

4

Moral Philosophy in the Modern Age

Our age is essentially one of understanding and reflection, without passion, momentarily bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose.

*Morality is character, character is that which is engraved; but the sand and the sea have no character and neither has abstract intelligence, for character is really inwardness. Immorality, as energy, is also character, but to be neither moral nor immoral is merely ambiguous, and ambiguity enters into life when the qualitative distinctions are weakened by a gnawing reflection.**

THE INDIVIDUAL IN SOCIETY

Since the Reformation, with some notable exceptions, moral philosophy has concerned itself primarily with the development of principles of conduct for rational individuals living in a social order. Social orders require that their subjects obey the laws that knit the social fabric together. The moral philosophers of the modern age have tried to provide a justification for such obedience.

Thomas Hobbes

One of the first to do so was the Englishman Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). He begins with the conviction that persons do need some rules for their relations with each other and that they are basically opposed to each other's interests. People are, by nature, in a state of war, each one driven by the desire for self-preservation and egoistic pleasure. Other persons are obstacles to both goals and must therefore be guarded against or dominated. Individuals in this state of war are dependent solely upon their own

*Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper, 1962), pp. 33, 43.

wits and power. In such a state no morality exists. It is a time of "continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."¹ In this state "the notions of right and wrong . . . have no place . . . that to be every man's, that he can get: and for so long as he can keep it."²

The state of war is inimical to each person's own self-interest. Therefore, by reason and desire, persons come together out of self-interest to form social groups in order to avoid the worst consequences of continual warfare. Reason helps them to see that if they draw up agreements about their relations with each other, all will benefit. These agreements Hobbes calls laws of nature: They are precepts, or general rules, "found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life or taketh away the means of preserving the same; and to omit that by which he thinketh it may be best preserved."³ Notice here how the notion of the law of nature has been transformed from Aquinas's view that it is a structure of reality ordained by God to Hobbes's view that it is a creation of human self-interest. The formation of these laws permits the building of societies, or commonwealths, in which each person's desire for preservation and security is reasonably well satisfied. Hobbes lists in his *Leviathan* a number of these natural laws, foremost among which are those that state that everyone should seek peace if possible but if that is not feasible, all the advantages of war may be used; that persons should grant to others just the same amount of liberty they want for themselves; and that promises or covenants should be kept. Failure to abide by covenants will abolish any hope of justice. All the laws of nature depend upon the state's power to enforce them against transgressors. "Covenants without the sword are but word." The Leviathan (monster) referred to by Hobbes is the commonwealth. It chooses a sovereign, in the form of an assembly or a single ruler, who is granted the power to enact sanctions against the breaking of the social laws. The members of the commonwealth do so for their own sake as a pragmatic means of ensuring their own safety and pleasure.

COMPETITION OR UNITY: A CRITIQUE OF HOBBS

Though Hobbesism has been violently and triumphantly exposed and disproved by most modern social theorists, it seems to possess a vitality which refuses to succumb. The reason is that it dares to provide a rational defence of the practice of a compe-

¹Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, in *English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, vol. 3, ed. William Molesworth (London: John Bohn, 1936), p. 113.

²Hobbes, p. 115.

³Hobbes, p. 116-117.

titive society which in theory we find it emotionally necessary to disown.

The criticism [of Hobbes] may be put most stringently by saying that Hobbes is wrong in thinking that there is nothing in human nature to act as a bond of unity between man and man . . . Hobbes takes too low a view of human motives and too high a view of human reason. Because his conception of human motives is completely negative and egocentric, he is compelled to throw on human reason a task which it is too weak to undertake. Unless the natural tendencies of human behaviour themselves provided a bond of society, reason itself could never construct the State. Consequently, one has only to show that man's animal nature provides already a bond of unity between man and man to refute Hobbesism.

John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (New York: Harper, 1961), pp. 136, 138.

John Macmurray (1891–1976) was a Scottish philosopher who wrote extensively on morality, religion, and the nature of persons in relation to one another. His best-known works come from his Gifford Lectures in 1954—The Self as Agent and Persons in Relation. He was professor of moral philosophy at Edinburgh from 1944 to 1958.

In a sense Hobbes provides a secularized version of the Augustinian-Reformation understanding of human nature and its need for social restraint and coercion. No God ordains the power of the secular ruler; rather, it is justified for pragmatic reasons. In this respect Hobbes marks clearly his departure from the long-dominant Christian moral outlook and at the same time implicitly acknowledges his debt to its attempt to deal with one of the most persistent of all moral problems—the lack of perfect love in the relations of persons with each other.

Although he was not a Utilitarian in the technical sense, Hobbes did look forward to that moral philosophy, which was to continue the movement from the idea of divinely sanctioned behavior to action with natural, human justification. To Hobbes, the goal of the moral life was not a relationship with any supreme being or state of supernatural bliss: It was straightforward self-preservation and the pleasurable exercise of power. The source of moral wisdom was neither divine revelation nor natural law

embedded in reality and discoverable to human reason: It was an explicit, rational consideration of one's own self-interest, and the evaluation of moral behavior was based simply on its success in achieving the goal of moral action.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Hobbes's position was his claim that persons have no natural affection for each other: that their passions have to be regulated by the rational power of restraint if they are to have amiable social relations. Morality, on this view, is not intrinsic to human beings but arises as the result of the practical necessity of having to get along with each other.

John Locke

These consequences of Hobbes's view were challenged in part by later British philosophers whose own moral theories have had great impact on ethical thinking since their time. John Locke (1632–1704), for example, whose political views were influential on the founding fathers of the American government, challenged Hobbes at a number of important points while agreeing with him at others. While accepting Hobbes's assumption that good must be that which causes pleasure and evil that which causes pain, Locke refused to identify moral good simply with pragmatic selfish interests. There is, he was convinced, a divine law accessible to human reason built into nature. Moral rules are as self-evident to the rational quest as are mathematical truths.

This fact leads Locke to a different emphasis from Hobbes when discussing social relationships in the state. Like Hobbes, Locke begins his reflections on persons in a state of nature. In this state persons live according to their inborn reason, which tells them not to harm each other with respect to life, health, liberty, or possessions. It is the right to property that Locke then develops further. Although he does not deny that people have a natural inclination for one another's company, Locke did recall Hobbes when he suggested that one of the most powerful reasons for coming together in society was the pragmatic regard of each person for the most practical way of preserving his or her rights and liberties. Chief among these rights and therefore primary in human motives for forming a society "is the preservation of their property."⁴ Naturally, persons give up some of their individual liberty in order to get the benefits of society. They authorize a legislative assembly to make such laws as are necessary for the common good, and they agree, in this **social compact**, to submit their behavior to the will of the majority. All of these acts are self-evidently rational and therefore conform to the moral law that is intrinsic to reason.

⁴John Locke, *Of Civil Government, Second Essay* (Chicago: Regnery, 1948), p. 76.

Spinoza

On the continent of Europe, another moral philosopher, born in the same year as Locke, was also formulating a theory of morality that relied upon the power of reason to discern what was in the self-interest of the individual. Although he did not base his reflections upon experience, Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677) accepted the premise that persons primarily seek their own welfare. He then proceeded in a thoroughly rationalistic manner to deduce the necessary laws by which their behavior is governed. The most basic such law is that which necessitates each thing to preserve and perfect its own being. The fundamental emotions felt by each being are pain and pleasure. Love and hate are directed respectively to those things that cause pleasure and pain. Morally, we value things insofar as we judge them to be causes of pleasure or pain. Thus our emotions are determined by what affects us, and our moral judgements, following our emotions, are similarly conditioned. We are not free to feel as we like and thus to make moral judgments as we might like. The true goal of the moral life is, consequently, to free oneself from bondage to emotional valuation by seeking mental or intellectual transcendence. This transcendence will consist primarily in our knowledge that we are determined emotionally, but this knowledge is liberating because it is ultimately the knowledge of God. “In so far as we understand the causes of pain, it ceases to be a passion, that is, it ceases to be a pain, and therefore in so far as we understand God to be the cause of pain we rejoice.”⁵ Like the Stoics, Spinoza counsels us to rise above the feelings that are caused in us by things over which we have no ultimate control. Spinoza also accepts the complete determinism of all behavior. The only room that remains in his theory for morality is that which the mind makes by its reflection on the imprisonment of the body and its feelings. Whether determinism is compatible with the exhortation to act in such a way as to escape the worst emotional effects of determinism is problematic. But it is clear that Spinoza, like many other moralists of his time and later, saw in reason the only foundation for any moral theory worthy of human acceptance.

PHILOSOPHERS OF MORAL FEELING

There were moral philosophers, of course, who were sceptical of the power of reason in determining morality. These thinkers took much more seriously, but less negatively than Hobbes, the importance of feeling in our formation of moral judgments. Chief among such philosophers were two

⁵Benedict Spinoza, *The Ethics*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes, n. (New York: Dover, 1951), part 5, prop. 18, p. 256.

Scotsmen, Francis Hutcheson and David Hume. Without rejecting entirely the role of reason, these men looked to an innate moral sense as the seat of moral feeling and judgment. Hutcheson (1694–1746) argued for an inborn “faculty of perceiving moral excellence and its supreme objects.”⁶ These “objects” are primarily the affections of disinterested benevolence or a selfless concern for the welfare of others. (Note the striking difference between this view and that of Hobbes.) Morality then becomes the carrying out of these affections.

Hutcheson’s countryman, and much more influential philosopher, David Hume (1711–1776) carried forward this view of the moral sense. He held that reason alone cannot produce moral blame or praise. This can be produced by feeling or sentiment alone. If we call something good it must be because we feel approval for it. We also know that what propels us into acting is not reason but emotion. Reason may help us determine matters of fact, but only passion (emotion) can make us take up an attitude toward matters of fact. These passions will arise in us according to whether the action contemplated leads to pleasure or pain. Virtue is defined by Hume as “whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation; and vice the contrary.”⁷ Hume felt that most people share the same general moral sentiments, chief among which he, like Hutcheson, felt was benevolence towards others. (Hume suggests in passing and in anticipation of the Utilitarians that whereas benevolence is not approved only because of its utility in making social relations possible, its usefulness is not a negligible factor in our approval.)

THE UTILITARIANS

The successors of the philosophers of the moral sentiment, the Utilitarians, extended the emphasis on the usefulness of moral feeling. Utilitarianism as an orientation within moral thinking has had a profound effect on contemporary ethics. It has clearly grown beyond the specific philosophies of the two Englishmen credited with its original expression, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). Like his predecessors, Bentham believed that persons are guided in their behavior by the desire for pleasure and an aversion to pain. He attached moral value to whatever brings pleasure and called evil whatever brings pain. Therefore, the goal of moral action is a form of hedonism: to maximize one’s own happiness. But Bentham was very much aware of man’s social relations, and so he in-

⁶Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, vol. 1, ch. 4, sect. 1, in *Collected Works of Francis Hutcheson*, prepared by Bernhard Fabian (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1969–1971), p. 53

⁷*Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927, reprint of 2nd ed., 1902), appendix 1, 239, pp. 288–289.

cluded in his evaluation of moral acts their effect not just on the individual but also on his community. The major contribution of Utilitarianism to moral thinking was its conception of the way moral deeds should be evaluated. Accepting the principle that moral insight comes from rational analysis of one's own desires and an understanding of the natural world in which they have to be fulfilled, the Utilitarians stressed the importance of calculating what the probable effects of any intended course of action would be. The proper ethical attitude is to calculate carefully the amount of pleasure and the amount of pain any act will bring, then to subtract the pain from the pleasure and find the balance. If there is a balance in favor of pleasure, the act is a good act.

Writing in an age that saw the importance of quantitative mathematics in the great advances in science then taking place, Bentham not surprisingly developed a rather quantitative calculus, called the hedonistic calculus, to determine the dimensions of value in pleasure. Pleasures will be valued by their (1) intensity, (2) duration, (3) certainty (the probability that they will occur), (4) nearness in time, (5) productivity (the likelihood of producing or being associated with more of the same kind of pleasure), (6) purity (the likelihood of their not being followed by or mixed with pain), and (7) extent (the number of people they will affect). Bentham summarized his utilitarian creed as "the greatest happiness of the greatest number."

John Stuart Mill, a disciple of Bentham, refined the definition of utilitarianism as "the creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, [and] holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain."⁸ Although he accepted Bentham's assumption that personal happiness corresponds to the happiness of the community as a whole, Mill modified Bentham's strictly quantitative understanding of pleasure. He insisted that some pleasures are qualitatively superior to others, such as the mental to the sensual.

Utilitarianism fit comfortably into the emerging commercial, capitalist middle-class world that, for a time, Britain led. It not only evaluated behavior by a standard familiar to any commercial agent (the calculation of the quantitative effect of the intended act), it also shared a common set of assumptions about human beings. Chief among these were the idea that persons sought their own pleasure primarily and that somehow the pleasure seeking of each person would complement that of every other person. A deeper, equally important assumption was that persons act according to their most powerful desires and that morality must adjust to this fact.

⁸John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (New York: Dutton, 1951), p. 8.

IMMANUEL KANT

A very different and extremely influential moral philosophy that challenged many of the Utilitarian assumptions arose outside England. The philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is famous not only for its ethical component but also for its theory of knowledge. Kant believed that our knowledge of the world was conditioned by certain a priori laws or rules for thinking. For example, we cannot know an event unless we think of it as conforming to laws of causal connection. This means that we know the world as necessarily subject to natural laws. But if causal necessity applied to all occurrences, the basis of morality would be threatened, since moral acts must be free. Kant believed that as long as our acts were determined by forces outside our will they would not be free and thus could not be moral acts. The freedom of the moral agent depends upon freedom from the forces of passion, desire, and external control. Kant located the freedom of the moral agent in a moral law within the individual. Through this moral law the agent was morally autonomous and rational, thus transcending the constraints of nonrational forces. The moral law known by each moral agent is **categorical**. It does not admit of adjustment to meet different empirical conditions. If it did, Kant believed, morality would become subject to the contingencies of changing circumstances and thus would become arbitrary or capricious. The **categorical imperative** provides a principle by which the agent can test whether an action is truly moral. “Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”⁹ That is, only those rules are moral that we, as their agents, are willing to make applicable to all persons, including ourselves, in all circumstances. For example, if I am tempted to steal some bread, am I willing to make the rule “steal when tempted” universal? If not, then it is clearly immoral for me to steal.

What we must avoid is doing an act for the sake of the pleasure it brings us or in order to fulfill a desire or inclination. Kant assumes that we will accord the greatest moral worth to the individual who acts out of a sense of duty even when it conflicts with the person’s own psychological desire (such as the person who refuses to lie even though telling the truth will bring great financial or physical harm). If we act according to a strict Utilitarian ethic, then we have no way of avoiding acting primarily out of desires or temptations that do not do us justice as rational beings who are more than the sum of our inclinations. The gap between the Utilitarians and Kant is very wide on this issue.

Of course, Kant’s ethical theory does not neglect the importance of the welfare of other persons. But it assumes that because all persons are essentially moral, they all have a rational faculty. Therefore, Kant contends, no

⁹Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. T. K. Abbott (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1949), p. 38.

person shall be treated simply as a thing or as a means to an end. One of his most famous moral statements enjoins us always to act so as "to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only."¹⁰ This is the basis of human dignity and self-respect: that all persons are ends in themselves because they share in the capacity for moral—that is rational—self-determination.

The effect of Kant's moral position is that the evaluation of moral acts is concentrated not upon their effects but upon their motives. Kant knew that we cannot completely control the consequences of our acts. Insisting upon the importance of the autonomy of moral agents, their freedom from external determination, Kant consistently concluded that we must judge agents only by reference to those things under their control. What is under their control is their willingness to have their will determined by the rational moral law within them. Thus, as long as individuals act according to the categorical imperative, out of a sense of duty, and according to the maxim that the rule by which they are acting should be universalized, then they can rest assured that they have acted morally, even though the actual consequences of their acts are other than they had hoped. According to Kant, "nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good without qualification, except a Good Will."¹¹

The rigor and formalism of Kant's ethics will probably never be surpassed. He developed in detail the consequences of viewing morality solely from the point of view of the rational moral agent. He illustrated the implications of holding moral agents solely responsible for the determination of their own acts by reference to an unconditional, absolutely objective rationality which alone can keep individuals from being buffeted by passions over which they have no control.

For Kant the goal of moral action is the fulfillment of the rational, moral faculty that is the person's distinguishing characteristic. To act morally is an end in itself, because the fulfillment of the individual is an end in itself. The source of moral action is the moral law within the agent revealed through objective reason. And the evaluation of moral action is its faithfulness to the categorical imperative and the moral maxim of universalization. By virtually excluding any dependence upon the external world, either in the formation of morality or its assessment, Kant provided an almost entirely self-enclosed system of morality.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATURAL ETHICS: DEONTOLOGY

The part of Kant's moral philosophy that has the most abiding influence on later ethicists is his insistence that persons are morally autonomous, capa-

¹⁰Kant, p. 46.

¹¹Kant, p. 11.

ble of reaching moral decisions by appeal to their own rational, moral nature. Although Kant did not believe that this fact ruled out the existence of God, it left nothing for God to do insofar as the determination of morality was concerned. The rational essence of morality, so thoroughly explicated by Kant, marked clearly the secular triumph of autonomous moral thinking over religiously grounded morality at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For those professional philosophers who followed in the footsteps of Kant, even when they disagreed with him on numerous issues, there was no turning back to an ethic that relied upon divine revelation for its insights and energy.

The history of moral theory since Kant has largely been a history of debate between those who, continuing Kant's line of inquiry, stressed the importance of appealing to a universal sense of right and wrong that is not intrinsically wedded to the actual consequences of one's acts and those who appealed either to an individualistic judgment of rightness or to the consequences of one's acts for a natural, social end. Sometimes called **deontologists** or **nonnaturalists**, thinkers such as W. D. Ross (1877–1973) and G. E. Moore (1873–1958) argued that morality must be based upon an appeal to something seen as intrinsically or a priori good in itself. Ross held that certain acts are "self-evidently" good and impose upon us certain obvious duties, such as keeping promises, doing justice, not injuring others, and acting beneficently. These things are right not because they can be justified by an appeal to their consequences but because we see that they are right. A person of insight immediately senses, by intuition, what is the appropriate action for the occasion. G. E. Moore contended that the Good could not be defined. It is a simple, unanalyzable, nonnatural characteristic that we are either aware of or not.

The self-evident character of our moral duties, which is the key to this kind of deontological intuitionism, has been challenged most often by those who fail to see the allegedly self-evident moral rules or who observe that even if such rules are apparent they often conflict with each other in particular cases (for example, the duty to preserve life and the duty to tell the truth when the agent is confronted with a mad killer who asks where the rest of the family is).

CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL THEORIES

Existentialist Ethics

Perhaps the closest to the moral intuitionists are those philosophers called **existentialists**. They share with the intuitionists the assumption that what is good must be discerned without lengthy argumentation or evidence derived from the natural world. They disagree with the intuitionists, however, that what is intuited as right is objective, rational, and the same for all

persons. Deriving their name from their emphasis upon the unique moments of existence each person experiences, the existentialists insist that meaning and worth are given to the moments of life by each individual alone. They distrust the power of reason to discern meaning in or through an ideal objective reality that determines what beliefs and values the self must hold. Some existentialists who have had enormous impact on contemporary ethics, like Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), do believe in an objective God who alone knows in what fulfillment consists. But even these religious existentialists hold that God provides moral guidance only through direct commands to single individuals that have validity only in the particular situation in which they are given. One can grasp what God commands only by a leap of faith beyond reason and even beyond traditional ethics. Kierkegaard's classic example is the command to the Hebrew patriarch Abraham to kill his only son, Isaac. To obey this command was clearly not rational, nor was it even ethical by traditional standards. Only by a leap of faith at that moment in that situation could Abraham grasp the right thing to do—to obey God in this singular deed.

Nonreligious existentialists, of course, eliminate any reference to the divine. Like Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) stresses the importance of human freedom in choosing what to do in any given situation. Unlike Kierkegaard, Sartre rejects any assumption that there is an objective reality to which moral choices are a response. The only reality, for Sartre, is each individual person with his or her own absurdly chosen project or intention. There is no meaning or purpose other than that which individuals determine for themselves. Morality, a human creation, is judged by its conformity to and enhancement of the individual's sense of freedom and dignity in using that freedom creatively and authentically.

Nietzsche

Sartre's words echo those of perhaps the most infamous of all existentialist thinkers, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Writing in reaction to what he regarded as the pretensions and strength-sapping morality of Christian philosophers, Nietzsche argued that the only reality was that which arose through the conflict between beings struggling for power. Each being, filled with the will to power, constructed philosophies and moralities as tools in the advancement of its exercise of power and mastery over others. Strength, vitality, creativity, and conquest were the goals of each authentic being. Christianity, early finding itself relatively powerless and resentful of this position, managed to get the powerful to accept its negative values of powerlessness, love, suffering, sacrifice, and hatred of the natural world and its enjoyments. Nietzsche wants to expose this baneful influence of Christianity and to restore a healthy love of the body and its power drives, and he insists that what specific morality is adopted by any person or

culture is relative to its own self-interests. Thus, with God and all absolutes dead, we are truly beyond good and evil and thus required to develop our ethics for ourselves out of our own power and desires.

Biological Ethics

Nietzsche's and Sartre's ethics, although they reject any absolute standard outside of human decision, do seem to be related to the unique needs of each person. The existentialists view these needs individually, not as set by a universal human nature. Gaining greater influence in the field of ethics, however, are those who believe that morality is the discovery of behavior that will enable persons to adapt to a given way of being which belongs to them by virtue of the structure of nature or what nature is evolving toward. These thinkers emphasize the social or biological ties persons have to the structure of nature, of which they are an organic part and to which they must conform if they are to achieve the fulfillment nature has made possible. In its crudest form, this kind of biological or evolutionary ethics, associated originally with the work of Darwin, led to the idea that humans should adopt the ethic of survival: Adapt or die. The doctrine of the "survival of the fittest" was used by many so-called social Darwinians to justify a social and economic system in which the wealthy thrived at the expense of the poor because they were obviously fitter.

Most advocates of evolutionary, naturalistic ethics, however, stress the importance, equally grounded in nature and equally conducive to survival, of cooperation with other persons and other parts of the natural environment. We will see the effects of such a view in more detail when we examine the moral issue of ecology and the preservation of natural resources (Chapter 16). The importance of the evolutionary approach to ethics is that it explicitly grounds moral obligation on the laws of nature, which are necessary and immutable. The greatest good, therefore, is the continuous adjustment or adaptation of the person to the environment.

One of the foremost proponents of naturalist ethics is B. F. Skinner, the famous behavioral psychologist whose work is widely read in many schools today. He has argued that with the proper conditioning people can be made to do what they really want to do. As a result they will feel content, because their motives will have been brought into harmony with their environmental conditions. In such a system, the notion of the free moral agent is no longer relevant. "As a science of behavior adopts the strategy of physics and biology, the autonomous agent to which behavior has traditionally been attributed is replaced by the environment—the environment in which the species evolved and in which the behavior of the individual is shaped and maintained."¹²

¹²B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Knopf, 1972), p. 185.

Marxist Ethics

Of potentially more influence worldwide than any of the moral positions examined so far is one that shares many assumptions with the naturalist or biological ethic. Marxism has had and continues to have a profound effect on many peoples around the world. Part of that effect stems from Marx's moral views. There is much debate among scholars of Marxism over whether the ethics of Marxism are those of Marx himself (and if so, which Marx—the early, allegedly more humanistic one, or the later, more deterministic one).

Although Karl Marx (1818–1883) certainly changed the emphasis in his writings, a strong case can be made that his moral position remained virtually unchanged throughout his intellectual development. That position has been described both as atheistic and as a secular equivalent of the moral vision of the Hebrew prophets. That it is atheistic is due to Marx's belief that religion is essentially oriented to the supernatural and consequently has little to contribute to the practical alleviation of suffering and injustice on earth.

Believing that human beings could achieve fulfillment only through creative work and mutuality with others, Marx located the sources of non-fulfillment (alienation) in the processes of the production of the goods that are intended to satisfy man's material needs. These processes have been appropriated by the capitalist economic class, which uses them to its profit and to the dehumanization of those it employs as productive tools. The result is a triple alienation: Workers become alienated from other persons, from the material world upon which they expend their labor (because they enjoy no creative relation with their work, merely the relation of a tool to an object), and from themselves (because as laborers in the hire of others they are not free to exercise their creative powers as they choose). The ethical imperative of Marx then becomes quite clear: One must work to overthrow the conditions of alienation as a means toward the good, which in this case is the practical, human experience of cooperation, mutuality, and fulfillment of the whole person in communism.

Marx's attitude toward religion is crucial here. Only if people can turn from supernatural concerns to worldly concerns can the ethical task be carried forward. Religion is an illusion. Therefore, for those still caught by religion, "the call to abandon their illusions about their condition is a call to abandon a condition which requires illusions . . . The criticism of religion disillusions man so that he will think, act, and fashion his reality as a man who has lost his illusions and regained his reason; so that he will revolve about himself as his own true sun . . . Man is the supreme being for man."¹³ Once we know that we are the ultimate reality and that our

¹³Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," quoted in *Religion for a New Generation*, eds. Jacob Needleman et al. (New York: Macmillan, 1977), p. 60.

fulfillment is the goal of moral action, then we can accept Marx's version of Kant's categorical imperative: "to overthrow all those conditions in which man is an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being."¹⁴

Believing that all the institutions, political processes, and values of a culture are a reflection of its economic modes of production, Marx regarded no prior historical moral values as absolute. This fact has been regarded by later Marxists, especially those who gained power in the Soviet Union, to justify almost any actions (including terrorism, inquisition, and brutality) as justified so long as they were directed toward the establishment or furtherance of communism. There are many Marxists who do not approve of the way in which Marx's views have been realized in the Soviet experiment. Consequently, they are not committed to the view that any means are justified by the end, which they share with Marx, of a just, sharing, free, fulfilling community. They do feel, however, that the moral standards of any culture must be judged ultimately by their approximation to or enhancement of the goal of all moral action. They also believe that human nature (our *species being*, as Marx called it) is such that, although not fixed or immutable, it is naturally oriented toward certain values rather than others, values appropriate to the kind of community of nonalienation that they anticipate the workings of nature and human effort will bring into being. Marx's attempts to ground his understanding of human beings upon a scientific, natural basis should not obscure the prophetic nature of his vision of humanity's end or his impassioned moral fervor in advocating the specific steps that would advance that goal.

Metaethics

The naturalism of Marx and his belief that no moral views could be absolute since they were the product of a particular culture and historical epoch were shared by many moral philosophers of the twentieth century who did not share Marx's social views. In this century, much of moral thinking has turned from a consideration of what people ought to do to a reflection on what they do when they consider what they ought to do. This kind of reflection has been called **metaethics**. Like metaphysics, which reflects on the meaning and justification of statements made about the world, metaethics reflects on the meaning and justification of moral statements. A metaethicist might ask what the meaning of the concept "Good" is, or what the difference between "moral" and "immoral" is, or how a moral judgment differs from a factual judgment, or what processes of reasoning are appropriate to moral thinking that might not be appropriate to aesthetic, scientific or religious thinking, and finally, how, if at all, moral judgments are proved, verified, or justified? Do we appeal to a set of objective

¹⁴Marx, p. 61.

facts for justification? If not, to what do we appeal? It is one thing to say that an act injures a fellow human being; it is something else to say that the act is wrong. Much debate swirls around the question of whether one can move logically from a statement of what is (this act hurts another) to a statement of what ought to be (we should not perform such acts).

One of the most radical positions taken up within metaethics by some moral philosophers is that which holds that no moral evaluations are ever objectively justified. In its extreme form—in the work of A. J. Ayer (b. 1910), for instance—this **emotive theory of ethics** holds that basic moral judgments are simply expressions of emotions. Because he assumes that emotions are neither true nor false, it follows that for Ayer moral views are neither true nor false. When we utter a moral opinion we are simply telling others in a roundabout way what we approve or disapprove. If I say that lying is wrong, what I am really saying is, “I don’t like lying, that is my feeling.” Ayer seems to hold that unless ethical beliefs are self-evident or unless they can be demonstrated to be true in the same way we demonstrate the truth of a scientific hypothesis (and he rejects both these options), then all ethical judgment is arbitrary and emotive.

Other thinkers who fall within the boundaries of this theory are less extreme than Ayer. One of the most influential, C. L. Stevenson (b. 1908), has modified Ayer’s position to admit the role of reason in the consideration of some aspects of moral thinking. Although he acknowledges that a moral judgment does depend at a fundamental level upon a feeling of approval or disapproval that is not itself a direct effect of a factual observation, Stevenson points out that some factual information can alter a moral feeling. If I say that I approve of capital punishment because it keeps potential murderers from committing murder, you might convince me by factual information that capital punishment does not have this consequence. As a result, I might (but am not logically coerced to) change my mind. Later metaethicists have tried to enlarge the role of rational argument within ethical discussion and have examined moral judgments for some larger sense of justification than that used by the empirical scientist.

UNCOVERING OUR MORAL COMMITMENTS

I believe that Socrates . . . understood what contribution philosophical reflection may make to our self-knowledge and self-culture. That contribution is essentially the logical (or dialectical) analysis of the golden concepts, such as justice, truth, God, through which we focus the ideals by which we live. In a spiritual sense, we *are* our commitments. Therefore, if these concepts provide the terms through which alone our commitments are made manifest to ourselves and others, then their careful study must provide a revelation of what we are, both to

ourselves and to one another . . . We have been made to think both by the existentialists and by the positivists that our basic commitments and ends are fundamentally a matter of decision or choice. Nothing could be further from the truth. I do not choose what I mean, or intend, by truth or by justice; nor do I decide what principles of knowledge or of justice I will live by. I *find* myself talking and thinking in a certain way just as I find, sometimes with great difficulty, those ideals and procedures by which I live.

Henry David Aiken, *Reason and Conduct: New Bearings in Moral Philosophy* (New York: Knopf, 1962), p. 368.

Henry David Aiken is professor of philosophy at Harvard. He is a well-known moral philosopher and the author of Value: A Cooperative Inquiry and The Age of Ideology, among other books and numerous articles.

Because of the influence of linguistic and logical analysis upon the education of professional philosophers, and because moral thinking is seen by many as a professional philosophical enterprise, the technical work in ethics is often done today by metaethicists. It should be remembered, however, as our history of ethical thought reminds us, that moral thinking arises out of a living situation in which reflection is a means toward the living of a fuller, more wholesome life. Such reflection is more likely to occur when people perceive threats to their sense of wholeness or integrity, especially threats against the successful enactment of values long cherished. In our time, with the direct and tangible challenges thrown at us by demands for justice by oppressed groups, for conservation of dwindling resources, for an end to war, and even for a return to personal values perceived to be under attack by social change, a great deal of moral thinking is done not by professional metaethicists but by people caught in the midst of real moral turmoil. Although they are aided in many cases by the clarifications of metaethics, most people are looking for a set of actual moral judgments they can live by, not just for an understanding of how moral judgments are made in general. The kind of moral response they seek comes out of concrete, particular moral positions, including those, such as the traditional religious ones, that are often overlooked by the abstractions of metaethics.

THE LEGACY OF VARIETY

In this brief survey of the major ethical theories of the West, we have seen a variety of moral positions. We have looked at the history of ethical thought primarily through the perspective of three basic questions: What is the goal of moral action, where does moral guidance come from, and how is moral action evaluated? Although all moral philosophies stress the goal of happiness or fulfillment, there are many different views of what that comprises. The religious ethics of the West insist upon a relationship with a divine being for complete wholeness. Other positions look to the individual's adaptation to natural laws, to the exercise of reason, to the absurd exercise of radical freedom, to the deployment of power, to sensual pleasure, or to the well-rounded use of all natural faculties. One of the major criteria in categorizing the different goals of moral action has been that between goals sufficient for the individual alone and goals that require fulfillment in and through other persons. This is the difference between an individualistic and a social ethic.

There are many different sources of moral insight affirmed by these different theories. Some look to reason and others to intuition, innate affections or feelings, God, or radical freedom. Some seek a balance between several of these issues. Some claim that the source of moral wisdom is absolute, unchanging, accessible to all persons in the same way at all times and places; others claim that moral wisdom is relative and contingent upon personal needs and situations or upon the development of nature at a particular stage. Some look inside the individual for a subjective source of guidance, others look outside for an objective source.

In the area of evaluation, the field is split between those who look primarily to the consequences of their acts as they affect an end to be reached by moral behavior and those who look to the conformity of the act or its motive, regardless of consequences, to a moral law, or to an intrinsic sense of what is good.

The differences between the various moral philosophies outlined in this chapter are more clear-cut in the abstract than they are in actual practice in everyday life. The goals of moral action in a single theory may be a harmony among personal pleasure, relationship to God, and service to others. Some theories account for moral guidance by means of combining reason, feeling, and an understanding of God's will. Some claim that whereas the goal of moral action is absolute, the means to achieve it may be relative. There are teleological theories that are egoistic and others that are communal. There are deontologists who insist that what is right is essentially objective, universal, and rational and others who claim that it is subjective, particular, and irrational.

Although it is impossible to apply each one of the ethical theories examined in this history to each of the contemporary moral problems to

be discussed in this book, it is useful to know something about the moral philosophies that have influenced Western thinking. We will have occasion in the remainder of the book to see how selected individual approaches represented in this survey can deal with specific moral issues. As we do so, however, we will need to remind ourselves of the variety of aspects that make up a moral theory, many of which will remain implicit in our discussion. We have tried in this survey to provide a sense of that variety as it has developed historically through the work of individual moral philosophers.

CHAPTER REVIEW

A. The individual in society

1. Thomas Hobbes developed a philosophy to justify the existence of the state as a necessary evil designed to safeguard individual interests.
2. John Locke emphasized the importance of individual rights, especially the right to property, which the social order must protect.
3. Spinoza recalled the rational detachment of the Stoics in his 17th-century moral philosophy.

B. Philosophers of moral feeling

1. Francis Hutcheson and David Hume located the source of morality in an innate faculty of perceiving moral excellence.

C. The Utilitarians

1. Jeremy Bentham and J. S. Mill contributed to moral philosophy a method of evaluation that judges the worth of a moral act by the greatest happiness principle.

D. Immanuel Kant

1. Kant wished to avoid evaluating moral deeds by their consequences or having them determined by factors beyond the control of the rational agent.
2. He contributed, therefore, the notions of the moral law within and the categorical imperative as a maxim for determining the morality of an action.

E. The development of natural ethics

1. Deontology argues that morality is based upon that which is seen as intrinsically good in itself.

F. Contemporary moral philosophy

1. The existentialists believe that morality must arise individually from each person's unique existential situation.
2. Nietzsche criticized all prevailing moralities for not sufficiently understanding that moral values arise out of each individual's will to power. There are no moral absolutes.
3. Naturalist or biological ethics stress the need for behavior to conform to environmental conditions in order to ensure fulfillment.
4. Marxist ethics criticize the alienating conditions of capitalism and encourage the building of a community in which our social nature will be satisfied.
5. Metaethics is a study of the kinds of reasoning that go on in moral theories. It considers the question of the justification of moral values.

G. The legacy of variety

1. There are many different answers to the three basic moral questions. In the daily practice of morality the distinctions between the moral theories elaborated in the West are blurred, but understanding each theory helps us to see how our own moral thinking has been shaped by the past.

SUGGESTED READINGS**Historical Surveys**

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- Sidgwick, Henry. *Outlines of the History of Ethics*. New York: St. Martin's, 1967, pp. 163-337.
- Warnock, Mary. *Ethics Since 1900*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960.

Issues in Moral Philosophy

- Frankena, William K. *Ethics*. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973.
- A short but excellent overview of major moral theories and principles.
- Hare, R. M. *The Language of Morals*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1961.
- A good example of metaethics.