

MORALITY
AN INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS

THE AMORALIST

‘WHY should I do anything?’ Two of the many ways of taking that question are these: as an expression of despair or hopelessness, when it means something like ‘Give me a reason for doing anything; everything is meaningless’; and as sounding a more defiant note, against morality, when it means something like ‘Why is there anything that I *should, ought to, do?*’

Even though we can paraphrase the question in the first spirit as ‘Give me a reason . . .’, it is very unclear that we can in fact give the man who asks it a reason – that, starting from so far down, we could *argue* him into caring about something. We might indeed ‘give him a reason’ in the sense of finding something that he is prepared to care about, but that is not inducing him to care by reasoning, and it is very doubtful whether there could be any such thing. What he needs is help, or hope, not reasonings. Of course it is true that if he stays alive he will be doing *something*, rather than something else, and thus in some absolutely minimal sense he has some sort of reason, some minimal preference, for doing those things rather than other things. But to point this out gets us hardly anywhere; he does those things just mechanically, perhaps, to keep going, and they mean nothing to him. Again, if he sees his state as a reason for suicide, then that would be to make a real decision; as a way out of making any decisions, suicide comes inevitably one decision too late (as Camus points out in

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Le Mythe de Sisyphe). But it would be no victory for us or for him if it turned out there was after all just one decision that he was prepared to acknowledge, that one.

I do not see how it could be regarded as a defeat for reason or rationality that it had no power against this man's state; his state is rather a defeat for humanity. But the man who asks the question in the second spirit has been regarded by many moralists as providing a real challenge to moral reasoning. He, after all, acknowledges some reasons for doing things; he is, moreover, like most of us some of the time. If morality can be got off the ground rationally, then we ought to be able to get it off the ground in an argument against him; while, in his pure form – in which we can call him the *amoralist* – he may not be actually persuaded, it might seem a comfort to morality if there were reasons which, if he were rational, would persuade him.

We might ask first what motivations he does have. He is indifferent to moral considerations, but there are things that he cares about, and he has some real preferences and aims. They might be, presumably, pleasure or power; or they might be something much odder, such as some passion for collecting things. Now these ends in themselves do not exclude some acknowledgement of morality; what do we have to leave out to represent him as paying no such acknowledgement? Presumably such things as his caring about other people's interests, having any inclination to tell the truth or keep promises if it does not suit him to do so, being disposed to reject courses of action on the ground that they are unfair or dishonourable or selfish. These are some of the substantial materials of morality. We should perhaps also leave

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out a more formal aspect of morality, namely any disposition on his part to stand back and have the thought that if it is 'all right' for him to act in these ways, it must be 'all right' for others to act similarly against him. For if he is prepared to take this stance, we might be able to take a step towards saying that he was not a man without a morality, but a man with a peculiar one.

However, we need a distinction here. In one way, it is possible for a man to think it 'all right' for everyone to behave self-interestedly, without his having got into any distinctively moral territory of thought at all: if, roughly, 'it's all right' means 'I am not going to moralize about it'. He will be in some moral territory if 'all right' means something like 'permitted', for that would carry implications such as 'people ought not to interfere with other people's pursuit of their own interests', and that is not a thought which, as an amoralist, he can have. Similarly, if he objects (as he no doubt will) to other people treating him as he treats them, this will be perfectly consistent so long as his objecting consists just in such things as his not liking it and fighting back. What he cannot consistently do is *resent* it or disapprove of it, for these are attitudes within the moral system. It may be difficult to discover whether he has given this hostage to moral argument or not, since he will no doubt have discovered that insincere expressions of resentment and moral hurt serve to discourage some of the more squeamish in his environment from hostile action.

This illustrates, as do many of his activities, the obvious fact that this man is a parasite on the moral system, and he and his satisfactions could not exist as

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they do unless others operated differently. For, in general, there can be no society without some moral rules, and he needs society; also he takes more particular advantage of moral institutions like promising and of moral dispositions of people around him. He cannot deny, as a fact, his parasitic position; but he is very resistant to suggestions of its relevance. For if we try saying ‘How would it be for you if everyone behaved like that?’ he will reply, ‘Well, if they did, not good, I suppose – though in fact I might do better in the resulting chaos than some of the others. But the fact is, most of them are not going to do so; and if they do ever get round to it, I shall be dead by then.’ The appeal to the consequences of an *imagined* universalization is an essentially moral argument, and he is, consistently, not impressed by it.

In maintaining this stance, there are several things he must, in consistency, avoid. One – as we noticed before, in effect – is any tendency to say that the more or less moral majority have *no right* to dislike him, reject him, or treat him as an enemy, if indeed they are inclined to do so (his power, or charm, or dishonesty may be such that they do not). No thoughts about justification, at least of that sort, are appropriate to him. Again, he must resist, if consistent, a more insidious tendency to think of himself as being in character really rather splendid – in particular, as being by comparison with the craven multitude notably courageous. For in entertaining such thoughts, he will run a constant danger of getting outside the world of his own desires and tastes into the region in which certain dispositions are regarded as excellent for human beings to have, or good to have in society, or such things; and while such

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thoughts need not lead directly to moral considerations, they give a substantial footing to them, since they immediately invite questions about what is so good about those dispositions, and it will be difficult for him to pursue those questions very far without thinking in terms of the *general* interests and needs of his fellow human beings, which would land him once more back in the world of moral thought from which he is excluding himself.

The temptation to think of himself as courageous is a particularly dangerous one, since it is itself very nearly a moral notion and draws with it a whole chain of distinctively moral reflections. This man's application of the notion will also have a presupposition which is false: namely, that the more moral citizens would be amoral if they could get away with it, or if they were not too frightened, or if they were not passively conditioned by society – if, in general, they did not suffer from inhibitions. It is the idea that they are afraid that gives him the idea of his own courage. But these presuppositions are absurd. If he means that if as an individual one could be sure of getting away with it, one would break any moral rule (the idea behind the model of Gyges' ring of invisibility in Plato's *Republic*), it is just false of many agents, and there is reason why: the more basic moral rules and conceptions are strongly internalized in upbringing, at a level from which they do not merely evaporate with the departure of policemen or censorious neighbours. This is part of what it is for them to be moral rules, as opposed to *merely* legal requirements or matters of social convention. The effects of moral education can actually be to make people *want* to act, quite often, in a non-self-interested

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way, and it often succeeds in making it at least quite difficult, for internal reasons, to behave appallingly.

But this, he will say, is just social conditioning; remove that, and you will find no moral motivations. – We can reject the rhetoric of the word ‘conditioning’; even if there were a true theory, which there is not, which could explain all moral and similar education in terms of behaviourist learning theory, it would itself have to explain the very evident differences between successful and intelligent upbringing, which produces insight, and the production of conditioned reflexes. Then let us say instead that all moral motivation is the product of social influences, teaching, culture, etc. It is no doubt true. But virtually everything else about a man is such a product, including his language, his methods of thought, his tastes, and even his emotions, including most of the dispositions that the amoralist sets store by. – But, he may say, suppose we grant that anything complex, even my desires, are influenced by culture and environment, and in many cases produced by these; nevertheless there are *basic* impulses, of a self-interested kind, which are at the bottom of it all: these constitute what men are *really* like.

If ‘basic’ means ‘genetically primitive’, he may possibly be right: it is a matter of psychological theory. But even if true in this sense, it is once more irrelevant (to his argument, not to questions about how to bring up children); if there is such a thing as what men are *really* like, it is not identical with what very small children are like, since very small children have no language, again, nor many other things which men really have. If the test of what men are *really* like is made, rather, of how men may behave in conditions of great

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stress, deprivation, or scarcity (the test that Hobbes, in his picture of the state of nature, imposed), one can only ask again, why should that be the test? Apart from the unclarity of its outcome, why is the test even appropriate? Conditions of great stress and deprivation are not the conditions for observing the typical behaviour of any animal nor for observing other characteristics of human beings. If someone says that if you want to see what men are *really* like, see them after they have been three weeks in a lifeboat, it is unclear why that is any better a maxim with regard to their motivations than it is with regard to their physical condition.

If there is such a thing as what men are *really* like, it may be that (in these sorts of respects, at least) it is not so different from what they are *actually* like; that is, creatures in whose lives moral considerations play an important, formative, but often insecure role.

The amoralist, then, would probably be advised to avoid most forms of self-congratulatory comparison of himself with the rest of society. The rest may, of course, have some tendency to admire him, or those may who are at such a distance that he does not tread directly on their interests and affections. He should not be too encouraged by this, however, since it is probably wish-fulfilment (which does not mean that they would be like him if they could, since a wish is different from a frustrated desire). Nor will they admire him, still less like him, if he is not recognizably human. And this raises the question, whether we have left him enough to be that.

Does he care for anybody? Is there anybody whose sufferings or distress would affect him? If we say 'no' to this, it looks as though we have produced a psycho-

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path. If he is a psychopath, the idea of arguing him into morality is surely idiotic, but the fact that it is idiotic has equally no tendency to undermine the basis of morality or of rationality. The activity of justifying morality must surely get any point it has from the existence of an alternative – there being something to justify it *against*. The amoralist seemed important because he seemed to provide an alternative; his life, after all, seemed to have its attractions. The psychopath is, in a certain way, important to moral thought; but his importance lies in the fact that he appals us, and we must seek some deeper understanding of how and why he appals us. His importance does not lie in his having an appeal as an alternative form of life.

The amoralist we loosely sketched before did seem to have possibly more appeal than this; one might picture him as having some affections, occasionally caring for what happens to somebody else. Some stereotype from a gangster movie might come to mind, of the ruthless and rather glamorous figure who cares about his mother, his child, even his mistress. He is still recognizably amoral, in the sense that no general considerations weigh with him, and he is extremely short on fairness and similar considerations. Although he acts for other people from time to time, it all depends on how he happens to feel. With this man, of course, in actual fact arguments of moral philosophy are not going to work; for one thing, he always has something he would rather do than listen to them. This is not the point (though it is more of a point than some discussions of moral argument would lead one to suppose). The point is rather that he provides a model in terms of which we may glimpse what morality needs in order to get off the

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ground, even though it is unlikely in practice to get off the ground in a conversation with him.

He gives us, I think, almost enough. For he has the notion of doing something *for* somebody, because that person needs something. He operates with this notion in fact only when he is so inclined; but it is not itself the notion of his being so inclined. Even if he helps these people because he wants to, or because he likes them, and for no other reason (not that, so far as these particular actions are concerned, he needs to improve on those excellent reasons), what he wants to do is *to help them in their need*, and the thought he has when he likes someone and acts in this way is 'they need help', not the thought 'I like them and they need help'. This is a vital point: this man is capable of thinking in terms of others' interests, and his failure to be a moral agent lies (partly) in the fact that he is only intermittently and capriciously disposed to do so. But there is no bottomless gulf between this state and the basic dispositions of morality. There are people who need help who are not people who at the moment he happens to want to help, or likes; and there are other people who like and want to help other particular people in need. To get him to consider their situation seems rather an extension of his imagination and his understanding, than a discontinuous step onto something quite different, the 'moral plane'. And if we could get him to consider their situation, in the sense of thinking about it and imagining it, he might conceivably start to show some consideration for it: we extend his sympathies. And if we can get him to extend his sympathies to less immediate persons who need help, we might be able to do it for less immediate persons whose interests have