

## *Introduction*

Of the two concepts in the title of this book, the first, morality, is probably one the reader and I understand somewhat similarly – though various chapters will analyze and extend the concept in novel ways. However, the same is not true of the other concept, namely, metaphysics. So I must explain what I mean by the term as well as by the connection between metaphysics and morality that runs as a guiding thread through these chapters originally written over the past ten years.

### **I.1 Metaphysics**

Many of the leading movements of philosophy in the previous century defined themselves to an important extent by the way they eschewed or rejected what they called “metaphysics.” Husserl’s phenomenology aimed to lay bare the essential structures of experience and consciousness without taking a position on “metaphysical” disputes about the ultimate nature of reality. Heidegger regarded the entire Western “metaphysical” tradition as propelled by a pervasive forgetfulness of the primordial question of Being. Wittgenstein and members of the Vienna Circle maintained, despite otherwise striking changes of view, the conviction that “metaphysical” propositions are meaningless, an abuse of language. From the start, the Frankfurt School believed that “metaphysics” must be a thing of the past, so that even when Habermas exchanged Adorno and Horkheimer’s lament about the hegemony of instrumental thought for his more optimistic theory of communicative reason, he enrolled it under the banner of “post-metaphysical” thinking. I have been putting the term “metaphysics” within quotation marks since these different figures did not understand the same thing by the word. Nor was their understanding of the kinds of philosophical thought they labeled “metaphysical” particularly well informed or accurate.

Admittedly, in the second half of the century, the situation began to change. Rejecting the supposed dichotomy between conceptual and

empirical truths, Quine argued for “a blurring of the supposed boundary between speculative metaphysics and natural science.” Strawson approvingly termed “descriptive metaphysics” the analysis of our basic conceptual scheme for dealing with the world, as opposed to the dubious efforts of “revisionary metaphysics” to modify or replace that scheme.<sup>1</sup> Yet these two well-known rehabilitations of the idea were less than satisfactory. Instead of being continuous with empirical science, ought not metaphysics to be understood as a more reflective enterprise, concerned with determining the fundamental features of reality as a whole, including those that must exist if the sciences themselves are to count as giving us knowledge of the world? This question is all the more pertinent given that Quine’s own “naturalism,” his conviction that the sciences provide the measure of what exists, is not a conclusion of the sciences themselves, but instead a philosophical – indeed, metaphysical – thesis. And why, we may also ask, should metaphysics be engaged, as Strawson urged, in describing our basic conceptual scheme instead of, more forthrightly, the structure of reality itself? For if the latter, then validating some parts of our existing modes of understanding may well go hand in hand with revising other parts.

Today, metaphysics flourishes in far less reserved forms. Indeed, one could say that the last fifty years have been a great period of metaphysical theorizing, at least in the Anglophone world. (Large swathes of French and German philosophy continue to labor under Heideggerian or Habermasian proscriptions.) Yet even now, there remains in many quarters a certain distrust of metaphysics. When discussing one topic or another, many philosophers often declare that they do not want to get “too metaphysical.” I need, therefore, to clarify what I mean by “metaphysics” in holding as I do, and without any reluctance, that metaphysics should play an indispensable role in our understanding of the nature of morality.

According to an old story, the term “metaphysics” began life as an editorial makeshift. In compiling his edition of Aristotle’s works in the first century BC, Andronicus of Rhodes needed a title, it is said, for the various treatises he intended to include after (*meta*) the physical works. It was merely fortuitous that these treatises happened to deal with questions concerning an underlying structure of reality (involving such notions as substance, being, first principles, ultimate causes, and God) that makes possible the study of physical nature, questions that came to epitomize the

<sup>1</sup> W. V. O. Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 20; P. F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1959), 9–11.

later concept of metaphysics. This story is almost certainly false. Ample evidence shows that the expression “*ta meta ta physika*” had long been current in the Peripatetic school, and that Andronicus placed those treatises after the books on physics because he, like others, believed their treatment of the ontologically more fundamental questions – questions that Aristotle himself assigned to “first philosophy” (*prōtē philosophia*) – had to proceed in the light of an understanding of physical phenomena, which are more directly accessible.<sup>2</sup> From the start, therefore, metaphysics has meant – to put the idea broadly – inquiry into the ultimate structure of reality, aiming to tie together all the various dimensions of our experience into a unified conception of the way things basically are and hang together. It must draw, to be sure, on our knowledge of the natural world. But it aims to provide a deeper and more comprehensive account of all that can be said to exist. Such is the definition I follow in this book, without, of course, necessarily endorsing any specific Aristotelian doctrines.

One may still wonder why metaphysics in this sense, going beyond what the sciences can tell us about the world, should prove indispensable or whether it is even possible. So let me turn to those aspects of morality that, as I maintain in the following chapters, we cannot fully comprehend without pursuing ontological questions that go beyond the domain of the empirical sciences. The need for metaphysical thinking, at least in these regards, should then become plain.

## I.2 Morality

The part of morality that is my principal concern has to do with the nature of moral judgments. A perennial question has been whether claims about what is good and right are simply the expression of certain attitudes of approval or disapproval, as Hume maintained, or whether they also purport to describe moral facts that obtain independently of our attitudes, and, if so, what such moral facts can be like in virtue of which of these judgments are true or false. Beginning in Chapter 1, but throughout the rest of the book as well, I argue that a “realist” approach is correct. Our moral judgments do indeed aim, by their very nature, to get it right about the moral facts there are. “Expressivist” theories, by contrast, fail to do justice to essential features of our moral thinking. One can, for instance, always ask about whatever may be the attitudes of approval or disapproval

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Hans Reiner, “Die Entstehung und ursprüngliche Bedeutung des Namens Metaphysik,” *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 8(2), 1954, 210–237.

expressed by moral judgments whether they are, in the case at hand, morally appropriate or not.

What then are these moral facts like? There is nothing wrong in saying that “generosity is a virtue” is true because there really exists the virtue of generosity. But in what does generosity being a virtue consist? In general, I hold, moral qualities can be analyzed in terms of impersonal reasons, valid in abstraction from one’s own interests and affections, to concern oneself with the good of others. “Generosity is a virtue” is true in virtue of there existing impersonal reasons to give unstintingly of one’s time, attention, and resources to those who are in particular need. Explaining in Chapter 1 the nature of this moral point of view, I go on in the two subsequent chapters to explore two areas in which it proves, perhaps unexpectedly, to be applicable. Not only are there impersonal reasons to concern oneself with one’s own good, leading to what may be called duties to oneself, but our moral relation to others carries over to our reading of texts, giving rise to what may properly be called an ethics of reading. Yet to return to the matter at hand: Moral claims do not express solely attitudes of approval or disapproval. They also convey moral beliefs, and the facts that make these beliefs true or false are facts about the reasons there are to concern ourselves with the good of others independently of how this may affect our own good.

Some philosophers will no doubt object that moral judgments cannot be statements about what we believe to be moral facts since beliefs, in and of themselves, cannot move us to act, having no effect on our will except in conjunction with relevant desires, whereas moral judgments are inherently action-guiding: to judge that generosity is a virtue is to be moved, all else being equal, to act generously when the situation calls for it. Now, as I explain in a number of chapters,<sup>3</sup> belief as such is not in fact motivationally inert. A belief is a disposition, and a disposition not merely to affirm, when asked, the thing believed, but to think and act in accord with the presumed truth of what we believe. Belief, in the phrase of C. S. Peirce, is a rule for action.<sup>4</sup> However, there is more. If moral judgments are basically engaged in referring to a certain kind of impersonal reason, then there is a further respect in which they are far from motivationally inert, at least to the extent that we are rational. Reason, as I argue throughout this book, is our capacity of being responsive to reasons. Insofar as we are

<sup>3</sup> See Section 1.3 in Chapter 1, Section 6.3 in Chapter 6, Section 7.7 in Chapter 7, and Section 8.3 in Chapter 8.

<sup>4</sup> C. S. Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” in *Selected Writings* (New York: Dover, 1958), p. 121.

rational, recognizing that we have a reason to do something is therefore sufficient to move us to act accordingly in the absence of any countervailing reasons. It is not as though, having perceived a reason to act in a certain way, we must still decide whether we should heed it. Someone who fails to do what they see reason to do is being less than completely rational. Beliefs about reasons are inherently motivating, in virtue of their very object.

### **I.3 Reason**

Reason, I have just said, consists in being responsive to reasons. For though not all our judgments are about reasons, all of them – moral or otherwise – are, or at least intend to be, responsive to reasons. Responsiveness is the crucial point. Several chapters in this book (particularly Chapters 1, 5, and 6) are devoted to exposing the errors in different versions – expressivist once again, but also Kantian – of the contrary and widespread view that in the end we ourselves determine what may count as reasons for thought or action. Expressivists hold that to think one has a reason to do something is not at bottom to claim that such a reason exists, but instead to express one's endorsement of a rule permitting or requiring the doing of that thing. This kind of analysis, however, cannot make sense of the objectivity of reasons, that is, of the fact that they would remain valid even if one happened not to endorse complying with them. For thinking that the reason one has is objectively valid cannot consist, as expressivists tend to reply, in endorsing a higher-order rule requiring endorsement of the first rule, since this only pushes back the difficulty. Merely accepting such a higher-order rule cannot render the reason objectively binding. Instead, there would have to be a reason to accept that rule. And this shows precisely why reasons cannot be explained in terms of the endorsement of rules. The endorsement of rules, if it is other than arbitrary, rests on what one takes to be good reasons to endorse them.

Kantian conceptions of the nature of reasons involve a similar mistake. For Kant, as for the many who have followed his lead, facts in the world acquire the status of reasons for thinking this or doing that in the light of principles our reason gives itself in order to determine what things may then serve to justify various beliefs or actions on our part. Reason, in the Kantian phrase, is “autonomous,” self-legislating. But again, when we do indeed impose principles of thought and action on ourselves, there must seem to us to be reasons for imposing them. The explanation is therefore circular. It is also ill-conceived from the start. For the extent to which the

principles we abide by are ones we have given ourselves is quite limited. Most principles, and certainly those that are most fundamental for our conduct, are instead principles whose antecedent validity we must simply acknowledge. Consider an example. Knowing my tendency to work such long hours that I end up becoming irritable and rude, I may make it a principle of never working for more than six hours a day. Certainly, I would not be bound by this principle if I had not imposed it on myself. But I have done so because I recognize the authority of a deeper principle that is not of my own making, namely, the duty of trying not to hurt other people's feelings. Principles that are self-legislated make up only a small, circumscribed part of the principles we accept. Kant declared that reason must regard itself as the author (*Urheberin*) of its principles since if it were to receive direction from any other quarter (*anderwärts her*), it would then be subject to alien influences (*fremden Einflüssen*).<sup>5</sup> Yet principles and reasons<sup>6</sup> of which reason is not the author are scarcely alien influences to which it is then subject. They are the very means of its exercise. Without them, reason would be directionless.

The difficulty does not disappear if the notion of the autonomy of reason is reformulated, as it sometimes is today, to mean that we are the authors of such elementary principles as avoiding contradictions and willing the necessary means to given ends in that they are “constitutive” – that is, essential to the possibility – of whatever we may coherently think or do. For it is *heeding* them that is constitutive in this sense. We fail to be intelligibly thinking or acting at all if we fail to acknowledge their authority for all our thought and action. Reason cannot be a law unto itself. It guides our conduct only through being responsive to reasons that exist independently of our attitudes of approval, independently of our endorsement of rules, and independently of our ideas of the reasons we have, ideas that may be true or false. This is so whether we are considering the reason of an individual or the reason embodied in the social practices of a community. In important regards, I remain an old-style rationalist, immune to the allures of both Hume and Kant.

Though the failure of both expressivist and Kantian accounts of the nature of reasons seems to me obvious, there remains the question of why the view that we ourselves determine what may count as reasons is

<sup>5</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, Akademie-Ausgabe (Berlin: Reimer, 1900-), IV, 448.

<sup>6</sup> Principles I understand to be rules designating standing reasons of thought or action that generally outweigh competing considerations.

nonetheless so prevalent. I believe the answer is also evident. Modern philosophy, like modern thought in general, has tended to suppose that all that can be said really to exist are facts about the world of nature, that is, the physical and psychological facts that make up in principle the domain of the empirical sciences. This naturalistic picture of the world leaves no room for reasons as also forming part of reality. For reasons are not themselves physical or psychological in character, but instead normative. Reasons indicate what we *ought* to think or do, all else being equal. More specifically, they consist in the way that physical and psychological facts *count in favor* of possibilities of thought and action we can take up, “counting in favor” consisting, in turn, in the normative relation of justification. The naturalist worldview, so pervasive as often to be more a habit of mind than an explicit doctrine, has therefore led many to believe that being a reason is a status that we confer on facts in the world, instead of a feature of the way things are. But as I have been suggesting – and as I argue systematically in several chapters of this book – that is an untenable position.

Generally, naturalism regards itself as being down to earth, empirical and science-minded, committed to avoiding obscure and needless speculation. In philosophy these days, it is all the rage. One seeks to naturalize this (epistemology) or naturalize that (the mind). Naturalism prides itself on not being metaphysical. Yet it is all the same a metaphysics, at least in the original sense of the term I explained earlier. It advances an account of the ultimate structure of reality and it does so by going beyond the deliverances of the empirical sciences themselves, since it is not and cannot be any conclusion of theirs that all that really exists is what they investigate. Such a claim is a philosophical thesis. If, then, reason is a matter of responsiveness to reasons and if reasons must thus be understood as a dimension of reality itself, naturalism has to be rejected and an alternative metaphysics devised. This is what I set out to do in Chapters 1, 4, 6, and especially 7. Needless to say, I trust, the alternative to naturalism I propose is not any kind of “supernaturalism.” God has no place in my conception of what there is. I shall instead speak often of a “platonism” of reasons, since reasons resemble Plato’s Forms in constituting a third dimension of reality, neither physical nor psychological in nature. They are not identical with either the empirical facts that give rise to them or with what may happen to be our beliefs about them.

It should now be clearer than it may have been at the start why metaphysics is both a coherent and inescapable enterprise. Thought that is at all reflective about its preconditions and purposes is bound to involve

a metaphysics, even if unacknowledged. I have presented this ontology of reasons – as I do in the body of the book – as a result of reflecting on the nature of moral judgment. Whence my book’s title. However, it is a line of thought with broad implications, and these too I explore in the chapters that follow.

#### I.4 Freedom

One implication has to do with what it is for us to be free beings. The Kantian ideal of autonomy represents an influential conception of the basis of our freedom: we are free beings insofar as we are able ourselves, individually or collectively, to determine what bearing things and events in the world should have for our conduct. I have just explained why this conception makes no sense. Yet precisely the grounds on which I reject the ideal of autonomy point the way to a better account of the nature of human freedom. We are free, as I argue in Chapter 7, to the extent that we think and act in accord with an understanding of the reasons that justify what we are doing. Freedom rests on reason, properly conceived. For what is compulsion, the opposite of freedom, if not being caused to think or act by factors either external or internal (such as addictions or obsessions) that prevent us from heeding what we can see good reason to do? Consider the difference between jumping out of someone’s way and being pushed aside.

This view of freedom tallies with what I said about the very nature of reasons, which consist in the way that facts in the world count in favor of possibilities of thought and action we can take up. We are not the only beings with possibilities. Just about anything could be other than it is. But we are beings that, unlike, say, rocks and trees, can take up or choose possibilities they have. This is what makes us free beings. Yet we take up these possibilities in response to the reasons we see as counting in their favor. Depending on how accurate our understanding of the relevant reasons may be, we therefore are generally more or less free in what we think or do. Freedom is a matter of degree. This means, I contend (Chapter 7, Section 7.5), that the classic moral principle of “*ought* implies *can*” should in fact be discarded, though without, I would add, compromising the *ought*. One may be unable to see the reasons for acting as one should without it being any less true that one is then acting wrongly. Freedom is also, as that chapter argues as well, compatible with its being part of the causal order of the world. For not only do the facts that give us the reasons for which we think or act still constitute causes of what we do. Our very understanding of these reasons, be it ever so faultless, is



shaped causally by our experience and character. The conception of freedom I present is one that is both rationalist and compatibilist.

## I.5 The Self

Another implication concerns the nature of the self. It seems axiomatic that each of us is a self in virtue of an underlying relation we have to ourselves in all that we think and do. The key question has to do with how this basic self-relation is to be conceived. Taking up this topic in Chapters 2 and 7, I pursue it at length in Chapter 8. To summarize the theory I develop there, let me begin by recalling what I have already said about belief. A belief, I remarked, is a disposition to think and act in accord with the presumed truth of what is believed. Such a disposition therefore entails being responsive to the reasons for thought and action the belief's being true would give us. So too, we cannot come to believe something without thinking it to be true, and this means without supposing we see some reason to think it true. (Try to believe that the number of hairs on the top of Caesar's bald head was seven!) In both its formation and its function, belief essentially involves, therefore, guiding ourselves by reasons, and precisely this self-relation – *guiding oneself by reasons* – constitutes, I argue, the basic relation to ourselves that makes each of us a self. For the same kind of analysis applies to desires. Any desire represents its object as something desirable and thus as something there are reasons to have or to pursue. (Try to imagine desiring someone's company without finding it attractive in the slightest regard! It's not as though you could find it attractive simply because you desired it.) Plus, any desire inclines us, unless we ignore or repress it, to think and act as the apparent desirability of its object gives us reason to do.

So it is with all other “intentional,” object-directed mental states or events, such as emotions and feelings – you cannot love or feel angry without loving or feeling angry at someone or something – since, taking shape in response to the reasons their object appears to provide for their arising, they in turn shape our behavior through what they indicate we have reason to think and do. You cannot get angry at a person except for some apparent provocation, and your anger no doubt points you to ways of getting back.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Sensations, such as an experience of redness or a feeling of pain, are not intentional and so do not involve a responsiveness to reasons. As a result, beings whose mental life consists solely in sensations (earthworms?) must lack selves. But by the same token, my view is that we are not the only beings

As should be plain, reason conceived as responsiveness to reasons is not, in my view, one mental faculty among others, opposed, for instance, to desire as on many typical models of the mind. It is rather the foundation of all the operations of the mind, since beliefs, desires, emotions, and feelings are defined by how, if in characteristically different ways, they are shaped and oriented by what we regard as reasons. They prove more or less rational to the extent that these reasons actually exist and happen to be relevant. Just as reason lies at the heart of our freedom, so it also is essential to being a self. In responding to reasons, we align ourselves on their import for our conduct. This is the basic way of relating to ourselves by which we are selves at all. It explains why we count as responsible for what we think and do. We are selves, however, only in relation as well to a normative order of reasons of which we are not the author and thus to the physical and psychological facts on which they depend. Traditional ideas of the “interiority” of the self are mistaken. Such, then, is the “metaphysics of the self” I advance, showing how being a self fits into the structure of reality as a whole.

What I have been calling the self has often been termed by much of modern philosophy the “subject,” and the account I have been summarizing indeed aims at explaining the nature of subjectivity. I prefer the term “self” because it brings out clearly that subjectivity consists in a pervasive relatedness to ourselves in everything we think and do. Modern philosophy has also generally supposed that the relation we as a self or subject must bear to ourselves is one of self-awareness. Such a conception, however, is very different from the one outlined here. It leads, in fact, either to paradox if this self-awareness is understood as a relation of reflection – all knowledge involves a distinction between knower and known, so that the self on this view would have to exist prior to its awareness of itself – or to mystery if the self-awareness is equated with an intimate, pre-reflective kind of self-acquaintance that excludes all distinction between subject and object. These well-known problems disappear when the relation to ourselves that makes each of us a self or subject is conceived as consisting in guiding ourselves by what we see as reasons. I would add that the conception based on self-awareness tends naturally to suggest that the self or subject can be conscious of itself prior to any consciousness of the

with selves, since the higher animals, too, have beliefs and desires. They too are responsive to reasons, though their reason is considerably more limited and less flexible than ours. See, for instance, Section 1.1 in Chapter 1 and Section 7.7 in Chapter 7.