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Author(s): Alasdair MacIntyre
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Why Is the Search for the Foundations of Ethics So Frustrating?

by ALASDAIR MacINTYRE

The need to inquire about the foundations of ethics arises intermittently; when it does arise, it generally represents a point of crisis for a culture. In different periods in the past of our own culture the oracles that have been resorted to in such situations have been of various kinds: Hellenistic cults, the imperium of Augustus, and the rule of St. Benedict all represent responses to such crises. But at least three times it has been the moral philosophers who have been summoned: in the twelfth century when “Ethica” took on the meaning transmitted to our word “ethics”; in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when a shared, secular rational form of moral justification was required to fill the place left empty by the diminution of religious authority; and now.

The ability to respond adequately to this kind of cultural need depends of course on whether those summoned possess intellectual and moral resources that transcend the immediate crisis, which enable them to say to the culture what the culture cannot—or can no longer—say to itself. For if the crisis is so pervasive that it has invaded every aspect of our intellectual and moral lives, then what we take to be resources for the treatment of our condition may turn out themselves to be infected areas. Karl Kraus’s famous remark that psychoanalysis is a symptom of the very disease of which it professes to be the cure may turn out to have application to other disciplines.

I am going to argue that Kraus’s remark applies to a good deal of work in recent and contemporary English and American moral philosophy. (Note that I am not at all suggesting that outside the Anglo-Saxon world they order these things better; au contraire.) I shall proceed in the following way: first I shall describe what I take to be the symptoms of moral crisis in our culture and their historical roots; secondly, I shall describe what I take to be the key features of recent moral philosophy; thirdly, I shall conclude from my description that such moral philosophy is essentially a reflection of our cultural condition and lacks the resources to correct its disorders; finally, I shall inquire why this is so.

Symptoms of Moral Crisis

The superficial symptoms of moral disorder are not difficult to identify: what can be going on when the New York Times announces that ethics is now fashionable? What can be said of a culture in which morality is periodically “rediscovered”? Why is instant but short-lived moral indignation endemic among us? What are we to make of a society in whose liberal iconography a few years ago the diabolical face of Richard Nixon was counterbalanced by the angelic benignity of a Sam Ervin, it being for that purpose obliterated from consciousness that Senator Ervin had voted against every piece of civil rights legislation ever proposed in the Congress? What are we to make of those politicians and academics who have already so successfully forgotten what they did during the Vietnam War? Who now remembers the present President’s response to Lieutenant Calley’s court-martial conviction?

What the answers to such questions establish is that overt moral stances in our culture tend to have a temporary and a fragile nature. These characteristics are, I suggest, rooted in the character of contemporary moral debate and contemporary moral conviction. It is a central feature of contemporary moral debates that they are unsettled and interminable. For when rival conclusions are deployed against one another—such as “All modern wars are wrong,” “Only anti-imperialist wars of liberation are justified,” “Sometimes a great power must go to war to preserve that balance of power which peace requires,” or “All abortion is murder,” “Every pregnant woman has a right to an abortion,” “Some abortions are justified, others not”—they are rationally defended by derivation from premises that turn out to be incommensurable with each other. Premises that invoke a notion of a just war derived from medieval theology are matched against premises about liberation and war derived partly from Fichte and partly from Marx, and both are in conflict with conceptions that count Machiavelli as ancestor. Premises about the moral law with a Thomistic and biblical background are matched against premises about individual rights that owe a good deal to Tom Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, and John Locke; and both are in conflict with post-Benthamite notions of utility.

I call such premises incommensurable with each other precisely because the metaphor of weighing claims that in-
voke rights against claims that invoke utility, or claims that invoke justice against claims that invoke freedom, in some sort of moral scale is empty of application. There are no scales, or at least this culture does not possess any. Hence moral arguments in one way terminate very quickly and in another way are interminable. Because no argument can be carried through to a victorious conclusion, argument characteristically gives way to the mere and increasingly shrill battle of assertion with counterassertion. This is bad enough, but it is not all.

For if I have no adequately good reasons to give you to convince you that you should exchange your premises for mine, then it follows that I should have adopted my premises rather than yours, when I originally adopted my position. The absence of a shared rational criterion turns out to imply an initial arbitrariness in each one of us—or so it seems.

This conjunction of an inability to convince others and a sense of arbitrariness in ourselves is a distinctive characteristic of the American present. It provides a background against which rapid shifts of feeling become an intelligible phenomenon, against which it is less surprising to find so much moral self-consciousness combined with so little moral stability. It is unsurprising also that a need to inquire about the foundations of ethics arises, independently of any special concerns with particular areas of the moral life. What produced this condition?

Part of the answer is clear, even if only part: our society stands at the meeting-point of a number of different histories, each of them the bearer of a highly particular kind of moral tradition, each of those traditions to some large degree mutilated and fragmented by its encounter with the others. The institutions of the American polity, with their appeal to abstract universality, and to consensus, are in fact a place of encounter for rival and incompatible outlooks to a degree that the consensus itself requires should not be acknowledged. The image of the American is a mask that, because it must be worn by blacks, Indians, Japanese and Swedes, by Irish Catholics, New England Puritans, German Lutherans and rootless secularists, can fit no face very well. It is small wonder that the confusions of pluralism are articulated at the level of moral argument in the form of a mishmash of conceptual fragments.

**Key Features of Modern Moral Philosophy**

There are three central features of modern moral philosophy: its appeal to intuitions, its handling of the notion of reason, and its inability to settle questions of priority between rival moral claims. I shall only be able to give a few examples to illustrate my claims, but I shall therefore take care to use examples that have a certain typicality and that enjoy a certain prestige. My final suggestion will be that modern analytical moral philosophy is essentially a ghost discipline; its contemporary practitioners are pale shadows of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors and their failures simply reiterate the prior failures.

One of the key ancestors of modern moral philosophy is of course Henry Sidgwick. It is Sidgwick whose use of the word “intuition” bridges the gap from its nineteenth-century to its twentieth-century usage. And it was Sidgwick who took it to be the task of moral philosophy to articulate, to systematize, and to bring into a coherent rational whole our prephilosophical moral intuitions, as does John Rawls nowadays—and as does J. O. Urmson and as did Sir David Ross. What is surprising is that, even when such authors acknowledge a debt to Sidgwick, they never notice his own conclusion: where he had hoped to find Cosmos, he had found Chaos. That is, they do not face the possibility that our prephilosophical intuitions do not form a coherent and consistent set and therefore cannot be systematically and rationally articulated as a whole. Yet the evidence is close at hand. Rawls constructs what he takes to be the concept of justice in terms of a set of principles of patterns of distribution; Nozick retorts with arguments starting from premises that are certainly as widely held as are Rawls’s. From this he then is able to show that if his premises are conceded, the concept of justice cannot be elucidated in terms of any pattern of distribution. The structure of the debate between them is thus for all its philosophical sophistication at once reminiscent of the modes of everyday moral argument. Why should I accept Nozick’s premises? He furnishes me with no reasons, but with a promissory note. Why should I accept Rawls’s premises? They are, so he argues, those that would be accepted by hypothetical rational beings whose ignorance of their actual position in any social hierarchy enables them to plan a type of social order in which the liberty of each is maximized, in which inequalities are tolerated only insofar as they have the effect of improving the lot of the least well-off, and in which the good of liberty has priority over that of equality.

But why should I in my actual social condition choose to accept what those hypothetical rational beings would choose, rather than for example Nozick’s premises about natural rights? And why should I accept what Rawls says about the priority of liberty over equality? Many commentators have identified a weakness in Rawls’s answer to this latter question; but the weakness of Rawls’s position is as clear when we consider the former question.

Rawls might suggest that if I do not accept his premises, I myself will fail as a rational person. This type of consideration has been central to the work of a number of other moral philosophers and notably to that of R. M. Hare, who has deplored Rawls’s appeal to intuitions and has urged that in the conception of moral reasoning alone can we find adequate means for discriminating those principles that we ought to accept from those that we ought to reject. But Hare is only able to carry through his project—which turns on the fact that I cannot consistently apply universal principles to others that I am not prepared to apply in like circum-
stances to myself—by excluding from it a class of agents whom he calls "fanatics," a class that includes Nazis who are prepared to embrace such principles as "Let all Jews be put to death and let this be done even if it is discovered that I am a Jew."

It follows that we do not discriminate moral principles, even on Hare’s view, by logic or reason alone, but only—at best—by conjoining the requirements of logic or reason with the nonlogical requirement that moral agents shall not be, in Hare’s special sense, fanatics. And there seem no good arguments for accepting this latter point and at least one good argument against it; surely we want political office-holders to hold such principles as "Let all incompetent political office-holders be deprived of office and let this be done even if it is discovered that I am incompetent." It is difficult not to see in this part of Hare’s position a covert, even if mistaken, appeal to intuitions as clear as any in Rawls.

The moral that I want to draw is simple and twofold; intuitions are no safe guide, and the conception of reason—usually a conception of consistency, sometimes eked out by decision theory—employed in moral philosophy is too weak a notion to yield any content to moral principles. What is wrong with being morally unprincipled is not primarily that one is being inconsistent and it is not even clear that the unprincipled are inconsistent, for it seems to be the case that in order to be practically inconsistent one first needs to have principles. (Otherwise what is it about one that is inconsistent?) Consider those two charming scoundrels who lounge insolently at the entrance to modernity, Diderot’s Lui in Le Neveu de Rameau and Kierkegaard’s ‘A’ in Enten-Eller. Both boast that they abide by no rules. What have Rawls and Hare to say to them? Rawls and Hare might well answer—and I sympathize with their answer—that it is not required of a moral theory that it be able to convince scoundrels, no matter how intelligent. A certain seriousness in the hearer is also required. But if this was to be their reply—and I must not put words in their mouths—it does suggest that their arguments will only find a starting-point with hearers who are already convinced that it is right to lead a principled life—for what else is it to be serious—where by ‘principled’ we mean something much more than any notion of rationality can supply. And indeed I take it that just this is generally presupposed in modern moral philosophy.

One outcome of this weakness in the central conceptions of such moral philosophy is that it presents us with no way of dealing with conflicts of rules or principles. Methods of justification for individual rules or principles are overabundant: we have utilitarian justifications, contractual justifications, universalizability justification, intuitionist justifications, and each of these in more than one variety. But from Ross to Rawls the treatment of priority questions is notoriously weak. For it always presupposes some prior unargued position about how our values are to be organized. Here arbitrariness becomes visible.

These failures have historical roots. Analytical moral philosophers, who have often treated the history of philosophy as an optional extra for philosophers (much like dancing lessons at a private school, they lend a touch of elegance, but are scarcely essential), have often recognized their particular debts to Kant, who is clearly the ancestor of the concept of reason in Hare, or to Hume or to Mill or to whomever. What they have not recognized is that they have been systematically retreading the ground of the great eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates and now emerge with no greater success than their predecessors. Kant’s notorious failure to derive substantial moral principles from a purely formal concept of practical reason has simply been repeated by his successors; and Hume and Mill have had their ghosts too.

One feature of the eighteenth-century debate that has reappeared is the superiority of negative over positive argument. What we owe to Hume, Smith, Diderot, Kant, and Mill are good arguments against the positions of their rivals; each destroys the pretentions of the others, while failing to establish his own position. Similarly with recent moral philosophy—instead of myself advertising to its weaknesses, I might simply have quoted each author against some other; Hare against Rawls, Warnock against Hare, Harman against Nagel, and so on. There is indeed a striking consensus against modern analytical moral philosophy concealed within it: every modern moral philosopher is against all modern moral philosophers except himself and his immediate allies. There is scarcely a need for any external attack.

Moral Philosophy and Modern Culture

What is striking then is the concordance between the ordinary contemporary moral consciousness and the condition of analytical moral philosophy. Precisely at those points at which the ordinary moral consciousness reveals arbitrariness and instability analytical moral philosophy discovers problems insoluble by it with any of the means available to it. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that such moral philosophy is a mirror-image of its age; and this conclusion is reinforced by attention to detail. Just as the inability of the adherents of each contemporary moral standpoint to convince the protagonists of other standpoints is reflected in the inability of moral philosophy to provide agreed rational criteria by which to judge moral argument, so a number of particular moral positions are mirrored in some moral philosopher’s account. Not all, for moral philosophers are characteristically middle-class liberals, and it is unsurprising therefore that the moral stance presented in philosophical guise is normally that of such liberalism. But even that liberalism has its varieties and so the contemporary political liberals of Time can inspect their portraits in Rawls’s theory of justice, while the contemporary eco-
nomic liberals of *Newsweek* can inspect their portrait in Nozick’s theory. There is therefore a case to be made that analytical moral philosophy is one of the many ideological masks worn by modern liberalism. But to pursue that case would be to overemphasize a merely negative polemic. Instead I want to try to gain a new perspective both on the predicament of contemporary morality and on the related predicament of contemporary moral philosophy. One way to do this is to alienate oneself from the present by adopting some external standpoint: what standpoint more external than that of Polynesia in the late eighteenth century?

**Taboos in Polynesia**

In the journal of Captain James Cook’s third voyage, Cook records the first discovery by English speakers of the Polynesian word *taboo*. The English seamen had been astonished at what they took to be the lax sexual habits of the Polynesians and were even more astonished to discover the sharp contrast with the rigorous prohibition placed on such conduct as that of men and women eating together. When they enquired why men and women were prohibited from eating together, they were told that that practice was *taboo*. But when they enquired further what *taboo* meant, they could get little further information. Clearly *taboo* did not simply mean prohibited; for to say that something—person or practice or theory—is *taboo* is to give some particular sort of reason for its prohibition. But what sort of reason? It has not only been Cook’s seamen who have had trouble with that question; from James Frazer and Edward Tylor to Franz Steiner and Mary Douglas the anthropologists have had to struggle with it. From that struggle two keys to the problem emerge. The first is the significance of the fact that Cook’s seamen were unable to get any intelligible reply to their queries from their native informants. What this suggests (and any hypothesis is somewhat speculative) is that the native informants themselves did not really understand the word they were using, and this suggestion is reinforced by the ease with which and the lack of social consequences when Kamehameha II abolished the taboos in Hawaii forty years later in 1819.

But how could the Polynesians come to be using a word which they themselves did not really understand? Here Steiner and Douglas are illuminating. For they both suggest that taboo rules often and perhaps characteristically have a two-stage history. In the first stage taboo rules are embedded in a context that confers intelligibility upon them. So Mary Douglas has argued that the taboo rules of Deuteronomy presuppose a cosmology and a taxonomy of a certain kind. Deprive the taboo rules of their original context and they at once are apt to appear as a set of arbitrary prohibitions, as indeed they characteristically do appear when the initial context is lost, when those background beliefs in the light of which the taboo rules had originally been understood have not only been abandoned but forgotten.

In such a situation the rules have been deprived of any status that can secure their authority and, if they do not acquire some new status quickly, both their interpretation and their justification become debatable. When the resources of a culture are too meager to carry through the task of reinterpretation, then the task of justification becomes impossible. Hence the relatively easy, although to some contemporary observers astonishing, victory of Kamehameha II over the taboos (and the creation thereby of a moral vacuum in which the banalities of the New England Protestant missionaries were received all too quickly). But had Polynesian culture enjoyed the blessings of analytical philosophy it is all too clear that the question of the meaning of *taboo* could have been resolved in a number of ways. *Taboo*, it would have been said by one party, is clearly the name of a non-natural property; and precisely the same reasoning which led Moore to see *good* as the name of such a property and Prichard and Ross to see *obligatory* and *right* as the names of such properties would have been available to show that *taboo* is the name of such a property. Another party would doubtless have argued that “This is taboo” means roughly the same as “I disapprove of this; do so as well”; and precisely the same reasoning which led Stevenson and Ayer to see “good” as having primarily an emotive use would have been available to support the emotive theory of *taboo*. A third party would presumably have arisen, which would have argued that the grammatical form of “This is taboo” disguises a universalizable imperative prescription.

The pointlessness of this imaginary debate arises from a shared presupposition of the contending parties, namely that the set of rules whose status and justification they are investigating provide an adequately demarcated subject-matter for investigation, provide the material for an autonomous field of study. We from our standpoint in the real world know that this is not the case, that there is no way to understand the character of the taboo rules, except as a survival from some previous, more elaborate cultural background. We know also and as a consequence that any theory that makes the taboo rules of the late eighteenth century in Polynesia intelligible without reference to their history is necessarily a false theory; the only true theory can be one that exhibits their unintelligibility as they stand at that moment in time. Moreover the only adequate true theory will be one that will both enable us to distinguish between what it is for a set of taboo rules and practices to be in good order and what it is for a set of such rules and practices to have been fragmented and thrown into disorder and enable us to understand the historical transitions by which the latter state emerged from the former. Only the writing of a certain kind of history will supply what we need.

And now the question inexorably arises in the light of my earlier argument: why should we think about real analytical moral philosophers such as Moore, Ross, Prichard, Stevenson, Hare, and the rest in any way different from that in
which we were thinking just now about their imaginary Polynesian counterparts? Why should we think about good, right and obligatory in any different way from that in which we think about taboo? The attempt to answer this question will at once raise another: why should we not treat the moral utterances of our own cultures as survivals? But from what then did they survive?

The answer is in surprisingly large part that the patterns of common moral utterance in our culture are the graveyard for fragments of culturally dead large-scale philosophical systems. In everyday moral arguments in bars and boardrooms, in newspapers and on television, in which rival conclusions about war are canvassed, we find, as I already noted, remnants of the medieval doctrine of the just war contending against cut-down, secondhand versions of utilitarianism, both being confronted in turn by amateur Machiavellianism. And in a precisely similar way debates about abortion, about death and dying, about marriage and the family, about the place of law in society and about the relationship of justice to equality, to desert, and to charity become encounters between a wide range of variously truncated concepts and theories out of our different pasts.

It is because of this that the procedures of piecemeal philosophical analysis are so inadequate. They become in practice a kind of unsystematic conceptual archaeology whose practitioners possess no means of distinguishing the different aspects of our past of which our present is so very largely composed. So it produces, piece by piece, as what we would say or as the concept of x or as our commonsense beliefs what are in fact survivals from large-scale philosophical and theological systems that have been deprived of their original context.

It is unsurprising as a result that the contemporary moral philosopher has so little to say to the crises of contemporary morality. For he fails to understand either himself or that morality historically; and in so failing he condemns himself to handling systematically rival positions without that context of systematic thought that was and is required even to define the nature of such rivalries, let alone to decide between the contending positions. Consider just one such juxtaposition: that of modern consequentialism to its absolutist rivals and critics.

**Modern Consequentialism and its Absolutist Critics**

Every moral scheme contains a set of injunctions to and prohibitions of particular types of action on the one hand ("Do not murder," "Do not bear false witness," "Honor thy father and thy mother") and a general injunction to do good and to avoid and frustrate evil on the other. But the different relationship between these two elements is one of the principal differences between rival and alternative moral schemes. For on the one hand Thomists and Kantians make what they take to be the injunctions and prohibitions of the moral law absolute and exceptionless; it follows that our duties to promote the good of others and of ourselves and to prevent harm to others and to ourselves are bounded and limited by the injunctions and prohibitions of the moral law. On no occasion whatsoever may I disobey a precept of the moral law in order to promote the general good or to avoid any degree of ruin whatsoever; and there can be no question of weighing or balancing the beneficial consequences that might be reasonably predicted to result from such a breach on a particular occasion against the importance of obeying the precept.

A utilitarian by contrast sees any injunction to or prohibition of any particular type of action as having only provisional and conditional force. Rules of conduct, wrote Mill, "point out the manner in which it will be least perilous to act, where time and means do not exist for analyzing the actual circumstances of the case," but when circumstances permit us to carry through such an analysis, any rule may be suspended or modified or replaced in the interests of promoting the greatest happiness or the least pain. Thus the precepts of morality are bounded and limited by our calculation of the general good.

Between the Kantian position and the act utilitarian position a number of others are ranged. At the utilitarian end of the spectrum a rule utilitarian may treat rules with a less conditional and provisional respect than does the act utilitarian, although he will hold that the rules themselves must be subject to an evaluation of the consequences of their being generally followed; and, since contingent circumstances change, even the rules that seem to offer the best possible reason to respect may have to be reevaluated from time to time. Consequently the rule utilitarian can never assert of any specific type of action that it is forbidden irrespective of circumstances any more than the act utilitarian can; and this would remain true, even if David Lyon's argument that rule utilitarianism collapses into act utilitarianism were not as successful as I take it to be.

Nearer the Kantian end of the spectrum—although still abhorrent to Kant—would be any moralist who holds that in some situations all choices of action involve the doing of some evil, but that some evils are lesser than others. Such a moralist would resemble the utilitarians in holding that sometimes it is necessary to do evil, but unlike a utilitarian would still see the best possible action open to him as evil.

Nonetheless although these intermediate positions are important, I believe that we can evaluate their claims upon our allegiance only if we first consider the conflict between those who hold that certain types of action ought to be done or not done irrespective of circumstances and consequences and those who deny this. I wish for the moment, although only for the moment, to consider these contentions in forms in which they are least entangled with the variety of philosophical contexts in which they have been at home. After all, moralists as different as Aristotle, St. Paul, and Aquinas hold the former absolutist position as stringently as
do Kantians; and consequentialists, to borrow G.E.M. Anscombe's term for them, are of many varieties also. It is enough to remember the contrast between the Benthamites and the followers of G.E. Moore.

What is striking is the way in which the stauncher adherents of both views find their own position apparently obviously true and their opponents equally obviously false. So Anscombe once wrote that "if someone really thinks, in advance, that it is open to question whether such an action as procuring the judicial execution of the innocent should be quite excluded from consideration—I do not want to argue with him; he shows a corrupt mind." ("Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 126, p. 17). Whereas Jonathan Bennett thinks it equally obvious that if predicted consequences of harm are recognized as a reason for not acting in certain types of cases, then no prohibition of any type of action whatsoever irrespective of consequences can be rationally defensible and to uphold together such a recognition and such a prohibition can only be the consequence of "muddle" ("Whatever the Consequences," *Analysis*, 26, p. 102) or, even perhaps worse, "conservatism."

Causality, Evil and Identity

But what is it about which the rival protagonists are in fact disagreeing? There are at least, so I suspect, three major areas of disagreement involved. One centers around the concepts of causality, predictability, and intentionality and involves the relationship of consciousness to the world. Another is concerned with the concepts of law, evil, emotion, and the integrity of the self. A third focuses upon the relationship of individual identity to social identity and involves the question of the relation of ethics to politics. Let me consider each in turn briefly.

What is an action? What is the connection between, what is the distinction between an action and its effects, results or consequences? Can causal connections be established without a knowledge of law-like generalizations? Can causal relationships be established where one term of the relationship has to be characterized nonextensionally, that is, in terms of an agent's beliefs and intentions? This group of questions is conventionally allocated to the philosophy of action or to the philosophy of mind; but an answer to them—or at the very least some theories about why we do not need an answer to them—is presupposed by any account of morality. For what an agent is or can be depends upon what the answers are.

The force of this consideration can be brought out by considering the answers presupposed by some novelists. Dickens's world is one of brisk practical effects where sentiments can become deeds the moment the material in which the deeds can be embodied, money and persons, becomes available and in which harm and benefit are matters of immediate human agency. Proust's world by contrast is one in which the inaccessibility of each consciousness to others—that range of illusions that constitutes a hall of distorting mirrors—makes the character of our actions in the external world ("in what?" one is sometimes disposed to say in Proustian moments) essentially ambiguous. The irrefragable realities are pain, disillusionment and art. In Tolstoy's world art is one of the illusions and the notion of large-scale contrivance is equally illusory: victories in war and the rise and fall of empires are not made or unmade, they happen. All that is to hand is the immediate moral deed.

It is crucial to recognize that in answering the questions or evaluating the answers of an Anscombe, a Quine, a Davidson, or a Wisdom on the philosophy of causality, action, and mind, we are deciding the case between Dickens, Tolstoy, and Proust, deciding it perhaps against all of them. What is not open to us is to leave the case undecided. In our actions, even if we choose not to acknowledge it, we have to inhabit some such world. Thus ethics requires a systematic connection with the philosophy of causality, mind and action.

A second set of questions concern law, evil, emotion, and the integrity of the self. Stoics, Thomists, and Kantians perceive the self as situated in a cosmic order in which it can receive fatal or near-fatal wounds. Utilitarians perceive the self as always able to choose the most beneficial or least harmful course of action open to it, whatever that may involve the self in doing. No deed is morally beyond the self; there are no limits. But from this standpoint, as Bernard Williams has noted, the traditional notion of a virtue of integrity disappears; for integrity consists precisely in setting unbreakable limits to what one will do. For Stoics, Thomists, and Kantians therefore my passions must be educated by reason, lest they betray my integrity; and this requires a thesis about the relation of reason to the passions and of both to law and to breaches of law. For a central distinctive emotion in the Thomist and Kantian schemes at least has to become that of remorse, the embodiment in feeling of repentance. Whereas a Utilitarian scheme may have some room for emotions of regret, but none surely for emotions of remorse or repentance. Moreover Stoics, Thomists, and Kantians believe that they confront a timeless moral order, whatever the variations in human psychology, while for Bentham and his successors the moral order can vary only within the limits imposed by a timeless psychology. Here once again it is clear that systematic answers to metaphysical questions are presupposed by rival moral outlooks. And so it is also with the third group of questions.

Who am I? In what role do I act? Whom do I represent in acting? Who is answerable for what I do? If I am a German now, how can I stand in relationship to a Jew now? If my father burnt his grandparents? If my father stayed home and did nothing while his grandparents were burnt? Liberal political theory has envisaged all the political and social, familial and ethnic characteristics of a moral agent as

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contingent and inessential except insofar as he chose them himself. Abstract, autonomous humanity has been its subject matter. But the deeds of individuals are often corporate deeds: I am my family, my country, my party, my corporation, as it presents itself to the world. Their past is my past. Hence the question arises: how is moral identity related to political identity? Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and Marx all give different answers. Each answer presupposes a particular view of the state and of the relationship of state and citizen. So that I cannot solve the problems of ethics without making a systematic connection with political theory.

The implications of my earlier thesis are now clear. Ours was once a culture in which the systematic interrelationship of these questions was recognized both by philosophers at the level of theory and in the presuppositions of everyday practice. But when we left behind us the ancient, medieval, and early modern worlds, we entered a culture largely and increasingly deprived of the vision of the whole, except at the aesthetic level. Each part of our experience is detached from the rest in quite a new way; and the activities of intellectual enquiry become divided and compartmentalized along with the rest. The intellectual division of labor allocates problems in a piecemeal and partial way; and the consequent modes of thought answer very well to the experience of everyday life.

The consequences for moral philosophy are clear; it reflects in its modes the society and the culture of which it is a part. It becomes a symptom rather than a means of diagnosis. And it is unable to solve its own problems because it has been isolated as a separate and distinct form of enquiry and so has been deprived of the systematic context that those problems require for their solution.

The Fate of the Moral Sciences

The history of how moral philosophy underwent its transition from large-scale systematic enquiry to piecemeal analysis—and therefore the explanation of why the search for the foundations of ethics is so frustrating—needs to be supplemented in at least three ways, if it is to be adequately characterized. First of course there are the parallel intellectual transformations within adjacent enquiries. Not only has philosophy been subdivided, but the rest of the moral sciences have been similarly reapportioned. Hence arises that peculiarly modern phenomenon, the intellectual boundary stone jealously guarded by professionals and signalled by such cries as “But that’s not philosophy!” or “You are really doing sociology.” Adam Smith by contrast, when he published the second part of his course at Glasgow as The Theory of the Moral Sentiments and the fourth part as The Wealth of Nations, was not aware that he was contributing to more than one discipline. So moral philosophy since the eighteenth century has become partially defined in terms of what it is not or rather what it is no longer. And consequently the history of the changes in moral philosophy will be partially unintelligible, unless it is accompanied by a history of what used to be the moral sciences and their subsequent fate. This fate is symbolized by the fact that when Mill’s translator came to translate the expression “the moral sciences,” he had to invent the German word Geisteswissenschaften, a word taken over by Dilthey and others for their own purposes; when in this century Englishmen came to translate such German writers, they proclaimed that Geisteswissenschaften is a word without any English equivalent.

Second there are significant questions of genre. It is far from unimportant that up to the early nineteenth century moral philosophy was written almost exclusively in books, whereas now it is written primarily in articles. The length, and therefore, the possible scope of an argument is part of what is affected by this change; but it also reflects a change in the continuities of reading of the public to which the philosophical writer addresses himself. Hume, Smith, and Mill still presuppose a generally educated public whose minds are informed by a shared stock of reading which provides both points of reference and touchstones. They seek in part, sometimes in large part, to add to the stock and alter these points of reference and touchstones. This is a very different endeavor from the contemporary professionalized contributions to a dialogue to be shared only by professors. Philosophy becomes not only piecemeal, but occasional. (It is perhaps worth noting here that part of the destruction of the generally educated mind is the sheer multiplication of professional philosophical literature. From this point of view the increase in the number of philosophical journals—and the pressure to write that produces that increase—are almost unmitigated evils. The case for making nonpublication a prerequisite for tenure or promotion is becoming very strong.)

Finally it would be necessary to reflect upon the ideological functions served by recent moral philosophy’s reflection of the liberal status quo. What is clear at the very least is that a moral philosophy which aspires to put our intuitions in order is going to be protective of those intuitions in one way, while a moral philosophy that claims to derive its tenets from an analysis of what it is to be rational, but that in fact has a large unadmitted component whose roots are quite other, is likely to be protective of them in another way. That recent moral philosophy should function in this protective way is scarcely surprising if I am right in identifying that philosophy as the heir of the eighteenth century; for the morality that it protects is the heir of the eighteenth century too. But the eighteenth century claimed for its liberalism epistemological foundations of a kind philosophy has since had to repudiate; we hold no nontrivial truths to be self-evident, we cannot accept Bentham’s psychology or Kant’s view of the powers of reason. Thus liberalism itself became foundationless; and since the morality of our age is liberal we have one more reason to expect the search for the foundations of ethics to be unrewarded.

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