

Introduction

Response and Commitment

In an earlier collection of essays, *The Morals of Modernity*,¹ I argued that our moral self-understanding, even at its most fundamental, needs to draw upon the distinctive forms of modern experience. All our thinking is shaped by our historical context. Philosophy is no exception and, committed as it is to being fully explicit about its assumptions and goals, it ought to acknowledge the ties of time and place that give it substance and direction. I have not abandoned this conviction, as many of the essays in the present volume attest. Yet I have also gone on to pursue a lot further another theme in the earlier volume that is very much at odds with a dominant strand of modern thought.

The principles by which we determine what to believe or do must in the end, so it is often held, be principles of our own making. Once the Enlightenment has undone the notion that they are imposed on us by a higher being, and the Scientific Revolution shown that they cannot be read off the fabric of the world, which is now seen to be normatively mute and devoid of directives, the conclusion appears inescapable that we alone must be their source. The authority of any principle of thought and action is an authority we bestow upon it ourselves. This idea of the *autonomy* of reason, far more common than the Kantian tradition from which the term itself derives, seems to me profoundly mistaken. Reason, indeed thought in general, involves an essential responsiveness to reasons. We cannot believe or do even the most insignificant of things except insofar as we see some basis or reason for doing so. Far from being the authors of the principles by which we live, we must conceive of them as binding on us from without, not only in moral matters but in every area. The point is not our need for divine tutelage. Quite the contrary, it is the need to revise the reigning image of what the world itself is like. To make sense of how we think and what we care about, we have to see reality as embodying

¹ *The Morals of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

a normative dimension. Commitment is unintelligible except as a response to the existence of reasons.

Now my very dissatisfaction with so pervasive a tendency of the modern mind might be taken as evidence of a general truth to which the idea of historical rootedness fails to do justice. However much we may be a part of our time and place, we retain the capacity to question accepted opinion and set out on a path of our own. This is undeniable. Yet nothing in the idea of rootedness, properly understood, really goes to deny it. After all, holding to some belief or practice, be it ever so firmly, entails being able to stand back and see ourselves from the outside. For we are not moved by reasons as we are by mere causes, but only in virtue of acknowledging their force, which means that on reflection (though then only by reference to other reasons) we must be able to weigh the value of committing ourselves as they demand. Though Hegel rightly spoke of reason's need to reconcile itself to its place in history, we can never come to feel so fully at home that we lose that inner distance to our commitments, that ability to have determined otherwise, which the Romantics whom he loathed called the element of irony in even our most serious of endeavors.²

All the same, I would also point out that my opposition to the modern notion of reason as autonomous has to do with what I take to be a self-misunderstanding. The target of my discontent is not, at least primarily, the moral and political principles characteristic of modern thought at its best, but rather its conception of what must be the basis of our allegiance to them – though this conception does embody a certain ideal of freedom with substantial implications for how we are to live our lives. My primary ambition is to have us see more clearly where we stand. And so, here too, philosophical argument remains moored in the present.

The first chapter of this book, "History and Truth," takes up again this refrain of the earlier book, showing why a sense of history ought not to produce a diminished devotion to truth. But it will be helpful if in this Introduction as well I describe in some detail the historically minded view of moral philosophy to which I have long been wedded. Then I can return to explain the principal theme of the present book, the responsiveness of our deepest commitments to an independent order of principles, and show how the two concerns fit together.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY

The Morals of Modernity grew out of my conviction that moral philosophy should be pursued with a historical sensibility. Such is not the spirit in which moral philosophers ordinarily go about their work. Their usual procedure is to treat the nature of morality as though it were essentially

² See my book, *The Romantic Legacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 76–83.

timeless in character, unaffected by any deep historical shifts in the way people conceive of their world and themselves. Reference may be made to great thinkers of the past, but they are invoked for their insights or mistakes about a subject matter presumed to be fundamentally unchanging. Even when the focus becomes some specifically modern development, the approach often remains the same. Liberal democracy, for instance, is regularly seen as a form of political life whose distinctive principles could have been known all along to define the proper goals of government and the dignity of the individual.

There have been, to be sure, notable exceptions to this tendency. But it is the norm, and it represents a mistake. Philosophy in general is wrong to aim at standing free from the vicissitudes of history. For then it must either fail to achieve anything of substance or misunderstand the conditions of its own success. Moral philosophy is no exception. Systematic reflection about the nature of the good and the right cannot hope to find much guidance in formal concepts of practical rationality, which tell us in essence only that we should pursue efficiently the things we hold to be valuable (that we should maximize expected utility, according to the technical jargon), but not what it is that we ought in fact to value. (I develop this point at some length in Chapter 5 of this book.) Nor will we make much headway if we simply bring in a knowledge of the essentials of the human condition along with a stock of moral truisms such as “promises are to be kept” and “the innocent are not to be harmed.” To get a handle on the philosophical questions that matter – for instance, the relation between the demands of morality and the pursuit of our own good, the basic unity or instead heterogeneity of what we owe to others as well as of what constitutes the human good, the proper goals of political association – we must turn to the resources that our own historical situation provides us. We need most of all to make use of one of the cardinal lessons of modernity, which is that the ultimate ends of life are bound to be an object of reasonable disagreement and that a core morality, binding on all despite their differing ideals of the human good, is therefore an institution of immeasurable value. We must also rely upon the traditions of moral thought, various and contingent though they are, that have shaped our sense of what is obligatory, noble, or unconscionable and given us what are indeed substantive principles of judgment and action. So we do anyway, if only implicitly or unknowingly, whenever we manage to say something of real moment (which does not, it is true, happen all that often in moral philosophy). To recognize the need to base ourselves on historical givens, instead of aspiring to some transcendent point of view, is thus to remove a crippling source of error and confusion.

Reflection, even in philosophy, cannot but base itself on commitments we already have, since its essence is to be the response to a problem. We do not reflect for the pure pleasure of reflecting, but because some idea or

experience has disrupted our ordinary expectations, obliging us to find a way of revising them, and we could not even identify the problem, much less work out a solution, except in the light of our existing beliefs and interests. Reflection is always situated. To take this truth to heart is to see the merits of what I call a “contextualist” epistemology.³ What is it for a belief, moral or otherwise, to count as justified? Answers to this question have generally fallen into two opposing molds, “foundationalist” or “coherentist”: either the reasons to accept some view are thought to rest in the end upon a special class of beliefs that we can see to be true in some immediate fashion, without appeal to yet further beliefs, or the reasons to accept it are held to turn upon its forming an integral part of some broad web of belief whose various elements lend one another mutual support. This conflict is a recurrent feature of the philosophical landscape, and yet the two warring camps share a crucial and dubious assumption. They both suppose that no view is really justified unless the considerations serving to warrant its acceptance have themselves the status of being justified. As a result, they both maintain that all our existing beliefs stand in need of justification simply by virtue of our having them at all. Otherwise, it is thought, we would not be entitled to rely upon them in figuring out what else we should accept.

The common idea that every justifying belief, and thus every belief as such, should be justified mistakes the point of justification, however. Asking whether some view ought to be accepted is one of the things we do when we reflect. It is a response to a problem, and only what is problematic calls for justification. Whether we should adopt a belief we do not yet have certainly counts as a problem, and that is why we are right to seek its justification, determining whether there are positive reasons to think it true. The fact that we already hold a belief does not, by contrast, constitute a problem – unless, of course, we have come upon reasons to think it might be false (one such reason cannot be merely the fact that we possess it), and so only under such circumstances must we set about ascertaining its credentials. The proper object of justification is not belief but rather changes in belief. We need to worry about the grounds for some view when it is one we are deciding whether to adopt or one we already hold but have reason to contemplate modifying or rejecting. Questions of justification arise within a context of existing beliefs that do not themselves have to be justified. They need not even be regarded as having been justified once upon a time, nor of course do they count as justified by virtue of the mere fact that they are held. Their status consists in being understood as true,

³ The term “contextualism” is used in epistemology today to mean many different things, not all of which I am inclined to endorse. I have in mind a certain view about the justification of belief. My ultimate source of inspiration is C. S. Peirce, and I am also indebted to the writings of Isaac Levi, such as *The Enterprise of Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1980).

since such is the sense in which they function as beliefs: to believe that *p* consists in being disposed to think and act in accord with the presumed truth of *p*.⁴ Existing beliefs define the setting in which problems take shape and provide the premises from which solutions can be devised. They are not in themselves a problem.

In this light, it ought to be clear why moral philosophy should proceed in a historical spirit, taking its bearings from the traditions of thought and forms of experience that have made us who we are. It is a matter of doing more consciously, and so more knowledgeably and carefully, what we must do in any case if we are to achieve something of consequence. Outside philosophy, inquiry can afford to ignore its historically conditioned character. There, the leading aim is to solve the problems at hand, in order to be better able to handle others in the future. Not so in philosophy, whatever the particular domain. Progress here means not just solving problems, but also making as explicit as possible the assumptions guiding the way we go about it. To say this is not to dictate in some substantive way what it is that philosophy should be. Attempts to delimit its peculiar methods or subject matter, which is the form substantive definitions regularly take, never succeed since they simply reflect the predilections of some particular philosophical movement. But something more general does appear distinctive of all philosophy, as shown by both those attempts and the exposures of their failure, and that is its commitment to being fully self-aware. To take this ideal seriously, I maintain, is to keep in view the historicity of the problems we face and of the resources we bring to bear on them.

In *The Morals of Modernity*, I sometimes held up Hegel as a pioneer of this approach. But I am no Hegelian. Much of his “system” strikes me as wrong, outlandish, or unintelligible. There is, in particular, his conviction that as our ideas of what counts as rational belief or action change over time, they develop in accord with an inner logic, following a necessary path that is the course of human history itself. Few today could endorse such a view. Once it has been discarded, however, a certain skepticism may seem inescapable. Must not a rejection of the notion that history has a meaning, when combined with an awareness of how reason depends on history, lead us to doubt whether we can really claim to have access to truth itself, as opposed to the picture of the world licensed by our current but changing standards? If the grounds we have for our present views turn on the contingencies of tradition and experience, what more can we really mean by saying that our predecessors were wrong than that they did not happen to think like us?

Skepticism of this sort is now widespread. It drives the different currents of so-called post-modernism that have proven so influential in

⁴ This account of belief is defended in Chapter 5, §8.

contemporary culture. Although the work of others may be more famous, the clearest statement of the post-modernist outlook remains an early and programmatic essay by Jean-François Lyotard. Once we have seen through the grand modern stories about finding outside history or in the movement of history itself an objective – that is, non-parochial basis for the evaluation of all human endeavor – we are left, he argued, only with our various language games themselves, each with its own rules, but without any impartial standpoint to settle the conflicts between them.⁵ This looks like the recipe for a rather facile relativism, and that is what post-modernism has indeed become. Thus there has occurred the expectable reaction of insisting that we can after all pry ourselves loose from the grip of history and latch onto timeless standards of belief and action.

Both attitudes miss what was Hegel's genuine insight, and which we can recast in a form more compatible with our own greater sense of contingency. Like him, we need to comprehend our rootedness in a particular time and place as the very means by which we gain access to truth, though now without any guarantee that where we happen to stand is an inevitable moment in the human mind's (or *Geist's*) quest for knowledge of itself and of the world. Our changing views about the proper principles of thought and action represent a learning process in which we come to see better how to determine what to think and do, a learning process that proceeds in much the same way as deciding upon beliefs and actions themselves – namely, by judging how to make the best sense of our experience in the light of what we already know. The key is to understand our finitude as opening us outward rather than hemming us in. As noted before, Chapter 1 in this book gives a general defense of such a position. There I look chiefly at the case of scientific inquiry. Most of the other chapters focus on questions in moral and political philosophy, and in them the same conception is at work.

THE NATURE OF REASON

The essays in this book are also united by a second concern, which has to do, as I have said, with our need to break with the modern idea of the autonomy of reason and to recognize the dependence of our thinking, particularly in the moral and political realm, on principles that bind us from without. "Autonomy" is itself a term with many meanings, and I should make clear at the outset which sense I have in mind. Sometimes it means our capacity to grasp and do what is right regardless of threats or rewards coming from some superior, human or divine, our right to think for ourselves instead of having to defer to custom or coercion. In this

⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition post-moderne* (Paris: Minuit, 1979). See also his book, *Le différend* (Paris: Minuit, 1983).

sense, the term denotes a certain kind of independence that we can or should enjoy in our relations to others. It is not the object of my critique. But autonomy can also refer to the nature of our relation to the principles themselves by which we think and act. Their authority, it is supposed, comes from us alone, since there can be no reasons to do one thing rather than another except insofar as we take them to be reasons: it is up to us to decide what import, if any, the facts as they are will have for our conduct. That the world itself is normatively mute except for the principles we impose upon it – this is the idea of autonomy, running through so much of the moral, political, and even scientific thought of modernity, which I contest in various ways during the course of this book.

Let me therefore explain a bit more why such an idea has seemed so persuasive and why it ought nonetheless to be replaced by a different view of the mind as essentially responsive to reasons. What this different view involves and how it fits together with my other theme, the essential historicity of reason, also deserve some general remarks, even though the essays that follow explore these matters in considerable detail.

Ever since the Scientific Revolution, a naturalistic picture of the world as a realm of value-neutral facts has grown in prestige and has encouraged in turn the view that how we ought to think and act is ultimately a matter of principles whose authority derives from us alone. Though not always explicit, the alliance between these two outlooks has proven extraordinarily influential. For instance, modern conceptions of freedom, whether their focus is individual conduct or political association, typically gravitate toward the idea of self-determination, claiming that we ourselves are responsible, if not for the conditions we find ourselves in, then for the terms on which we deal with them. Thinking moves so easily along these lines because of the background assumption that, were it not for the norms we introduce, there would exist only the things that natural science has come to take as its domain – matter in motion, along perhaps with minds (unless they too are but matter in motion), but nothing outside us to point us one way rather than another. The necessity we face of having to impose a rational order of our own construction on an alien world is held to constitute our very dignity as human beings. It is in this regard that Kant has been the paradigmatic philosopher of modernity. Quite apart from his more particular doctrines, he was the first to recognize clearly that, once we accept the naturalism of the scientific worldview, reason must be seen as essentially self-legislating or “autonomous” if we are to believe that it exists at all.

I am convinced that this conception of mind and world, however influential, is fundamentally mistaken. A number of essays in this book, particularly Chapters 2 through 5, are devoted to showing, by reference to certain issues in moral philosophy and also by way of generalization, that a different approach is necessary. Thus I argue in Chapter 5, against some

of the central strands of modern thought, that there is no way to reason ourselves into the moral point of view from some supposedly more basic position outside it: morality speaks for itself, and we must simply see and acknowledge that another's good is in itself a reason for action on our part. This lesson, which I term "the autonomy of morality" (to underscore the contrast with the Kantian ethic of autonomy), has general implications. Thought is unintelligible unless understood as guided by reasons that are not of our own making. We cannot, for instance, believe at will (say, that the number of stars is even), but can only believe what we see there to be some reason to regard as true. Though freedom is the power to choose independently of external constraint, choosing entails heeding the reasons we regard as favoring one thing rather than another. The idea of self-determination misses the way that the freedom that makes us the beings we are involves both active and passive moments, commitment as well as response. It cannot be right to say that we impose our reason on a normatively mute world. For reason itself consists in a responsiveness to reasons, reasons that prescribe how we ought to think and act.⁶

"Naturalism" is invoked today in a number of different senses. Some of them – that knowledge rests on experience, that explanations appealing to the supernatural should be avoided – are not at issue. The naturalism I oppose is the view, increasingly hegemonic in modern times, that all that there is, properly speaking, is what the natural sciences say to exist – physical and psychological facts, in other words, and thus nothing intrinsically normative, no facts about what we ought to do. This naturalism, despite its deference to modern science, is not a theorem of any scientific theory. It is a metaphysical position, according to which the scientific image of nature answers our philosophical questions about the ultimate makeup of reality. As a piece of metaphysics, it is to be judged, as all metaphysical theories have to be, by considering how well it ties together our experience as a whole. In this regard, it does quite poorly, I maintain. If we cannot make sense of reason, or indeed of thinking in general, except as involving a responsiveness to reasons, then reasons must be seen as themselves a part of what there is.

The idea that we are in the end bound only by principles we institute ourselves has had a wider currency than these rather abstract remarks might suggest. It has played a pervasive role in modern culture, from the individualist celebration of experiments in living to the aesthetic ideologies of the avant-garde. It comes to powerful expression in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose constant refrain – every value we honor, even the obligation to truth, is a means we have willed, and could have willed

⁶ I develop this claim, not only in a number of essays in this book, but also in a book I have published on the nature of the self, *Les pratiques du moi* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004).

otherwise, to give shape and meaning to our lives – continues for all its fundamental incoherence (see Chapter 9) to exercise a continuing fascination on the contemporary mind. The idea of autonomy knows indeed no party allegiances, since it also inspires a common way of commending the political ideals of modern liberal democracy, of which Nietzsche himself was no friend.

In many people's eyes, it has seemed axiomatic that the ideal of democratic self-government consists in a people or its representatives laying down themselves, in a legislative assembly or more firmly by way of a constitution, what the rules establishing their common life together shall be. The principles by which they are to be bound, defining the powers of the state and the rights of citizens, must be principles whose authority stems from them alone. This is a deep misunderstanding. As I explain in Chapters 6 through 8, it misses the moral framework within which alone liberal democracy acquires its distinctive character. No supposed expression of the people's will can count as authoritative, no appeal to what would be the object of reasonable agreement can serve as the standard for the basic terms of political association, as in the "political liberalism" of Rawls and similar thinkers (myself included), unless "democratic will" and "reasonable agreement" are defined by reference to a moral principle of respect for persons. This principle, requiring that the necessarily coercive rules of political life be nonetheless acceptable to all whom they are to bind (acceptable on the assumption that they themselves endorse such a principle), has therefore an authority independent of the democratic order itself. For democracy to be possible, citizens must be understood as standing under the obligation to respect one another as persons, in advance of the laws they give themselves.

No doubt my insistence that reasons form part of the fabric of reality, that the world contains a normative dimension to which our reason is responsive, will strike many as simply extravagant. This impression will not be lessened by my having sometimes chosen to call the position "platonistic," in allusion to this one element of common ground with Plato's theory of Forms. Just as Plato held that in addition to trees and our ideas of trees there must exist the Form, or what it is to be a tree, so I claim that not all that exists is physical or psychological in character. Reasons, which are irreducibly normative, must also figure among what is real. "On the Platonistic picture," writes Allan Gibbard, "among the facts of the world are facts of what is rational and what is not . . . If this is what anyone seriously believes, then I simply want to debunk it." Gibbard's scorn turns out, however, to be little more than an expression of his own *parti pris*, for he justifies it by adding, "Nothing in a plausible, naturalistic picture of our place in the universe requires these non-natural facts."⁷ To be sure,

⁷ Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 154.

nothing in a naturalistic worldview allows that there exist such things as reasons and thus facts about what is rational. But the question is precisely whether that worldview is in the end a tenable one.

It is often said, in company with Max Weber, that in modern times the world has become “disenchanted” (*entzaubert*). I am not contesting the phenomenon. But it is essential to understand aright what it consists in. Perhaps it is true (though many will disagree) that we can no longer in good conscience suppose that the world harbors any element of the divine or the sacred, which is what Weber meant by disenchantment.⁸ Yet this does not entail that the world is barren of all normative distinctions. Sometimes naturalism has leaned upon such an argument, as though reasons for belief and action must draw their authority from someone – either God or us. That assumption is incoherent, however. Reasons have their own authority, and persons acquire authority because of the reasons we see to trust or honor them. If we ought indeed to endorse the disenchanted view of the world, then presumably there are good grounds for doing so distinct from anyone’s say-so or from what happens to be the spirit of the times, grounds that really do obtain.

Some have promised that we can have “objectivity without objects,” that we can regard our statements about reasons as true or false without falling into the platonistic illusion of supposing that there actually are reasons that make them true or false.⁹ Unsurprisingly, this *via media* proves elusive. Statements are true in virtue of things being as they claim, and to back away from their objects having to exist means equivocating about their really being true. Ultimately, the charge of metaphysical extravagance is but the reflection of an unbudging allegiance, doctrinaire or implicit, to a pre-given notion of the world. Though there is no point postulating entities beyond necessity, there is also no point deciding *a priori* what can and cannot exist – which includes (as I stress in Chapter 3) refusing to own up to the implications when we do accept that thinking is essentially responsive to reasons.

Still, I can dispel some misconceptions if I note right away – I examine the matter at length in Chapter 5 (§7) – that I am not imagining reasons to occupy some ethereal, platonic heaven, cut off from the natural world here below. Reasons for belief and action depend on the physical and psychological facts being as they are. There is a reason to take an umbrella only if it is indeed raining, or a reason to get a drink of water only if I happen to be thirsty. Similarly, reasons exist only insofar as beings exist capable of doing things for reasons (such beings including, I would add,

⁸ See, for instance, his famous essay, *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1996).

⁹ A recent example is Hilary Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), Chapter 3.