Introduced

I have noted a tendency at times for my own students to radically misconstrue whether some proposition is a descriptive proposition or one issuing some sort of moral value judgement. There is no easy recipe for distinguishing these better but there are a few helpful clues in our language. Most of our ideas are expressed in language and value judgements are no different. Accordingly, we have developed a range of linguistic ways of expressing value positions. My first suggestion then is that you be very meta-cognitively deliberate and self-conscious about the language you are using or reading (if, say, it is another person's proposition which you are trying to categorize). Look carefully at what is said, at the words used. Turns of phrase which are commonly used to express value-judgements are: '*should*', '*ought*', '*right*', '*good*', '*a* (or '*the*') *right*', '*important*', '*duty*', '*proper*' and so on; and, of course, 'should not', 'wrong', and the rest of the negations. As a rough rule of thumb, you are not going to be able to express a moral proposition without this sort of terminology and you can take its presence as *likely* signalling the presence of a value proposition. Call such words 'clue words'; they tip you off to the possibility that you have a moral proposition present. It is only a 'clue' though and you cannot just automatically assume that the presence of one of these words means that you have a moral proposition (have a look at my discussion of D5, above). Although they are *not* a sure-fire guide, or some sort of recipe, and they have to be employed with some thoughtfulness as all of these words can *also* be used to express *non*-moral (as opposed to immoral) propositions as well as ones to do with morality, they are, nonetheless good *clues*.

Key Ideas

Clue Words (like: 'should', 'right', 'important' and their negations) provide a clue, but *only* a clue, to the possible presence of a moral proposition; they are not to be used as a mindless recipe in place of thoughtful analysis.

Descriptive Uses of Clue Words – Some Examples

Almost all of the language that we employ to express moral propositions, the clue words as I have called them, can *also* be used to express descriptive propositions. Consider 'should' as an example. One might have the proposition:

>   M10 No child should have to live in fear of physical violence.

What this seems to do is enjoin a moral duty upon all of us to do what we can to intervene and prevent any child from having to live in fear. This is a clear-cut moral proposition. By this I mean that, whether you agree with it or not (and it is swiftly open to serious criticism as being wildly overstated despite its superficial 'motherhood and apple pie' attractiveness as a value; but that's another story), it is clearly a moral, as opposed to descriptive, proposition. Even if you come to judge it as not morally acceptable as a stance, as *im*moral, if you like, it is still moral as opposed to *non*-moral.

But sometimes 'should' can be used in a descriptive proposition. For instance, say some piece of medical equipment was not working and the technician, after some repairs, pronounces:

> D10 There, it should work now.

Am I to take it that she is signalling her value stance to the effect that the equipment has a moral duty to work now? Of course not. All that is happening is a (quite morally neutral) expression of the *likelihood* or *probability* of various cause-effect chains being in place ready for activation. Similarly, say that a colleague is late for a conference and the meeting secretary phones his room and reports with:

> D11 He ought to be here in a few minutes.

This is *probability* talk, *not* moral appraisal talk. Contrast it with:

> M11 Jones really ought to be on time for meetings.

This does seem to be the issuing of a moral judgement.

I will not continue but *every one* of our clue words can be used in a non-moral way so attend closely to this point about care in the analysis of these clue words and ensure that you understand the above. I have found confusion of the moral and non-moral uses of 'should' and other clue words to be a major fault in those new to this sort of careful analysis and categorization of propositions.

Key Ideas

Descriptive propositions, not just moral ones, might be expressed using our clue words; so watch out!

Embedded Clue Words: More Detail

Next, I would like to have a deeper look at an issue touched upon when we analysed D1. 'Most ethical' seemed to be being used to express a moral value judgement but I observed that it was not the author's. So, despite appearances, I allocated the proposition as descriptive, not moral. This sort of situation occurs quite a bit. How a given sentence is to be analysed is all a matter of *how* the clue word occurs in whatever sentence is under scrutiny, even when it is the moral sense of the word. Consider the following, both employ 'should' and in both cases the *word* is used in the moral sense but in only the former case is the sentence being used to advance a moral *proposition*; the latter is a *descriptive* proposition. So, compare:

> M12 Rural medical practitioners should give discounts to families in poverty.

and:

> D12 Most Welsh people think that rural medical practitioners should give discounts to families in poverty.

In the former, we get the author's, or speaker's, *own moral proposition* about rural medical discounts. In the latter, we get no contribution of that sort at all. All that we get is a *descriptive* proposition reporting *other* people's values, one about what most Welsh people would decide on that moral issue. The use of 'should' is *embedded* in the proposition and not used directly to express the author's moral views. To note *their* views says nothing in itself about the rightness or wrongness of such discounts. Even if one thought the proposition about the views of most Welsh people to be true as a matter of fact (I have no idea), one could, with no hint of contradiction, go on in the next breath to morally disagree with them. That is, one could hold that no matter how many Welsh people think such discounts to be right, it is nonetheless wrong. In short, working out for yourselves what *you* take to be morally defensible answers to our questions is distinct from finding out what *other people's* answers are. Those answers of others (and their supporting argumentation) might be useful food for your thought but it will not settle the *moral* question of what *is* right; just the *descriptive* one of what some group of people *think* is right. Moral controversies are not to be settled by doing a survey. (We will return to this issue of what is right versus what people say is right in Chapter 9.)

So, look carefully at what is written: is it an expression of the author's own moral judgement? – in which case it is a moral proposition; or is it a report by the author of the moral judgements of someone else? – in which case it is a descriptive proposition (purporting to describe the contents of their mind).

Key Ideas

Sometimes, even when it is a moral use of a clue word, the word is not used to express the moral judgement *of the author* and so that proposition is *not* a moral proposition.

I will use the tag '*ambiguous proposition*' for propositions that, upon one interpretation of some key turn of phrase, fall into one type and upon another interpretation fall into another type. Ambiguous words are words with more than one meaning and I am just borrowing the general idea for our more specific present purposes. The label is apt because propositions like:

> A1 Everyone has the right to freedom of religious thought.

may mean:

> M13 Everyone has the *moral* right to freedom of religious thought.

but also may mean:

> D13 Everyone has the *legal* right to freedom of religious thought.

We cannot tell, just from looking at A1, which is meant. So, as I will use the word, an ambiguous proposition is one whose meaning is unclear in that particular way. Interpreted one way it would be a moral proposition but interpreted another way would be a descriptive proposition.

It is one thing to issue one's own moral judgement about what moral rights people should have but it is *quite another thing* to comment about what *legal* rights have been granted in some country or other. (As an aside, there is *no* such legal right in most western countries; parents are permitted to indoctrinate their children into various religious beliefs, thereby compromising their freedom of thought. Whether that is a good thing or a bad thing you might care to think about, I merely note it as a legal fact.)

So, what moral rights you think people should have and what legal rights the 'powers that be' have granted to them are two *distinct* matters; yet both use the 'right/s' turn of phrase and it can be unclear which is meant. It is not just the word 'right/s' that has this problem of ambiguous meaning: the same arises with the word 'permissible' (it can be legal or moral permissibility in question and they are not the same idea), with the word 'accountable' and with some others.

What makes such propositions ambiguous is that we have no guidance from the sentence, or the context of its utterance, or writing, just which way it's supposed to be interpreted. Be alert to this problem in trying to understand the propositions

of others but also be alert to it as a problem others might have in understanding you. Why not make it crystal clear just what you intend and write in '*moral* right', if that is what you mean, instead of just 'right' (which might be misconstrued as '*legal* right')? And so on for other such expressions. Of course it is also the case that some propositions which would be ambiguous in isolation are not when you attend to the surrounding *context*. So, if A1 had been uttered in the context of a discussion of the laws of the land and what they stipulated as citizens' legal rights and responsibilities, then there would be no ambiguity whatsoever and we would understand that D13 was what was meant. So, if you are not sure, attend carefully to the context and see if that helps you work out what is meant.

Apart from the possible moral/legal confusion, another source of ambiguity in some situations is that, even with context, it is sometimes not clear if some other clue word is meant morally or not. All you can do is be as careful as you can in unpacking the ideas of others and try hard to avoid creating confusion in expressing your own ideas.

Although I have introduced the idea of ambiguous propositions as ambiguous between the category 'moral' or the category 'descriptive', this is just because we have only laid out two categories so far. As we will see, there can be some confusion across other categories as well.

So, in summary on clue words: some linguistic clues? – certainly; they are a big help so long as they are not taken to be relieving you of the obligation to think about what you read and write.

Key Ideas

Sometimes you cannot tell how a clue word is meant (it is *ambiguous*) but a lot of the time the *surrounding context* of the proposition helps resolve any such potential ambiguity.

A Common Student Error in Categorizing Propositions

Finally, just a reminder that, so far, it is *descriptive* propositions that we are contrasting with *moral* propositions. A proposition can, I have said, be descriptive and false (e.g. 'The earth is flat' or our recent example: 'Everyone has the legal right to freedom of religious thought'). A proposition might also be descriptive and highly speculative (e.g. 'There is intelligent life somewhere else in our galaxy'). In each case, the proposition is an *attempt* to describe reality, to say what the world is like – that the attempt fails, or is unjustified, is *beside the point* of categorizing the proposition as descriptive. So far, so repetitive of earlier sections. Hopefully this is clear and needs no further elaboration for you to follow the point.

However, some of your student ancestors of my experience have persisted in confusing the idea of a moral value proposition with that of a not-proven,

or speculative, but *nonetheless* descriptive, proposition. So, consider the proposition:

> D14 On average, black, homosexual, paraplegic, left-handed, fundamentalist Hindus are less capable in those skills of abstract thought apt for thinking through ethical dilemmas than those who are not.

I have no idea whether this is true or not and surmise that we would have to rate its utterance by someone as pure speculation on their part, as guesswork, as mere opinion. Despite it being guesswork, it is a guess *about* that class of people's comparative intellectual capabilities. Given this, it is a descriptive proposition, an attempt to say what reality is like. It is *not* a *moral* judgement of any sort about what *should* be the case. True or false, known or unknown, it is a descriptive proposition, not a *moral* proposition. In summary, being an unproven, or speculative, proposition about what reality is like (a guess, a mere matter of opinion), does not of itself make the proposition a moral proposition. Never mind that some proposition is just someone's speculative opinion, ask yourself what it is an opinion *about*; if it is just an opinion about what the facts are, then it is still descriptive. For it to be a moral proposition it has to be the author's view as to what is right or wrong, good or bad, and so forth.

Much the same can be said about moral propositions (although I have not found students to have the same problems here). That you disagree with it, or think it to be in moral error, does not make some proposition any the less a moral proposition. For instance, 'Lying to people is always morally permissible' might be a view that you reject but that just means that you think it to be expressing an *im*moral stance; it is still a moral proposition as opposed to *non*-moral.

Key Ideas

Do not confuse expressing a moral judgement with making a speculative 'mere opinion' claim about what facts of the world are.

Uses of Some Clue Words in Aesthetic Propositions

Sometimes when you analyse a proposition, the claim being made with the employment of one or other of these clue words is value judgemental but *not morally* so. Another category of values is that of *aesthetic* values – matters of taste – to do with beauty, ugliness and so forth. Some of our clue words can be employed to advance aesthetic value propositions, not just moral value propositions. As an illustration, were someone to say that some style of clothing was *right* for you, you would *mis*understand if you took them to be saying that the style was one that it was morally proper, or dutiful, for you to be wearing. All that is meant is that

they like that look on you. Having made this distinction between aesthetic and moral values, I will henceforth ignore it, as aesthetic value propositions are not our concern.

A Brief Summary and a Taxonomy of Proposition Types so Far

I said earlier that the main business of this chapter was to assist you get a clear conception of the distinction between *descriptive* and *moral* proposition types. So, let me first just briefly review those two types.

Descriptive Propositions

These propositions are those *supposedly* describing what reality is like. They might be tentative attempts, or even be sheer speculative guesswork or they might be proven truths. They might concern matters of particular detail or be broad sweeping generalizations. They might be true or they might be false. Whatever the detail of all of that is, we are calling them '*descriptive propositions*' – attempts to describe what reality is like.

Moral Propositions

These propositions are those where the author is taking some sort of stance concerning the moral rightness or wrongness, goodness or badness of something; a stance about what morally should or should not happen, about the moral rights, duties and responsibilities of various people and so on. Again, much as with descriptive propositions, it is irrelevant to a proposition's categorization as a *moral proposition* whether it is advanced tentatively or with great confidence, whether it is accepted by you or not and so on. All that matters is that *the author* is indeed proposing some sort of moral value judgement.

Moral propositions almost always use turns of phrase such as 'should', 'good' and so on to express the moral judgement being made; such *Clue Words*, as I called them, are, however, not a mindless recipe for the allocation of propositions as moral ones. They are but *clues* and should be used in conjunction with an intelligent appraisal of the sentence and its context as every one of the clue words has a non-moral use as well. Which leads us nicely into my next category.

Ambiguous Propositions

Ambiguous propositions, you will recall, are those that are not clearly one proposition type or another as they stand – it all depends on how some particular clue word is taken. So, some proposition could be a moral one or could be a descriptive one; we just cannot tell. (Note that some propositions that might have been ambiguous if considered in isolation might have that potential ambiguity

resolved by the context of their occurrence.) So far, the possible ambiguity has been between descriptive and evaluative proposition types (the only basic types that we have considered to date). As we will see in due course, although this is the most common type of ambiguity, things are a little bit more involved.

Mixed Propositions

So much for progress to date. I would like now to add one more proposition type to our taxonomy. I will call such propositions '*Mixed Propositions*'. The metaphor is from chemistry. Take some sand and pour it in a cup; now take some ground black pepper and pour it in the same cup. Stir well. Now remove a teaspoonful of the cup's contents. The teaspoon will contain both sand and pepper. Each retains its own separate identity (the sand is still just sand, the pepper is still just pepper) it is just that various bits of each are present in the teaspoon. Ditto with our proposition types. Sometimes more than one proposition is present in the same sentence. And on some such occasions one of the propositions is a moral proposition and another is a descriptive proposition. So, upon examining such a sentence you would be in error to just say: 'It is a moral proposition' or: 'It is a descriptive proposition' because it is more than that, it contains both of them at once.

Consider this sentence:

> DM1 Professionals arguing in front of a client causes the client to lose trust in
> their judgement and it is wrong to cause any such loss of trust.

This sentence contains both a descriptive proposition and a moral proposition bundled together. It says both that such disagreement will cause the client to lose trust in their judgement (a descriptive proposition as to what the fact of the matter is) and that such loss of trust is wrong (a moral value judgement). Such composite propositions are, for our purposes, usually most easily considered if analysed into their component bits (as just done with DM1). Once these are analysed, they break down into our two existing proposition types. So, in this case, the best way of thinking of DM1 is as these two propositions:

> D15 Professionals arguing in front of a client causes the client to lose trust in
> their judgement.

and:

> M14 It is wrong for anyone to cause the clients of professionals to lose trust in
> them.

In the case of DM1, the mixed nature of the sentence (the presence of more than one proposition, with one of them unpacking as D15 and the other as M14)

is fairly obvious because we have a blatant conjunction with the two conjuncts joined by the word 'and'. Sometimes, however, things can be not quite as obvious. Consider:

> DM2 Professionals arguing in front of a client wrongly cause the client to lose trust in their judgement.

Note the insertion of the word 'wrongly'. With that insertion DM2 says the same thing as DM1. It is just that the sentence structure bundles the two propositions together rather than separating them out to form the two conjuncts we see on either side of the 'and' as we had in DM1. The *same* propositions are there in each of our two versions; it is just more obscure in DM2 just what is going on. It is that obscurity that can trip you if you do not attend carefully to 'teasing out' all of what has been said.

As a variation on this theme, one can also have sentences which contain more than one proposition yet they are not of different types. That is, there might be more than one descriptive proposition advanced in the one sentence or there might be more than one moral value judgement. Instances are: 'Joan cried at the news but also realized that what had happened was what Jeremy would have wanted'. Here we have two pieces of information, two descriptive propositions, one about her crying and one about her realization, bundled into the one sentence. Or, try: 'Lying is wrong but so is causing people avoidable harm'. Two things are being called wrong; two moral value judgements are being made. Each of these two sentences could be broken up into its component parts and later down the track I will be talking about making sure that you do just that so that it is clear what is being said. However, for the moment, I do not want to fuss with these cases of more than one proposition but with each of them being of the same type. Our present concern is to note the possibility of propositions which are formed of a mixture of descriptive and moral propositions. It is particularly important that you be alert to these and able to unpack them into their component bits. Without a bit of care there is every chance of you simply not realizing the presence of the *moral* proposition element in mixed propositions and this can be a real impediment to thinking clearly about professional ethical matters when such sentences crop up in the enquiry. I will return to a particularly troublesome case of this (one rampant in educational, nursing, social work, counselling and other professional circles) in a later chapter (Chapter 7 on 'needs').

So, our final category so far is:

Mixed Propositions

Mixed propositions are those where more than one proposition is present in the sentence with one of them being a moral proposition and the other being a descriptive proposition (or at least that is so within the limitations of the proposition types we have dealt with so far).

In closing, note that what all of this amounts to is that, so far, we have *two basic proposition types*: *moral* and *descriptive* (ignoring aesthetic propositions). Then we have two other types that are built up from these two basic ones. *Mixed* propositions are ones where two distinct propositions are bundled together in the one sentence – one moral and one descriptive. *Ambiguous* propositions are ones where only one proposition is present but it is not clear whether it is a moral proposition or a descriptive proposition.

Key Ideas

Mixed Propositions are where a sentence has more than one proposition being stated and more than one *type* of proposition (so far, descriptive and moral).

Conceptual Propositions

As just remarked, we have so far had two basic proposition types, descriptive and moral. In this section, I want to introduce the last item in our taxonomy of proposition types. The final proposition type I will portray for you I will call '*conceptual propositions*'. For some reason, my experience has been that this is the proposition type that students have most trouble understanding – perhaps because such propositions do not crop up often. Accordingly, I will try to explain it and draw the contrast between this type and our other two basic types.

The major possibility for confusion about conceptual propositions is with descriptive ones and I will spend some time focusing upon that as a way of introducing the conceptual proposition type. (The distinction between conceptual propositions and descriptive propositions is controversial within philosophical theory but the detail of that goes beyond our present purposes.)

Let us start with a common example. What is the concept of bachelorhood, what is it that constitutes a bachelor being a bachelor, the core idea if you like, the meaning? Say we answered: 'being an unmarried adult male'. One can think of what has been offered here as constituting a proposition about the conceptual equivalence of 'bachelor' and 'unmarried adult male'. So, we could portray things in the form of a proposition to the effect that bachelors are unmarried adult males – this would be an example of what I will call 'a *conceptual* proposition'. Let us portray it in labelled form for ease of reference:

C1 Bachelors are unmarried adult males.

Contrast it with the descriptive proposition:

D15 Bachelors' favourite food is beer.

What is the difference?

I said that C1 was a way of expressing the conceptual equivalence of 'bachelor' and 'unmarried adult male'. Another way of thinking about this is that C1 seems to have its truth and falsity dependent not on *facts* about the world, things true of the people who happened to be bachelors. Rather, its truth or falsity is dependent upon the *meaning* of the word 'bachelor', the nature of the *concept*, what is essential to the very *notion* of being a bachelor, or something of that sort. If it is true, then its truth lies in meaning relationships among 'bachelor' and 'unmarried', 'male' and 'adult'. If you think it is true and I think it is false then the nature of our dispute is that we are operating with different meanings of the word 'bachelor'.

In contrast, D15 is true or false dependant upon the facts of the matter about the food preferences of bachelors, and whether it is true or false would not affect what we understood 'bachelor' to *mean*, as opposed to what the facts about bachelors are. There seems, then, on the face of it, to be a distinction to be drawn between conceptual propositions, like C1 and descriptive propositions, like D15.

Another way of grasping this distinction better is to think about how we might go about trying to establish each of the two proposition types as true or false. So, how might these propositions be tested?

On the face of it (and again philosophical controversy abounds but is bypassed here) the way that we might go about trying to work out whether or not we agree with a descriptive proposition is different to what we would look for in testing a conceptual proposition. For instance, we might expect some sort of survey of bachelors to be of help in seeing whether most (was it 'most', was it 'all'? – as an aside, note how vague the proposition was; we will talk about vagueness and clarity in the next chapter) bachelors liked beer more than any other food.

But we would not test the *conceptual* proposition by picking out a sample of bachelors and then seeing how many of them are unmarried adult males. If that were what we understood the *concept* of bachelorhood to amount to, then we would *already and automatically* have judged our sample as comprising unmarried adult males *in virtue of* judging them as bachelors. If one knows that someone is a bachelor then there is nothing further to find out as to whether they are an unmarried adult male or not. To check this sort of claim is not a matter of seeing if the bachelors have some *further* property as a matter of descriptive fact (like preferring beer) but a matter of seeing if the understanding of 'bachelor' is right in the first place. So, one might check the conceptual proposition by reflecting upon the relationship among the ideas 'bachelor', 'unmarried', 'male' and 'adult'. When I do that, it seems to me that C1 is true, true by definition if you like. 'Unmarried adult male' is indeed contained within the idea 'bachelor'. All I had to do to decide upon the truth or falsity of C1 was reflect upon word meanings and the syntax, or grammatical structure, of the sentence. I say the *syntax* of the sentence because, were our sentence to have been:

C2 Bachelors are *not* unmarried adult males.

then the presence of that all-important word 'not', together with the very same meaning relationships just discussed, would make C2 *false*. Mind you, one has to be a little bit cautious. What if we made the 'meaning relationships' nature of conceptual propositions quite explicit in a '"this" means "that"' sort of way. Try the following:

C3 'Bachelor' means 'unmarried adult male'.

As I remarked in an aside earlier, we will focus upon issues of clarity of expression in the next chapter but the problem arises here so we will have to get a little bit ahead of ourselves. As it stands, C3 is unclear. Is the suggestion that this is the *total* meaning of 'bachelor'? If so, it should be rewritten more clearly as follows:

C3a 'Bachelor' means 'unmarried adult male' *and nothing more*.

So viewed, C3a is false; it is too inclusive because it is only unmarried adult male *humans* that are to be thought of as bachelors.

However, perhaps it just meant:

C3b 'Bachelor' *at least* means 'unmarried adult male'.

If so, then it seems to be true. I hope to have given you some feeling for the distinction between conceptual propositions and descriptive ones and also some appreciation of the importance of precision and clarity in the expression of conceptual relationships. It might be thought that all that is needed is a dictionary, for does not it act as the authoritative lexical record of how we use words, of the conceptual connections in our language? Up to a point this is so; certainly it would sort out the concept of 'bachelor' well enough. But many of the conceptual connections in our language are not tracked in dictionaries and, indeed, not *explicitly*, or consciously, understood by the native speakers whose usage the dictionary tries to summarize. Remember that the dictionary can be no more precise than the linguistic practice it is trying to report and sometimes that practice is pretty murky. Much philosophical work involves thinking about subtle meaning relationships and conceptual connections. In particular, many issues in professional ethics require thinking about conceptual connections that are more complex and subtler than what are captured in dictionaries. I will illustrate this point when considering our next comparison.

So far, we have spoken only of the difference between conceptual and descriptive propositions. I now want to spend a moment discussing the difference between conceptual propositions and *moral* propositions. Consider this proposition:

M15 Everyone has the moral right to life.

You might agree with this or you might disagree with this; but clearly the author of this proposition is issuing a *moral* judgement and so it is, in terms of our proposition types, a *moral* proposition. Contrast with this the proposition:

> C4 To say that someone has the moral right to life is to say that, when it comes
> to living or dying, it should be their decision, not someone else's.

This proposition certainly has some moral clue words present ('*moral* right', 'should') but we are getting *no moral judgement* by the author at all, so it is *not* a moral proposition. Rather, what is going on is that we are having someone outline what they take the allocation of a moral right to someone to amount to, what the very idea of a moral right is. It is, if you like, presenting an answer to some such question as: 'What do you mean when you say that someone has a *moral right* to life?'.

You should realize that some of the concepts which you will be wielding (in thinking through value judgemental topics concerning your professional lives) are not going to be as clear cut in their meaning as 'bachelor' is (try: 'equality' as a glaring case in point or 'moral right' as just used). As to whether conceptual propositions concerning such concepts are true or not, it is not part of what I am trying to achieve here for you to be generally attempting to adjudicate these conceptual propositions in their own right. To make such judgements involves rather sophisticated conceptual analysis and that requires a fair amount of philosophical training which you will likely not get. Rather, all that can be reasonably asked is that you just recognize that one possible source of controversy in ethical discussions concerns what various concepts amount to and thus which conceptual propositions we endorse and which not. Discussions can get 'at cross purposes' when meanings are unclear and different participants mean different things concerning central ideas. All you can do is be alert to this possible problem and try to make it as clear as you can as you go just what *your* concept is of this, that or the other key idea in your discussion and spend some time making other participants clarify their own concepts. As you will see in the next chapter, my suggestion about this is that you explicitly set up what I will call your own 'working definitions' of these key, but possibly murky, concepts. This is so that everyone involved understands each other as much as possible. So, you might say: 'When I say that schools should provide an equal education for all, I mean that they should treat students in whatever way will result in them exiting school with as close to an identical set of competencies as possible'. That might not be how someone else would understand 'equal education' but rather than divert into challenges to your understanding of the concept, they can at least see what *your* idea is (mislabelled though they might judge it to be) and get on to the substantive moral issue of whether or not they think that your schooling aim is morally appropriate – so, as you mean 'equal education', is this what schools should be aiming to provide or not?

Generally speaking, conceptual propositions will not loom as large in your enquiries as descriptive propositions and, especially, moral propositions – which is

a blessing given how hard they can be to cope with without thorough philosophical training. So, although I include them as our last basic type of proposition, the main ones to focus on are moral and descriptive propositions.

Finally, for completeness, a given sentence might contain a *mixture* of a conceptual proposition and some other basic type or it might be *ambiguous* as to whether what is present is a conceptual proposition or some other basic type.

Key Ideas

Conceptual propositions neither tell us what the world is like nor pass moral judgement upon it; rather, they make claims about the relationships among concepts.

Summary Remarks

What you should have clear from this chapter is a number of distinctions. The most important distinction to have straight is that between a descriptive proposition and a moral proposition. Although you should understand what conceptual propositions and aesthetic value propositions are, the most important thing for now is distinguishing descriptive from moral propositions and noting where both are present (mixed propositions) and where it's not clear which is present (ambiguous propositions).

Moral propositions and descriptive propositions are the major constituent elements of the arguments that make up a rigorous enquiry into ethical problems and it is to that matter of *argumentation* that I turn in the next chapter.