

A STUDY IN MORAL PROBLEMS

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649242108

A study in moral problems by B. M. Laing

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

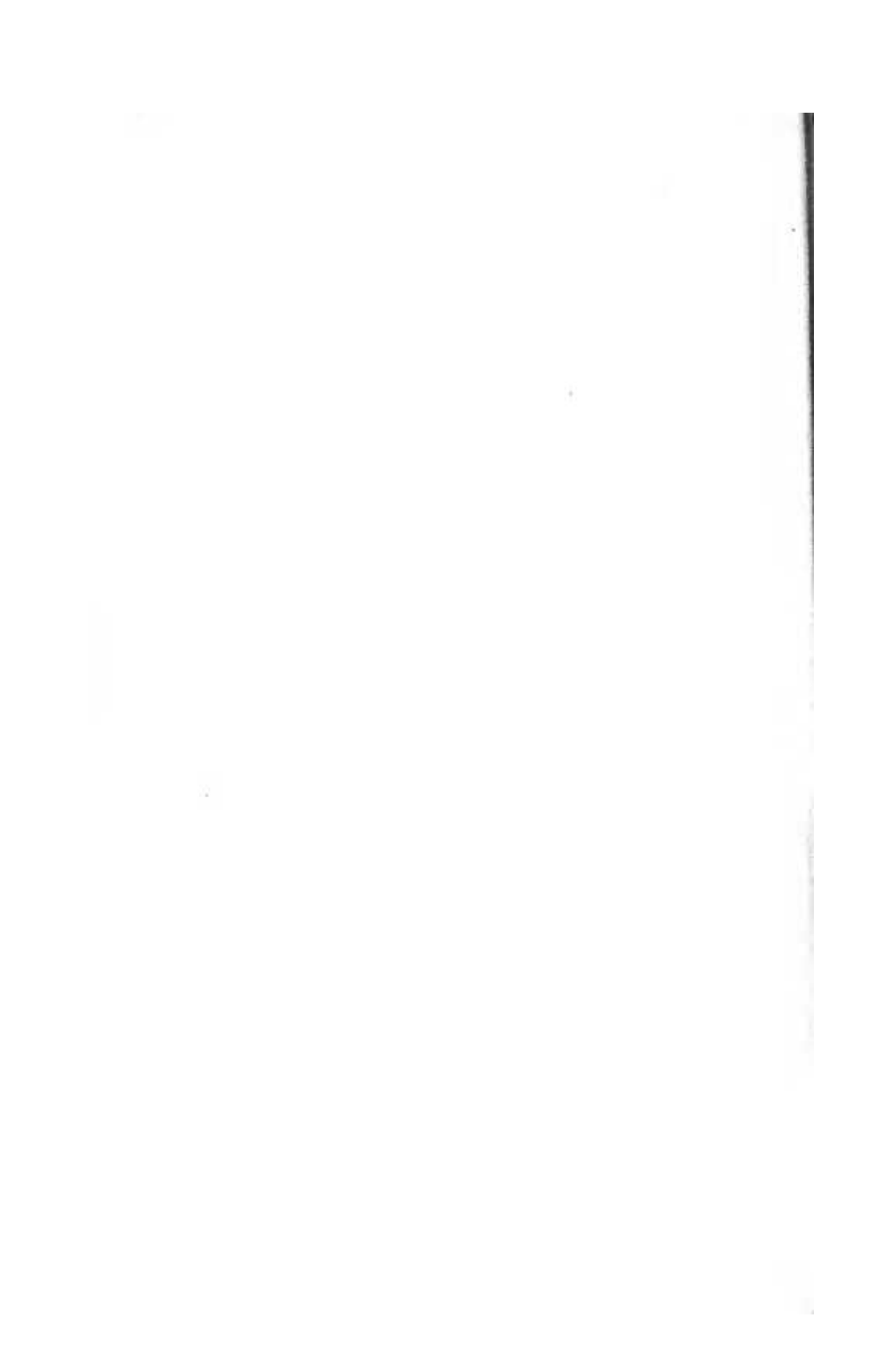
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LONDON: GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD.
RUSKIN HOUSE, 40 MUSEUM STREET, W.C. 1
NEW YORK: THE MACMILLAN COMPANY



First published in 1922

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PREFACE

THROUGHOUT the following chapters there runs one central problem and upon it all the arguments converge. It is the problem of the relation between human action and natural law. It is an old one and one that has been dealt with by eminent thinkers: Kant and Lotze are but two. On account of the development of science with its insistence upon the reign of universal law, it has become in modern times a very important problem because of its bearing upon moral and social effort. The freedom that is somehow implied in morality has to be reconciled with the rigidity and uniformity that characterize natural law. That problem must be and is here regarded as a fundamental one, because it lies at the basis of all the more specific moral problems like evil, social conflicts, conflicts of values, the instability and uncertainty of moral progress and moral achievement; and because its solution will point a way to a solution of these difficulties.

A discussion of the general problem of the relation between freedom and mechanism or natural law tends accordingly to take the character of studies in morality, though at the same time it becomes quite clear that metaphysical questions arise and cannot be avoided, while yet within the present limits they cannot be very adequately discussed. There arise questions about the structure of the universe and the nature of reality, as well as about the meaning of natural causality and natural conditions. Such questions demand full discussion; but at the moment that must be left aside, and only a reference can be made to certain points in these questions that are relevant to ethical studies, for they create difficulties as regards method. It has, for instance, been very generally held that the possibility of

beginning with cause and of working up to purpose is extremely doubtful. The disparateness of natural cause and moral purpose, of natural law and moral law, renders such a procedure impossible. There is an insuperable difficulty in effecting a transition from laws which describe how things and people do act to laws which prescribe how people should act. The one type of law cannot be derived from the other. Ethics, in consequence, can never be purely inductive; and there remains a fundamental distinction between ethics and the inductive sciences. This view, however, may be questioned; and, by questioning it, it becomes possible to give a very intelligible account of human action and to obtain a clear explanation of many moral difficulties.

The common assumption has been that it is the business of ethics to set up moral standards or norms; and it is this assumption that has created difficulties for ethical method. It has led to the demand that moral problems must be solved in moral terms or in terms of moral fact; and it has hampered ethical enquiry and hindered the solution of moral difficulties by prejudging how and where a solution is to be found instead of allowing the enquirer to seek a solution amongst a material that is likely to be most fruitful.

The assumption may be questioned, and in the interests of moral theory must be so. The element of control or regulative power is already present in human action; and moral theory has not to create it. What ethics has to do is to interpret that element of control and to express its nature in formulæ. Its task, accordingly, does not differ from the task of any positive science; it would do so only if it had to create a standard or control, or to impose a formula upon human action. It may be here pointed out, for instance, that one consequence of this is that, once the nature of the control is interpreted and this nature expressed in a formula, the problem becomes one of explaining the divergence of human action from the formula. The whole procedure of ethical investigation becomes inductive; and the objection to an inductive treatment of morality becomes invalid. It is only because an inductive treatment is thus possible that there can be a science of human action at all.

But when induction is spoken of, it must not be taken to mean the formulation of laws by generalizing a few instances. Generalization of the form— X_1, X_2, X_3 , are each Y , therefore all X s are Y —does not do anything more than present the problem by defining its range. The real problem is to find the ground or reason of all X s being Y ; and when this has been done, the fact expressed in, and described by, the proposition "all X s are Y " is explained. Generalization is only a preliminary to explanation, and the objection to an inductive ethics is partly due to the belief that generalization sums up the nature of induction. The recognition, however, that induction is concerned with something else than merely a generalization of the form all X s are Y , that it regards this as merely a fact to be explained, and that its most important task is to find the law of the fact, leads to important consequences for ethical theory; for it implies that induction leads into the structure of the real and that the element of control operating in human action may be discovered in the nature of the real.

The discussion in the following pages places full reliance upon induction and makes confident use of it; and a result is that no obligation is felt to find a solution of moral difficulties in moral terms. For purposes of explanation every positive science is continually expressing one fact in terms of a different type of fact—colours in terms of waves, things in terms of atoms, atoms in terms of electrons. In doing so it is doing something more than merely describing the qualities or properties of things; it is stating that one kind of phenomenon with certain characteristics arises or comes to be when certain factors or conditions of quite a different character are present. The word "arises" or "comes to be" is purposely used because it is somewhat colourless and raises no question about the "how" at the moment; and for these reasons is more suitable than the terms "produced by" or "emerges" because of their implications and the divergent theories which they presuppose. Now a study of morality, if it is to be scientific, must follow similar lines. It must not be content with enumerating various features of morality or moral conduct, various rights and duties. It must pass on to the discussion