

REFLECTION AND MORALITY

BY CHARLES LARMORE

I. OUR HUMANITY

Morality is what makes us human. One meaning of this common saying is plain enough. Refraining from injury to others, keeping our word, and helping those in need constitute the elementary decencies of society. If most of us did not observe these practices most of the time, or at least give one another the impression of doing so, no one would have the security to pursue a flourishing life. Even a life of basic dignity would be impossible if we found ourselves continually at the mercy of aggression, treachery, and indifference. Morality makes us human by providing rules of mutual respect without which there can be neither social cooperation nor individual achievement.

However, another meaning suggests itself as well. It has to do not with morality's function, but with its source. Other animals are like us in being able to show deference and feel affection, even to the point of sacrificing themselves for those whom they love. But morality, insofar as it involves looking beyond our own concerns and allegiances in order to respect others in and of themselves, lies beyond their ken. Does not then our very ability to think morally point to a peculiarly human power of self-transcendence, a power that we alone among the animals have of regarding ourselves from the outside as but one among others, and that finds in morality, if not its only, then certainly its most striking expression? This question engages our attention far less than it should. When people, philosophers included, wonder about the nature of morality, they tend to focus on what reasons there may be to be moral, what acting morally entails, or in what sense, if any, moral judgments count as true or false. All of these are important issues. But often the taken-for-granted deserves the greatest scrutiny. That we should be able at all to view the world impersonally, recognizing the independent and equal standing of others, involves an overcoming of self that is no less remarkable for having become largely second-nature.

Among philosophers, Immanuel Kant was one of the few, and certainly the most famous, to argue directly that morality is, in this sense, what makes us human. "Duty! Sublime and mighty name, what is an origin worthy of you?" Only a freedom, he replied, that "elevates man above himself as a part of the world of sense . . . a freedom and independence from the mech-

anism of all of nature.”¹ Our moral consciousness, according to Kant, testifies to the freedom we alone have to rise above all that experience has made of us, so that we may act in accord with demands we understand as binding on us independently of our given interests and desires. I believe, like many, that Kant was on the track of an essential truth. But, like many too, I do not believe that the source of morality can be anything so extravagant (if morality itself is not to be an illusion) as a freedom unshaped by the course of experience. Freedom, in any form we can conceive, depends not only on external conditions proving conducive to our ends, but also on our having acquired, through training and effort, the abilities necessary for exercising control over ourselves and the world. After all, we have to learn how to think morally, which means developing a sense of social expectations as well as the self-discipline needed to distinguish the good of others from our own, or from what we wish their good would be.

Thus, Kant’s intuition needs to be brought down to earth. One proposal might be that the capacity for self-transcendence to which morality gives expression consists in our nature as normative beings, responsive not merely to the causal impress of the environment, but to the authority of reasons as well. To see that we have a reason to think or act in a certain way is to see that we ought to do so, all other things being equal, and heeding an “ought”—as is clear with the moral “ought”—means holding ourselves to a demand we regard as binding upon us. Why is not this subordination of self the self-transcendence at issue?

Certainly morality is not possible except for beings that can respond to reasons. Yet the “ought” is not limited to the moral realm, any more than it is true that the only reasons for action we have are moral in character. Most importantly, the subordination of self involved in the recognition of reasons as such falls importantly short of the way that morality asks us to look beyond ourselves.

Suppose, for instance, that we are pursuing some interest of our own or the good of some people we hold dear, and doing so solely because that interest or those people matter to us. The reasons we then perceive to act one way rather than another are ones we would have to agree that anyone similarly disposed would have in such circumstances. All reasons are *universal*, binding on one person only if binding on all of whom the same conditions are true that make them applicable to the first. That is what it is for reasons to be binding, and why responding to reasons means holding ourselves responsible to the authority of an “ought,” distinct from our individual will. Nonetheless, this subordination of self is not the self-transcendence that morality demands. For the reasons in question only apply to us because we care about those ends. Their authority, though real, remains conditional.

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft (Critique of Practical Reason)* (1788), Akademie-Ausgabe (Berlin: Reimer, 1900–), vol. V, 86–87.

Imagine, however, that we think we ought to help someone simply because that person is in distress. Perhaps it is someone whom we happen to hold dear, but we are attending, not to the love we feel, but only to the person's suffering. Reasons of this sort are not just universal, as all reasons are. They are *impersonal* as well, applying to us in abstraction from our own interests and affections. Or, more exactly, their applicability does not depend on any such personal factors insofar as the latter are identified as ours, since it is possible to have an impersonal reason to satisfy a desire of ours if the desire, understood solely as belonging to a person like any other, turns out to warrant attention.² In short, impersonal reasons derive from the way things are in and of themselves—as, in the imagined case, from another person's actual condition. And it is just this impersonal element that constitutes the hallmark of moral reasons for action. Thus, acknowledging the force of reasons is not by itself sufficient to impel us to look beyond ourselves in the way that morality requires. Nor is it, incidentally, a distinctively human capacity. Many of the higher animals also have, or can be trained to have, a sense of how they ought to behave. Yet moral thinking, the grasping of impersonal reasons, remains beyond their reach.

This last point suggests the direction of a more promising approach. Though other animals can respond to reasons, they appear for the most part unable to reflect about what they ought to do, evaluating and weighing the reasons they see to favor one option or another. Reflection seems basically beyond their reach, if by "reflection" is meant standing back so as to regard ourselves from the outside, as we regard someone else, in order to figure out who we are or what we really ought to think or do. Why is it not then our capacity for reflection to which morality gives special expression? Are we not better able to consider others as persons in their own right, apart from the personal concerns that color our perception of the world, the more reflective distance we achieve toward ourselves? Of course, as that question implies, reflection need not always be impersonal. Sometimes we reflect by asking ourselves what someone close to us would think about our situation. But herein lies a strength of the approach I propose. For now the freedom that is integral to morality becomes intelligible. It is the ability to overcome the hold that a natural absorption in our own affairs exercises over our thinking in order to see the intrinsic value in the good of others, and it manifestly grows out of the less impartial ways we have of standing back from ourselves. Impersonal reflection is a creature of experience, and

² Impersonal reasons are what Thomas Nagel, in *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), chapter 10, called "objective" reasons, whose "defining predicate" contains no free, unbound, occurrence of the variable referring to the agent whose reasons they are. (If I jump out of the way of an oncoming truck because that will preserve my life—and not just someone's life, that "someone" happening to be me—then my reason will count as "subjective," not "objective" or impersonal.) I prefer my terminology, since reasons that are not impersonal are, in my view, nonetheless real.

a more sensible answer than Kant's to the question of what constitutes our peculiar power of self-transcendence.

Morality is not, of course, the only example of impersonal reflection (any more than it could be the only example of the nonempirical freedom that Kant postulated). When we reflect upon what we should believe about a certain matter, and ask not what we are inclined to suppose or what our friends or community would conclude, but rather what the facts themselves require, we are reflecting impersonally. For our target then consists in impersonal reasons for belief—reasons (in parallel to impersonal reasons for action) that we grasp as binding on us independently of our desires and loyalties in virtue of being based on what we know to be true about the subject matter itself. Morality, however, provides a privileged illustration of our capacity for impersonal reflection. For what could be a more conspicuous expression of our ability to stand back from our own attachments, as though we were merely one person among many, than to consider other people's good as of equal moment with ours, particularly when it is to our personal disadvantage?

In this essay, I want to examine more deeply the way reflection serves as the source of our moral thinking. How is it that by viewing ourselves from without, we can learn to see others as having an equal claim on our attention? Reflection, as I have said, need not always assume an impersonal form. What, then, is involved in its coming to exhibit the sort of self-transcendence that morality demands? Obviously, the place to begin is the nature of reflection itself.

As may already be apparent, and will become plainer as I proceed, reflecting about what to believe does not, to my mind, differ substantially from reflecting about how to act—except, of course, in subject matter. Grand distinctions are often made between theoretical and practical reason, particularly in the Kantian tradition. But they are largely overdrawn. (In this regard too, as in many others, the rationalism I espouse departs radically from Kant's.) Reason is best understood as the ability to respond to reasons, be they reasons for belief or for action, and the point of reflection, as I shall explain, is to consider explicitly what we have reason to think or do in regard to some problem that has disrupted our settled routines. Though the relation between reflection and morality is my ultimate concern, the next two sections will therefore look at the nature of reflection along quite general lines. I will not be losing sight, however, of what is involved in reflecting about how to act. It is precisely this comprehensive approach that reveals the true character of practical reflection, the common structure and function it shares with reflection about what to think and believe. So far from the practical and the theoretical constituting two disparate realms, all reflection is essentially cognitive in nature, aiming at a knowledge of the reasons there are. This general account will guide the more specific analysis of moral thinking to which I then return in Sections IV and V. There my concern will be to show how our capacity

for impersonal reflection shapes the makeup of the moral point of view, its preconditions and implications. Because this capacity sets us off so dramatically from all the other animals, morality can indeed be said to form a signal expression of our humanity.

II. THE NATURE OF REFLECTION

It is characteristic of the human condition that we rarely exist at one with ourselves. Often we feel torn between competing commitments. Or no sooner do we make some decision of moment than we recall our doubts about whether a different option might not be better. To deliberate honestly is to risk having a mind divided, for our inner conflicts seldom amount to mere confusions, vanishing in the wake of a more careful scrutiny. Generally, they mirror the real complexity of our situation, the multiplicity of demands that rightly exercise a hold on our attention. Even when we conclude that we have good reason to take one path rather than another, we leave behind something of ourselves in the possibilities we reject.

Yet conflict is not the only or the deepest way in which we fail to coincide with ourselves. Even more fundamental is our continual alternation between doing and reflecting. We move back and forth between two standpoints, the view from within and the view from without. Because each of us has a life that is ours alone to live, we naturally approach the world in the light of the interests and allegiances that happen to be ours. So long as everything goes its customary way, we think and act from within our own perspective. Yet we are also often moved to reflect on our thought and action—not for the pure pleasure of doing so, but because some problem has emerged that puts into question the way we have been proceeding. We are no longer clear about the sort of person we are or about what we should believe or do with regard to some other matter. Reflection is the response to a problem, the attempt to reestablish a fit between expectation and reality.

Reflecting also means, however, ceasing to live our lives from within in order to look at ourselves from without. To be sure, we stand back so as to examine the particular difficulty that has arisen. But even if it is something quite circumscribed (some trait of ours and not the shape of our life as a whole), and even if it concerns an object distinct from us (the real character of someone else or the confusing nature of some natural or social phenomenon), it is still ourselves, and not merely the difficulty, that we regard from the outside. As a response to a problem that has disturbed our routine, reflection is always a turning back upon ourselves, since it aims to figure out what *we* are to do about the difficulty before us. It requires us, moreover, to look at ourselves *from without*, since ascertaining what we ought to do means discovering what solution we have *reason* to adopt. Because reasons are necessarily universal (if they are binding on

one, then they are binding on all under similar conditions), we cannot determine how we should proceed except by considering what anyone in our shoes ought to do. Naturally, we do not forget that in the case at hand we are the target, since our question remains, “What should we do?” But we approach this question (in effect, if not in so many words) by asking ourselves how anyone like us ought to think or act. When we simply respond to reasons, without reflecting, we do not take this sort of detour. But deliberating about what reasons we may have is a different matter. That is the essence of reflection, and it requires us to regard ourselves as one person among others—from without, though not necessarily, as will become clear, from an impersonal distance.

Reflection, therefore, always involves self-distancing. It requires us to adopt a third-person attitude toward ourselves, as though we were a “him” or a “her.” This fact, incidentally, points to an important truth about the pursuit of self-knowledge. Reflection need not have self-knowledge as its aim, of course, since often we reflect in order to discover what we should do or what we should believe about other matters in the world. When we do seek to know ourselves better, it is because some conflict has appeared between our conception of who we are and the behavior we notice, the desires we feel, or the unsettling remarks that others have made. And since we can only handle this problem by considering how someone like us ought to revise or deepen his self-understanding, we have no choice but to study ourselves as we would any other person, by collecting evidence and drawing inferences. Our knowledge of ourselves is then built up in the same empirical, trial-and-error way as our knowledge of others. We have no privileged access to the makeup of our own minds, which is why others can sometimes know us better than we do ourselves.³

There are, in fact, two distinct dimensions along which we objectify ourselves whenever we reflect. First, in order to get hold of the problem we have encountered, we must adopt toward our own person the same sort of observational stance we occupy toward others when, living our lives from within, we regard their thoughts and feelings as among the elements of our environment. We look at ourselves as someone with a certain problem to solve, and we may have to study its ins and outs with care. But, second, we cannot determine what we, as such a person, ought to do in response except from a standpoint of evaluation that consists, not in everything we happen to believe and want, but in the standards and assumptions we think ought to govern our decision. This is as much as to say that, in deliberating about how we are to proceed, we examine ourselves through the eyes of someone we imagine as embodying just such an evaluative standpoint. In effect, we ask what such a person would conclude that we should do. The two kinds of self-distancing are quite

³ In my book *Les pratiques du moi* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), I discuss at greater length the nature of reflection and self-knowledge.

distinct, of course: in the one, we describe ourselves as we are; in the other, we figure out what we are to do. It is in the way they work together that reflection functions as it does. To reflect is not simply to contemplate our own person, as though gazing at our reflection in a mirror, which is what the first kind of self-distancing alone would entail. We turn our attention toward ourselves in order to handle some obstacle that has disrupted our relation to the world.

Despite these differences between living our lives from within and reflecting on them from without, it would obviously be wrong to suppose that reflection stands opposed to life, or that it constitutes a luxury we might choose to forgo. We become the persons we are through the problems we confront. There is no end to the need for standing back, and we live as much outside ourselves, thinking about what we should do, as within the various activities we do pursue. Indeed, little in the way we see the world around us fails to show the mark of what we have learned by reflecting. That is why a concern for others, though it has its roots in reflection, forms an important part of our everyday lives. Internalizing what we have learned, we come to act with an eye to the well-being of those—family, friends, and associates—about whom we care enough to have considered how they feel. Similarly, we incorporate into our dealings with others moral principles we have acquired by reflecting impartially on how one should, in general, treat one's fellow man. What I am calling the view from within is not essentially self-interested.

Nonetheless, the business of living easily keeps us in the pull of our own orbit. This we often discover if we happen to reflect anew. For reflection knows no inherent limits. It allows us to make out the ways in which the very habits of mind we have acquired by reflecting still remain tied to the particularities of our life. Thus, we recognize, on taking a broader view, that our various loyalties and loves are likely to matter little to others with their own lives to live, their own ties and causes. Even the moral principles we espouse may appear a bit parochial or biased, once we consider the extent to which they have been shaped by culture or class.

As I have previously remarked, reflection can proceed from more than one type of standpoint of evaluation. It need not aim at being impersonal—that is, at judging how we ought to think or act irrespective of our own interests and attachments. We may, for instance, base our evaluation of the options before us on what we imagine some individual (real or fictional) whom we hold dear would do in our place, or would want us to do. Philosophers tend to neglect this mode of reflection, perhaps because they believe themselves to be above it, but they are certainly wrong to do so. All of us lean from time to time on various exemplars, internalized heroes and idols, to figure out how we ought to think and act. Moreover, modeling ourselves on others is not in itself a vice, as though the proper course were always to think on our own. Everything depends on the

worth of the models to which we appeal. Though it is often simple chance, or some special allure, that has led them to represent for us a kind of person we would like to be, this too is not necessarily deplorable. We may not have the time or the means to check their reliability. And even when we do, some particular trait of theirs may later prove instructive in ways we could not anticipate when confirming their general value.

So little is identifying with others an appropriate object of disapproval, it plays an essential role in our coming to grasp the impersonal point of view.⁴ The capacity for reflection does not spring full-blown from anyone's head. It develops over time. In early life, reflection upon who we are and what we should do consists, quite naturally, in imagining what those who are close to us would say. As our horizons broaden and we discover that parents and friends disagree, we find ourselves impelled to devise more abstract angles of evaluation: thus, we come to examine ourselves by the standards of some larger community to which we feel bound. But the same factors tend to push us beyond that perspective as well. And thus we may eventually fashion the idea of a fully informed and perfectly rational standpoint, transcending the limitations in the attitudes of particular individuals and societies—though, even then, identification is not at an end, since generally we do so by looking in our own culture for exemplars of such a standpoint to take as our models. Only through this sort of process do we learn what it is to hold ourselves accountable to an impersonal standard of thought and action. Only thus can we come to grasp the specifically moral point of view, which is to see in another's good, separately from our own interests and attachments, a reason for action on our part.

Nonetheless, whether we assume the outlook of some other individual, or reflect instead from an impersonal standpoint, certain elements remain constant. One is that reflection aims, in response to a problem, at determining what we have reason to think or do. Reasons, as I have pointed out, are universal in character: if they are binding on us, then they are binding on all who find themselves in conditions similar to those that make them applicable to us. It follows that even when we reflect, not impersonally, but by identifying with the standpoint of someone we esteem, our conclusions are still ones we must assume that anyone like us ought to endorse in such a situation. That is not an awkward implication. For would we adopt that standpoint if we did not presume it to be attuned to how people should really behave who have interests like those that impel us to take it up? If I pattern my wardrobe on what some movie star wears, I am assuming that he knows how people who want to be cool ought to dress.

⁴ Cf. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759, 1790; Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Classics, 1976), part III, chapters 2–3, as well as George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), part III.

Another constant is that, in reflecting, we have to rely on our current understanding of the world. We cannot regard ourselves from without except by continuing to think, at least in part, from within the perspective we presently occupy. Precisely because reflection is the response to a problem, it is always situated: only in the light of our existing views can we so much as identify the problem before us, and we cannot hope to handle it except by drawing upon the relevant information at our disposal. When we reflect by imagining what someone important to us would say, we make use (for example) of what we understand to be that person's characteristic habits of mind. So too, when we consider impersonally what we ought to think or do, we base our reasoning on the knowledge we have acquired, not only of the matter before us, but also, more broadly, of how belief should be proportioned to evidence or of how people are to be treated fairly. The impersonal point of view is not the view from nowhere. It always bears the mark of our time and place.

And yet, I must add, its claim to being impersonal does not thereby show itself to be a sham. Our access to reality as it is in itself is always mediated through the contingencies of history. This is not the place to enter into a discussion of epistemological questions, but the general position to which I am alluding is easily summarized.⁵ Impersonal reasons, I have said, are reasons that stem solely from facts outside of us, uncolored by our own interests and attachments. Though reflecting on what impersonal reasons we have certainly entails appealing to our existing conception of those facts, our conclusions are still valid precisely to the extent that the beliefs on which we rely, for all their rootedness in the prior course of our experience, constitute knowledge of the matter at hand. To be sure, we may be wrong about the reliability of these beliefs. But that just means that our ideas concerning what impersonal reasons we have are always revisable, which is neither surprising nor ruinous. Impersonal reflection is, after all, an achievement, and, consequently, it is the subject of constant scrutiny for lingering traces of bias or distortion.

At this point, however, there arise some crucial questions. Does reflection, impersonal or not, really aim at truth? Is it an organ of knowledge, and if so, what can it provide knowledge of? These questions would appear to admit of a ready answer. We reflect in order to be better able to discern how we ought to think or act in the given circumstances, and that seems clearly to count as an object of knowledge. For it is something of which we begin by feeling ignorant and seek, by reflecting, to gain a correct grasp. What we ought to do is tantamount to what there is reason for us to do. So reflection, in essence, aims at knowledge of reasons for belief and action.

⁵ For a closer discussion, see Charles Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), chapter 1, "History and Truth."

Such a conception results from taking literally the way we ordinarily talk about reflection, and in my view it ought to be no cause for alarm. But many disagree. In their eyes, it entails an untenable metaphysics and is, in any case, untrue to the nature of reflection. To suppose that reflection's relation to reasons is one of knowledge means not only attributing to the world a domain of irreducibly normative fact, but also imagining that knowledge by itself could ever move us to action as reflection manifestly does. Belief by itself is motivationally inert, and can lead us to act only in conjunction with some additional, conative element of the mind, such as a desire or a commitment. Reflection, it is therefore claimed, is a practical rather than a theoretical enterprise: when we reflect on what we have reason to do, our purpose is to settle how we want to live, not to discover some fact about the world. To this set of claims I now turn.

III. REFLECTION AND KNOWLEDGE

Reasons for belief and action are essentially normative in character. What we have reason to do is what we *ought* to do, all else being equal. There is no explaining what is meant by reasons except by appeal to this or similar ways of speaking. Reasons cannot therefore be equated with any features of the natural world, physical or psychological, even though they certainly depend on the natural facts being as they are. That is why many philosophers balk at allowing that reasons can properly count as objects of knowledge. If knowledge is of what is the case independently of our coming to hold a view about it, then supposing that reasons figure among the things we can know entails that the world, as the totality of what is the case, must include normative facts about how we ought to think and act. Such a view runs counter to the naturalism that constitutes the reigning philosophical orthodoxy of our day. All that really exists, it is said, belongs to the domain of the natural sciences, the realm of physical fact or of psychological fact too, if the latter is not further reducible to the physical. As should be plain, I reject this sort of naturalism. But my main business here is to clarify the character of reasons and to explain why we should conceive of reflection as a way of acquiring knowledge about them.⁶

Consider then, first, why it is that a reason cannot consist in a physical state of affairs. We sometimes say that the rain, or the fact that it is raining, is a reason to take an umbrella when leaving the house. Strictly speaking, however, my reason to do so is not the rain itself, but rather a certain relation that the rain bears to my possibilities of action. After all, one might agree that it is raining, yet dispute that this fact gives me a reason to take an umbrella. Only insofar as the rain justifies or counts in

⁶ A more detailed version of the following argument is presented in Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality*, chapter 5, especially sections 7–8.