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1

Organizing Practice: The Elements of Ethics

> We, the public, are easily, lethally offended. We have come to think of taking offence as a fundamental right. We value very little more highly than our rage, which gives us, in our opinion, the moral high ground. From this high ground we can shoot down at our enemies and inflict heavy fatalities. We take pride in our short fuses. Our anger elevates, transcends.
>
> Salman Rushdie, 'At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers', *East, West*

1. A PRACTICAL SUBJECT

Ethics is about how we live in the world. It separates the things we will do gladly from those we will not do, or not do without discomfort. It classifies the situations we aim for, and those we seek to avoid. It is displayed in our attitudes to ourselves, such as pride, or self-satisfaction, or guilt, or shame. It is also displayed in our attitudes to others: whether they behaved well, or went the extra mile, or did their bit, carried their burdens, lived or died in ways we admire. Our ethics is shown in the things we forbid, or tolerate, or require. It is shown in the reactions we have as we think of the characters of people, or the events they cause, or the nature of the societies they form. To develop an ethical personality is to become sensitive to different aspects of things, and to be disposed to use them to influence or determine attitudes, emotions, and choices. Ethics is a practical subject, manifested in our reactions to things and the motivations we feel. Ethics puts pressure on our choices, and we use ethical considerations to guide the choices of others. The practical role of ethics is what defines it. This is what ethics is *for*. If there is such a thing as ethical knowledge, it is a matter of knowing how to act, when to withdraw, whom to admire, more than knowing *that* anything is the case. A conversation drawn by Jane Austen or George Eliot can reveal volumes about the characters'

ethics, although no overtly moral language is used and no moral opinions are delivered.

This means that our ethics is manifested in our practical reaction to things. It is not simply a matter of the situations we find ourselves in, but of how we respond to them. We are born into a social world of values and duties, that is, a world of human norms and pressures and ways to behave which we learn, very quickly, to absorb. We take them in with our mother tongue. Perhaps it is in principle open to us not to be interested in what we are taught. At the limit, such a distance might become inhuman: a child might observe the entire world of values, emotions, norms, in a totally alienated spirit. Autistic children are often described as being like that. But normally values are contagious. We grow up absorbing them. Some people later rebel in some ways. But even thoroughgoing rebels need some way of voicing what they *are* concerned about and what they find important and demand from themselves and others. Then these other concerns show what their ethics really is. Our ethics is shown by the things that matter to us, and the things that do not. It is shown, too, by the way things matter and the practical stances we take up. In this sense, *there is no getting behind ethics*. It comes unbidden. It comes with living.

Still, ethical commitments have their specific nature. They feel different from 'mere' desires or preferences. To some they have a peculiar majesty, a sovereignty over our other desires. But as the quotation at the head of this chapter suggests, to others they present a darker appearance. Ethics has its detractors. Moral certainties, and the causes and crusades mounted in their name, are dangerous things. The history of human moralizing is as grey and dismal, pathy and stained as any other part of human history. Perhaps it is even more so, for the moral cloak conceals our crimes even from ourselves. People find it easy to man the Gulag or the guillotine while intoning about justice, equality, and liberty, and they seldom treat each other as badly as they do when they feel they have a right or preferably a duty to behave as they do.[1]

We are also right to mistrust being told what to do. People who moralize too readily arouse our suspicions. To be able to give somebody a bad conscience is to have a hold over them, and people like this power. They may claim quite spurious authority, from sacred traditions, or convenient pieces of text, in holy books or holy constitutions,

[1] The connection is horrifically described by Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), ch. 1.

or from inner voices. They may be hypocrites, or they may be just stupid, blind to the real complexities of situations people find themselves in, and perhaps they are glib with justifications for their own doings. And in response other people often claim that they have enough to do, wrapped up in pursuing their own personal concerns, without worrying about telling others what to do, or becoming obsessed with 'impractical' issues of conscience. People individually, and perhaps more especially companies and nations, dislike occasions when ethics intrudes upon their decision-making, and there is a strong temptation to reject its voice as cant: insubstantial or irrelevant, fit only for dreamers.

Moral judgement is indeed used to coerce, and cajole, and to judge: when it is internalized, its victims may walk around under a burden of guilt and anguish. People who talk much of obligation approach practical life with a certain kind of armoury, and one that may make them insensitive, cruel, inhospitable to understanding and excuses. We might hear them say, for example, that people who live in the inner cities are under an obligation to respect the principles of property and the laws against drugs or vagrancy. And we know what this means. We are entitled, if we agree, to coerce, to use force, to turn our backs on do-gooders, on social workers, on liberals, or on attempts to understand or improve the environment, and so on. Instead, peoples' failure to live up to their obligations licenses our anger, resentment, punishments, and violence. History shows plenty of examples where moralizing brings nothing but disaster. The Christian Church's history of seeing mental illness in terms of witchcraft and devil's work is not unusual in this respect. During the Cold War, regarding communism as 'evil' was a handy substitute for any thought about the intolerable social structures that led to good men seeing it as their only hope. It discouraged any such thoughts as akin to treachery, just as on the other side, seeing capitalism as evil often prevented any attempt to understand the liberal optimism that leads reasonable people to suppose that markets work. A contemporary example would be the hysterical certainty that heroin (or even marijuana) is evil that leads governments and doctors to deny them to terminally ill patients in terrible pain. At the time of writing, moral attitudes in Islamic countries, China, and much of central Europe have prevented governments from making half-way adequate provision for education in ways to avoid AIDS. Moral crusades strangle thought, and the attitudes of those who promote them are frequently repulsive.

Hence we find the insecurity about the authority of ethical thought that infuses the Western tradition. Thrasymachus in the *Republic*

splendidly maintains that ethics is merely a device of the powerful for furthering their own interest.[2] Plato's spokesman for relativism, Protagoras, seems to think ethics is simply a matter of conformity to local custom.[3] Callicles, by contrast, in the *Gorgias*, is supremely contemptuous of the whole subject.[4] It is these attitudes that Plato or Socrates sets out to oppose, but they live on at least as vigorously as the arguments mustered against them. The theme of ethics as the fig-leaf for power recurs in the writings of Marx and Engels.[5] Nietzsche is the philosopher who most famously takes on the task of outright opposition to morality, although the picture here is blurred at best, since Nietzsche is at least as often railing against what he regarded as the soggy, self-abasing side of Christian morality, in favour of a proper aristocratic pride, rather than railing against ethics itself. Wanting to substitute something more pagan for an entrenched Christianity is not rebelling against ethics, but making a move within it.

To balance the picture a little, one thing we might remark at the outset is that it is not obviously the defender of ethics who is impractical and unworldly. To imagine a human world without ethics, but in which life goes well, it is necessary to suppose a golden age: a world without competition, or causes of strife, or clashing desires, or envy or malice. Certainly, we would not need to campaign for humane prisons if nobody committed crimes and got into prison in the first place. We would not need conventions on the treatment of prisoners of war if there were no wars. But given the tendencies of human beings, as we know them, we do need these things. So it is not the proponent of ethics, but the detractor, who seems to be the more out of touch with what is needed to sustain human society. It is no accident that the critics of morality already mentioned—Marx, Engels, Nietzsche—go on fairly unashamedly to moralize themselves. They have their views about what makes life admirable or tolerable.

2. INPUTS AND OUTPUTS

How is ethics to be thought about? Our attitudes and practices arise in response to features of the world around us. We represent the world around us in one way or another, and because of that we end up

[2] Plato, *Republic*, Bk. I, 338c.
[3] Plato, *Theaetetus*, 172a–c.
[4] Plato, *Gorgias*, 484c–486c.
[5] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, in *The Marx–Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd edn. (New York: Norton, 1978), 154–5, 172–4.

behaving one way or another. So we can usefully compare the ethical agent to a device whose function is to take certain inputs and deliver certain outputs. The *input* to the system is a representation, for instance of an action, or a situation, or a character, as being of a certain type, as having certain properties. The *output*, we are saying, is a certain attitude, or a pressure on attitudes, or a favouring of policies, choices and actions. Such a device is a function from input to output: an ethical sensibility.

Analogously, a skilled sportsman, for example, is sensitive to features of the delivery and flight of a ball, and for each way the ball is delivered, makes the appropriate response. A less good player either notices the wrong features, or fails to notice the right ones, or, even if he does so, makes a less effective response. The player needed training to learn to separate the important features from the 'noise' or useless information that meets the eye. Similarly the good person has learned to select some features of situations as demanding some responses, and to ignore others as unimportant. The question is how to analyse this organization of input and output.

Speaking in terms of input and output will prove useful, but it is right to register two warnings. First, it does not prejudge the question of how much thought or how much rationality may be involved in the transition. It is not intended to imply a simple chute or conveyor belt whereby we mechanically or automatically find some things generating some responses. The response can indeed be automatic, as when 'without thinking' we find some behaviour repellent, or the reverse. But there may be nothing mechanical or automatic about it. On the contrary, it may take the most delicate exercise of observation and imagination to represent a situation to ourselves in ways that even suggest a particular reaction or verdict, and even then, we may draw back from giving it, demanding further knowledge, or further thought. Sometimes we may scarcely know what to look for, or what to find relevant. Selecting certain features of a situation as the ethically salient ones is a process that we practice, and that will change with education and experience. It may surprise us that some things matter in the way they do to other people, and we may learn to emulate them or to oppose them. It is a process that we discuss, and sometimes criticize. All that the input/output terminology insists upon is that we recognize the distinctness of the starting-point in the features of a situation that we believe to be present, and the upshot of taking them as salient, which is the output of practical policy, attitude, or emotion.

The second warning is that talk of an input/output function may imply too much of a one way street, whereas the truth is more com-

plex. Attitudes and emotions determine the features of things and people that we notice. They organize our experience, determining how we construe situations. Loving or hating someone we highlight, perhaps unconsciously, features that make them lovable or hateful, sometimes even inventing ones for the purpose and suppressing what does not fit. In the light of emotion things which we would otherwise see become invisible, while others thrust themselves onto our attention. Just after Anna Karenina has met and fallen in love with Vronsky, she meets her husband:

> As soon as the train stopped at Petersburg and she got out, the first person to attract her attention was her husband. 'Goodness, why are his ears like that?' she thought, looking at his cold, distinguished figure and especially at the cartilages of his ears, pressing up against the rim of his round hat.[6]

Some philosophers suggest that we should not even separate input from output. Their idea is that all we should find is the one unified mental act: judging a situation in moral terms, or seeing the situation as demanding in some specific ways. Such philosophers like to think in terms of a unitary, 'thick' rule or concept, a single principle of organization that in one movement determines both how we see the situation and, seamlessly included in that, determines our reaction to it. They then refuse to distinguish fact (input) from value (output). They think this distinction is due to a simplistic idea of there being a 'fact–value' gap. The issue here is delicate, and I shall have much more to say about specific proposals of this type throughout the book. But a preliminary remark is in order. Someone may clearly just 'see' a situation in value-laden terms. From the inside, as it were, there is just that one movement of the mind and a judgement comes out in value-laden terms: the action was heroic, the boy is a nerd, the man is a cad, the snake is slithery. In George Eliot's words that I quote later, a feeling can become 'an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects'. In other words, for the agent, there is just the one movement of the mind, a 'felt thought', as literary critics like to put it. It seems just obvious that the boy is a nerd, or the snake slithery—as obvious as the fact that the table is solid or the sunset crimson.

But this does not destroy a more reflective view, which sees very well that in deploying these terms the subject is exercising an input/output function. She is in fact taking some features of a situation, usually identifiable in a more neutral way, and in their light

[6] Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. David Magarshack (New American Library, 1961), Pt. I, ch. 30.

entering into a practical state: admiration for the bravery of whatever deed was done, contempt for the person who enjoys mathematics and computers, condemnation of the man whose actions were not those of a gentleman, or disgust and fear at the mode of motion of the snake.

It is only by thus 'splitting' the input and the output that the reaction can be seen sufficiently clearly for what it is. And this is important because only then can the reaction itself be intelligently discussed, and perhaps, as in at least two of these cases, seen as highly questionable. The splitting may take some analysis and critical thought, because the moral and emotional lens is not readily visible to the person who sees situations through it.

Consider how in just the same way the sportsman's only thought might be that the coming ball needs such-and-such a treatment. Yet, if his response is inappropriate, we need to factor out what it was about the delivery that made him think that, and then perhaps get him to practice a different reaction to balls of that kind. The subject may even fail to see that in calling a boy a nerd he is reacting unfavourably to an interest in mathematics and science (and that this in turn is a function of disturbing social arrangements, themselves cemented in place and expressed partly by the very existence of the term with its current flavour). But this is what he is doing, and if on reflection he can be brought to see that this is so, then perhaps improvement is possible. Refusing to 'split' begins to sound like a refusal to think, perhaps symptomatic of a complacent belief that the emotional and moral lenses through which we see deserve no critical attention themselves.

Because ethics is essentially practical, there arises a query about the extent to which we might be in the domain of reason, knowledge, or cognition, and truth or falsehood. For most philosophers one leg, certainly, is in this domain: the part in which we represent the world to ourselves in some way, believing some features to characterize the situation to which we are reacting. But since the other leg stands in the domain of practice there seems always to be a part of the function which is not so clearly under the control of reason and cognition. This is the active or dynamic part that translates what is cognized or apprehended as true into a motivation or real pressure on action.

This seems true even if we have a very generous conception of what is truly apprehended. For example, in the philosophy of Kant people are supposed to be able to apprehend when something is contrary to a moral law whose credentials are those of reason itself. But even with such a highly charged input, unless we *respect* the law, this apprehension could remain inert, no more a part of our practical lives than the parking regulations are part of the practical lives of those who more or

[illegible] successfully take no notice of them. Respect is here the dynamic element that translates knowledge into practice.[7]

Many philosophers, perhaps professionally wedded to the sovereignty of reason, have tried to bring the whole process under the control of rationality. They do not want to acknowledge any element of contingency or happenstance, or of cultural or imaginative or emotional factors in the step that has to be made from the representative to the practical. This book is intended to make that acknowledgement comfortable without denying that it needs to be made.

3. EMOTIONAL ASCENT

Ethics does not concern the whole of human choice and action, although it structures a surprisingly large amount of it. We react badly to the taste of something and throw it away, or react well to the price of some commodity and buy it instead of a competing brand, but in these cases at first blush ethics is not involved. We act from desire, and certainly without even thinking of the rights or wrongs of what we are doing. Perhaps we are just disgusted, or attracted. But, of course, it may be that ethics lurks in the background: the food may taste disgusting because of a culturally embedded association of foods of that kind with prohibitions (does snot or earwax actually *taste* disgusting?—but what could be more loathsome than tasting it?), or the commodity appeals to us in the first place because of its association with status and an implicit demand on the admiration of others. What, then, distinguishes the obvious territory of ethics?

We could approach this question by discussing the kinds of thing that set us off delivering judgements of value, or that prompt us to invoke obligations, duties, and the rest. But I am going to postpone discussion of that for the following chapter, in favour of thinking first about the output side.

It is hard to imagine a human life going on at all without an implicit awareness of some values of some kinds. If we are not allowed to compare whether under one regime life goes better than under another, then how is choice and action possible at all? The Shakespearean characters Hamlet, and Jacques in *As You Like It*, are each examples of

[7] Kant thought that this respect is, however, 'necessary'. It is not a function of culture or temperament, but characterizes rational agency as such. See, for instance, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 73–7. I discuss this further in Chapter 8.

people who have lost their values. The world for them is just 'weary, stale, flat and unprofitable'. As a result there is nothing left for them but melancholy, listlessness, and incapacity for action. Conversely, if we are condemned to act in the human world, then by the same token we are compelled to rank situations and actions as better or worse. At the very least, we must prefer some things to others. In Chapter 3 I shall locate our values in effect as our stable concerns, and living requires that we have stable concerns.

But there is more to the output side. What kind of thought or feeling is involved when we have a moral reaction to some conduct or some situation? Centrally, a moral transgression is something that is other peoples' business, something that is against the mores or norms. It is some kind of trespass. As such it is of legitimate concern to others. This is not a strict definition, since itself it involves ethical terms (we are talking of when it is proper or allowable for others to be concerned, and this is to make an ethical judgement). But it points to the right area.

We should think in terms of a staircase of practical and emotional ascent. At the bottom are simple preferences, likes, and dislikes. More insistent is a basic hostility to some kind of action or character or situation: a primitive aversion to it, or a disposition to be disgusted by it, or to hold it in contempt, or to be angered by it, or to avoid it. We can then ascend to reactions to such reactions. Suppose you become angry at someone's behaviour. I may become angry at you for being angry, and I may express this by saying it is none of your business. Perhaps it was a private matter. At any rate, it is not a moral issue. Suppose, on the other hand, I share your anger or feel 'at one' with you for so reacting. It may stop there, but I may also feel strongly disposed to encourage others to share the same anger. By then I am clearly treating the matter as one of public concern, something like a moral issue. I have come to regard the sentiment as legitimate. Going up another step, the sentiment may even become *compulsory* in my eyes, meaning that I become prepared to express hostility to those who do not themselves share it. Going up another level, I may also think that this hostility is compulsory, and be prepared to come into conflict with those who, while themselves concerned at what was done, tolerate those who do not care about it. I shall be regarding dissent as beyond the pale, unthinkable. This should all be seen as an ascending staircase, a spiral of emotional identifications and demands.

The staircase gives us a scale between pure preference, on the one hand, and attitudes with all the flavour of ethical commitment, on the other. The scale is not *only* emotional, in the sense that it is measured

by strength of feeling, although we might notice that this is a natural enough phrase to use. But in this sense strength of feeling is also a matter of the degree to which things capture our attention, our degree of engagement, and our readiness to deploy pressures on other people to conform or to change.

At the bottom end we located genuine idiosyncratic likes and dislikes, such, perhaps, as the brute, given, facts about our natures that lead us to prefer some tastes or smells or colours to others. If someone has slightly different preferences, or if I find my own preferences changing over time, then that is just how it is. There is not an issue to be fought over here. We need have no engagement with such preferences. *De gustibus non disputandum*: tastes are not to be disputed. But there are actually surprisingly few cases of pure preference that invite no judgement. Even simple pleasures of the palate can give rise to moral and social judgement. It is not only that societies are quite strict about which foods are permissible, as well as which ones would honour or dishonour a guest, for example. It is also that if someone deliberately chooses what is disgusting then they become the target of moral reactions. In his recent book William Ian Miller described the revolting case of St Catherine of Siena who mortified her flesh to the extent of drinking the suppurations of one of her patients.[8] Not surprisingly, this disconcerted everyone, including the patient, who 'came to believe that whenever the holy maid was out of her sight . . . that she was about some foul act of fleshly pleasure'. We can understand the patient believing that if you will do *that* you will do anything, and also recognizing that she herself, the patient, has been relegated to being a mere occasion for St Catherine's own performance, a 'prop in her play', as Miller describes it.

St Catherine was not indulging a taste, one hopes. Perhaps in our culture we cannot moralize so tellingly about a real taste: a preference for sweet crude wine over more finely balanced wine for instance. But it does not escape dimensions of criticism altogether. One would not expect too much, in some directions, of someone with the first taste. One would wonder what caused them never to *learn*. Laziness? Puritanism? Pride in vulgarity? Some might think of such a taste as slovenly, akin to slovenliness in dress or cleanliness. Those are certainly qualities that invite moral reactions, although how far up the staircase of emotional ascent we then climb is also subject to dispute.

[8] William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

The pure gourmet or aesthete who climbs too quickly is himself the object of certain kinds of scorn, including amusement.

However, it is with the palate, only a little beyond lies aesthetic taste. But here disputation is more evidently in order. We enter the domain of judgement, and have a clearer conception of a *fault*: a sensibility that prefers what is worse to what is better. A person who is blind to the beauty of a poem or the harmony of some music is missing something. If they prefer the cheap, or glib, or sentimental, then this in turn is akin to a moral fault. It is something we could want to engage. Or, if for instance they are resolutely blind to the interest of art from other cultures, we might suspect that this illustrates a blinkered vision, parochialism, or even an incipient racism. We might want to educate them out of it. If their aesthetic taste goes on to include such things as a relish for violence, or depictions of groups in humiliating or other lights, then our engagement becomes overtly moral: we want to change them, and we may deploy various sanctions to do so, mobilizing social pressures, and eventually even soliciting for legal powers in order to express disapproval or bring about reform.

As an aside, we may notice that the interplay between aesthetics and more overtly ethical issues is complex and interesting. It was a topic of major concern in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is not a topic of significant concern in contemporary philosophy, and this reflects our late-twentieth-century Western inability to articulate aesthetic ideals as genuinely binding and obligatory, not to mention our artistic inability to give expression to human or moral themes. This is one of those peculiarities of our situation that seems so natural that it is invisible, but that nevertheless plays a part in defining the distinct ethical texture of our time. In general there is often a perfectly proper question whether some lapse of taste is itself to be thought of as an appropriate target for moral or ethical valuation, or whether it should simply be left alone, passed by with a smile rather than a frown. Thus, we may laugh at Ruskin's view that only moral goodness makes a person beautiful. But there are certainly cases where aesthetic and moral values interpenetrate. It may be hard to say, for instance, whether an affection for some way of life, such as that of the village, or monastery, or army, is more aesthetic or moral.

Consider as well such problems as expressing genuine respect for the wildernesses of the world, or for the diversity of living species, except in unconvincing terms about how useful they are, for example as sources of medicine. Here we need to find a moral force behind respect for the independence, or grandeur, or sublime nature of the wilderness, although we find it difficult to do so without sounding

sentimental or romantic. But take the actual case in which an advertising concern hatched the plan of putting a disk into space, about the apparent size of the moon, on which advertising slogans and images would be generated, thereby becoming compulsory and permanent sights in the night sky. It is hard in conventional terms to show that anyone is 'harmed' by such a project—for why should it be more harmful to look at the Coca-Cola logo than to look at the moon?—indeed, if the product advertised is beneficial, perhaps some 'good' would be done. And doubtless some people would *like* it. Yet it is not over-delicate to see the proposal as disgusting, a violation, a symptom of a break in the tie between humanity and the cosmos, an outrage against the dignity of the natural order of things. Indeed (climbing the staircase) I would say that it is barbaric to see it otherwise. One would feel contaminated, polluted, by belonging to a culture in which such a thing could be thought of. Aesthetic revulsion here blends seamlessly into moral revulsion.

It is naturally the actions of other people that concern us the most. But ethics does not only concern actions: we may think that in some circumstances people ought to *feel* various ways. We go some way up the staircase when we moralize about moods, for instance resenting someone who fails to feel meditative gazing at the night sky, or uplifted by a mountain landscape, or tranquil by the lake. Again, there are levels of ascent here: as with the aesthete, a significant moral question is how far up the staircase, how quickly, it is appropriate to go. People who climb too quickly give us our bigots and fascists, and are as much of a nuisance as the lukewarm, who scarcely ever get off the ground.

At the top end of the emotional scale are cases of harm and evil where dissent is not tolerated. I think it is wrong to hurt children for fun, and here there is nothing left of *de gustibus non disputandum*. If you do not think this, then I am against you too, and my opposition may show itself in any number of ways, from avoiding your company, to advising others to do so, to seeking to change you, to constraining you as I can, or deploying social and legal pressures of all kinds against you.

The reactions we have identified may seem surprising foundations for the high and pure subject of ethics. When some people think of ethics they highlight the lofty conscience, the sense of righteousness and duty that animates good people and is capable of motivating acts of nobility and heroism. I have started with feelings of disgust, contempt, anger, or feelings of shame and guilt, together with a staircase of attitudes such as disgust at those who are not disgusted, or anger at

those who remain calm. At present I shall just remark that these are quite sufficient to give us the heartland of everyday ethics. Consider how the God of the Old Testament defines his morality mainly by a series of commands, coupled with a ready disposition to unleash his anger on anyone disobeying them. That is what his morality consists in. A moralistic society is one in which a large variety of things arouse the anger and censure of others; a tolerant or tranquil society is one in which only certain behaviour does so. We best observe the morality of a society by noticing such patterns, and observing when hostility gets public acceptance and expression (that is, when such anger is not itself the subject of a hostile reaction on the part of significant numbers). To moralize, we might say, is to insist on emotional responses. But in saying this we must not forget that as well as emotions such as anger there are the reverse. Encouragement and admiration are also important. When people go beyond what can be required of them—that is, they go the extra mile, well beyond any baseline below which anger would have been appropriate—they deserve and sometimes receive our admiration. And this carrot is frequently more effective than any stick.

While I think there is no doubt about the central ethical role of disgust, anger, and contempt, it is easy to oversimplify the reactions involved. Ethics is not always emotional: a prohibition or permission can be issued in a perfectly clinical frame of mind. It is clearly not simply a matter of likes or dislikes or preferences, as those are usually understood, for ethics often opposes our likes and our preferences in the name of principle (although the issue here is delicate, and returns in Chapter 4). Rather, ethics involves the *full* dynamic range of our practical natures. An ethic may be shown in perfect calm. I may not be angry at someone who steals my goods, nor even hold him in contempt, but nevertheless think he ought not to do it, and here the output is expressed in terms of my preparedness to encourage restraints and boundaries within which people should be forced to act. As Gilbert Ryle put it, ethics involves the 'tempers, habits, dispositions, moods, inclinations, impulses, sentiments, feelings, affections, thoughts, reflections, opinions, principles, prejudices, imaginations and fancies'.[9] A picture that leaves out any of these is to that extent impoverished.

Analytical philosophers demand definitions, but I do not think it is

[9] Gilbert Ryle, 'Jane Austen and the Moralists', *The Oxford Review* (1966), repr. in S. P. Rosenbaum, ed., *English Literature and British Philosophy* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 182.

profitable to seek a strict definition of 'the' moral attitude here. Practical life comes in many flavours, and there is no one place on the staircase that identifies a precise point, before which we are not in the sphere of the ethical, and after which we are. We find things important in different ways, and different reactions, emotionally and practically, may equally qualify as expressions of our ethics. An ethic may characteristically express itself in disdain of those who do not measure up, rather than anger at them, or in colourless administrative controls on conduct, rather than emotional public demonstrations. But this difficulty of definition arises not because the subject is mysterious, or especially 'sui generis', or resistant to understanding in any terms that enable us to understand the rest of our emotional and motivational natures. It arises because of the polymorphous nature of our emotional and motivational natures themselves.

4. GUILT, SHAME, AND THE REJECTION OF ETHICS

Critics of ethics sometimes express themselves by saying that it is 'all a matter of words', or 'depends on what you mean by' various ethical terms. We can now see that this cannot be right. Ethical disagreement is essentially practical. It concerns who gets approval, and who gets the reverse, and the words with which it is conducted are not simple counters that we can use as we like without dispute. This simple point can be buttressed by a number of arguments, of which the most famous is the 'open question' argument propounded by G. E. Moore.[10] Thus, it might naively be thought that ethical terms are given their meaning entirely by those features that we select as good or bad. These features determine the application of ethical verdicts to things. So, for instance, I may care about whether something creates happiness, in order to decide whether it is good. You, on the other hand, might care more about whether it shows respect for nature. Does this mean that we just talk past each other if, for instance, I describe contraception as good, and you deny it? Is our disagreement 'merely one about words'? Not at all. This is not a standard case of one person using a word to mean one thing, and someone else using it to mean another. Our dispute cannot be settled by the method appropriate to verbal disagreement, namely head-counting or other purely linguistic investigation into usage. Even if it turned out clearly that most people

[10] G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 10–20.

used the word as you do, it remains open to me simply to say that you are all wrong. You have inappropriate standards, according to me. Applying the term to the wrong things, you approve of the wrong actions and forbid the wrong actions. You no doubt will retort the same to me. Our dispute is one over the kind of feature that *ought* to determine our verdicts, and this is not a purely verbal dispute. It is a dispute about how to react to different features of things, and how to act and choose. In effect, Moore pointed out that it is always an open question, something that can be discussed and denied, whether some given feature of things is the thing that determines whether they are good.

If it is hard to see a disagreement over which standards to use as more than verbal, this is because the boot is often on the other foot: many disputes that may seem to be purely verbal are at bottom ethical. Words are contested because they illustrate attitudes, and have other consequences, and these can rightly cause concern. Many terms in a language combine a descriptive and evaluative element, and their application is contested as a matter of ethics. The most familiar are racist and sexist epithets, but, as anybody who has tried to find 'neutral' terminology to describe any social or political matter knows, ethical shades and colours cling to nearly all the words describing social life, and the choice of one description or another will be in part an ethical choice. Words typically nudge people, with more or less subtlety, towards attitudes to the things they pick out, and rejecting or accepting these attitudes then pitches us into an ethical, not a verbal, issue. This is so even at the most sensory end of things, where philosophers might have expected a purely descriptive, empirical vocabulary. For instance, there is probably no neutral way to describe the textures of things that are disgusting to the touch. Slimy, viscous, [illegible] are all heavily loaded words.

We can now return to the suspicion of ethics voiced in the first section. We can interpret the critic as suggesting that it would be better if we lost these tendencies to such things as socially coordinated anger. The tendency to such reactions is part of a defective way of life. The idea is that the ethical vocabulary is typically used to cement and [illegible] unfortunate psychological attitudes, disguising power, discouraging thought, and perhaps acting as a fig-leaf for what may at bottom be an exploitative social order.

Morality, as we have identified it, encourages coercion and rejection, and as such needs careful employment. The question will be whether the attitudes with which it can be associated, and upon which [illegible], count as an *abuse* of the notion, or an integral part of

any use of it. If the latter, then we may hear ourselves saying, for example, that there are no obligations, thereby wishing to cleanse our practical lives of the attitudes that go along with anger, resentment, exclusion, punishment, and to foster instead sympathy, acceptance, inclusion, and perhaps a relatively fatalistic acquiescence in human nature in all its manifestations.

To see how it might go, we can reflect for a moment on a concept that has lost a great deal of its popularity, that of sin. Sin deploys the emotion of disgust in the service of a particular kind of ethics. The sinner is foul or vile, and his or her sins raise a stench. They are loathsome: they fill God with pain. If it were just a question of the sinner being contemptible, God could look the other way, but one is *afflicted* with disgust, whereas one is not afflicted with contempt. Sinning is supposed to bring with it the particular pain of self-disgust: the sinner is not only bad, but unclean. The sinner ought not just to feel guilty, but ought to loathe himself, ought to hide himself from the sight of others and the sight of God.

Now it is not very difficult to think that these emotions can be overdone, and were undoubtedly typically overdone in the Christian centuries. Let us do away with them. But if we learn to soft-pedal sin, what next? Guilt is the most obvious next candidate for criticism. Guilt is the badge of a moral style that puts the anger of others where sin puts their disgust. We feel guilty when we know that the anger of others would be justified. That feeling has an imperial manner: thinking in terms of it may make me into a 'servant of the world', unable to live my own life or pursue the partial, limited, even selfish projects that alone would allow me integrity and dignity, if I could only let them do so.[11] Guilt is quickly inclined to go bad, becoming obsessive and neurotic.

Once more, there is also a great deal of force in this critique. As already conceded, it would often be a good thing if moralizing occurred less and were less unpleasant when it did occur. Many people want to demonize and criminalize lives that they don't like and don't understand. Parents meet the emotions of their growing children with moralistic antagonism, and families and people are destroyed by the habit. People are destroyed by neurotic and obsessive misplaced guilt as well, and the feeling of having let themselves or others down, when no such feelings are appropriate.

So is guilt wholly bad? If others moralize against us, there are three

[11] This is a paraphrase of (part of) the Bernard Williams's critique of the 'morality system'. See especially *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985).

broad possibilities. We may resent their criticism, thinking it was none of their business, or that the standards they are applying are inappropriate, and we will either return their hostility, or at best shrug it off as the reaction of people who are best ignored. Or, we may engage with them, and seek to justify our action. Finally, we may recognize that they are right: that is, we see our own behaviour as they do, and ourselves feel guilty.

Guilt is the emotion that arises when we feel we could not defend ourselves against the anger of others. We have 'internalized' the voices of others, and recognize that we have no defence against their reaction (it is the very reaction we would have to them, had they done what we did). Guilt co-ordinates the hostility of others with preparedness to undergo it on the part of the subject.[12] Perhaps it would be better to downplay it, like sin. If we get rid of sin and guilt, however, we are still left with a third moral style. Shame is similar to guilt but usually described as differing by internalizing the contempt or disdain rather than the anger of others.[13] When we are ashamed we think that we are in a position where others who witness us would or could despise us. Fear of shame, or shame itself, motivates us to hide ourselves from the gaze of others. We feel ashamed in situations in which we are not up to scratch, even when no question of guilt arises.

There are three main differences that have been suggested between guilt and shame. The first, and most important, is that guilt is associated with our own agency: we are typically guilty through having done or failed to do something. By contrast, shame may attach to features where there is no question of one's own agency. I may be ashamed of my unmusical voice, but I cannot feel guilty about it, because I do not believe it was any doing of mine that created it, nor that any effort of mine would have significantly improved it. I may be ashamed of my bodily figure, but I can only feel guilty about it if I think that I brought it about by, for instance, failing to exercise or by over-eating. To feel guilty, it seems, I must feel responsible for whatever needs putting right.

Arising from this is the second difference. Shame typically motivates us to *concealment*. We try to hide the failure or the flaw from others. Guilt, on the other hand, typically motivates us to *reparation*, which can include 'setting things right', apologizing, confessing, expiating, and getting back onto all fours with the others. Guilt can

[12] Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 67–8.

[13] For a recent treatment, see Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1993), 219–20.

motivate us to expose ourselves. Guilt is especially supposed to work even although others do not know what we have done. It is enough that we have internalized their voices, and this means that our discomfort is not dependent upon the actual accusation of others. We can imagine what they would say about us, and find it uncomfortable, even if in fact nobody was there to point the finger of anger. Shame is not quite so indifferent to the absence of others. It connects with concealment differently in different cases. There are things that we are not ashamed of doing, but where we would be ashamed to be observed, such as exercising natural bodily functions. Here, shame only arises from the actual gaze of others. In the other kind of case shame is more like guilt. We may be ashamed although there were no actual witnesses. I may be ashamed of my poor piano-playing, although I take care to practise in private, or ashamed on re-reading a clumsy paragraph I have just written but that nobody else has read. Because these performances are deficient, I am glad they are hidden from others.

The third and related mark of difference we have already mentioned. This is that guilt is typically associated with the potential anger or hostility of others, whereas shame anticipates their disdain or contempt. If I am ashamed of my lame performance at the piano, I anticipate that anyone hearing it would find it regrettable or miserable, but not that they might be angry at me for it (if they might be, it would be because my agency is involved—I failed to practise as I should have, or as I promised to, for instance).

It is sometimes thought that guilt is irrational if it is engendered via elements of a situation that were bad luck or beyond our control. I engage more with this range of thoughts later. But I can remark here that this is not how we actually think about it. Suppose I sometimes drive paying a little too much attention to my mobile phone, and too little to the road. I do not feel guilty. But if by bad luck a child runs out and I kill it, then I do, even if that extra aspect of the situation was quite beyond my control. And I am supposed to feel guilty: if I do not feel guilt, having run over the child because I was paying attention to my mobile phone, I am likely to be regarded as some kind of monster. In our actual moral world, in such a case contrition and some instinct to reparation are compulsory. In fact, the link with responsibility should not be thought of as fixed and a priori. It may permit of cultural variation, so that it is just a fact about the West that we typically restrict guilt to occasions for which we feel responsibility.[14] And even

[14] This theme is emphasized in Rom Harré, *The Social Construction of the Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

in the West, we can understand the guilt of someone who feels that they have been or are part of some infamous collective process, regardless of their responsibility for it. We feel guilty about just being complicit. People can feel guilty about their parents' doings, and we can feel guilty about our generation's destruction of the environment, although here the thought 'I should do or should have done something about it' may not be far away.

Finally, it is worth remarking that the three features we have noticed that distinguish guilt from shame—the involvement of agency, the disposition towards reparation and contrition, the internalized anger rather than disdain of others—are typically intermingled, so that it is seldom clear-cut which it is that we feel. Feeling ashamed of something is often not readily distinguished from feeling guilty about it. It would be a fine call, for instance, to say whether typical anorexics or bulimics feel guilty about eating or ashamed of eating. Often this is because we can become obsessed by the false idea that a deficiency must have been due to our own agency. In low-church cultures, for example, illness or handicap can be moralized into something about which to feel guilty: a punishment for some imagined transgression. Furthermore, guilt and shame almost inevitably go together for another reason, which is that when we feel guilty it is typically because we have behaved as we did because of emotions or desires or motivations of which we are ashamed. Here the impulse to confess clashes with the impulse to conceal, and the resulting conflict makes our state multiply unpleasant.

With this much understanding of these emotions, then if we also concede that societies can be too moralistic, too quick to react to too many kinds of behaviour with anger and guilt, or contempt and shame, is it coherent to suggest that we would get by better without any such emotions at all? The idea might be that we could still rank some situations as better than others, and try to bring them about, and we could still admire some human characteristics more than others, and try to encourage them and imitate them. It is just that we would not feel angry or ashamed or guilty at the failures of others and ourselves. We would accept more, and judge less. This might seem to be pure gain, for anger and shame and guilt are unpleasant emotions.

There is a way of thinking, more common in popular psychology texts than in philosophy or literature, that invites us to think of guilt and shame as bad feelings, like nausea, that we ought just to wish away. They are there to be cured. But that is too simple. Guilt, for instance, typically involves the wish to have done otherwise, and if I really wish to have done otherwise, I won't find that wish just a brute

uncomfortable fact about my own consciousness, one that I might in turn wish away. I don't just wish myself to be free of that wish. My last word is not 'this is a nasty state to be in, so I wish I could get rid of it'. My last word is 'I wish I had done otherwise'. This is the intentionality or directedness of emotional states, including desire, and will be a major element in understanding desire. I return to it in later chapters. Misunderstanding it prompts entire philosophies to mistake the nature of deliberation.

The cost, obviously, of getting rid of guilt or shame will be one of *motivation*. Without these emotions, the motivation to act well is diminished. If there is no fear of the anger of others, or no internalization of their potential rejection, then a central buttress of good behaviour has been lost. If there is no inclination to make reparation, or to undergo the hostility of others, then our responses are unco-ordinated and social dissolution becomes more likely. For how do the happy people who are innocent of guilt or shame comport themselves? It would be left to other motivational states to keep them behaving well. But it is not at all clear what these would look like, for too many of the normal boundaries on action are dependent upon entrenched emotions. Fear of discovery, for example, presupposes that discovery will be a bad thing, yet if it never arouses the anger of others, it will not be a bad thing. Desire for the admiration of others may not be so urgent if the admiration goes without some kind of ranking, whereby actions that are not admired eventually provoke at least some kind of disdain. Unless I am sometimes ashamed of my piano playing, and sometimes even guilty about failing to practise, I am not likely to improve very fast. Pride is a pleasant state, and the prospect of a proper pride is a great motivator, but it only exists at its best when the situation was one in which a shameful outcome was possible, but avoided.

Some philosophers, notably Bernard Williams, have portrayed guilt as part of a culturally specific 'morality system' which we would be better off without. But I doubt if this is right. Of course, both guilt and shame can both become obsessive and neurotic. But the co-ordinating function and the motivating function of these emotions are enough to give them a place in the well-tempered psychology. (Other aspects of Williams's critique, including the idea that guilt trades on an unrealistic fantasy of pure freedom, occupy Chapter 8.)

In the Oresteian trilogy of Aeschylus, Orestes, having killed his mother, who had herself killed his father, is pursued by the 'Eumenides', initially the Furies, whose hate and fury signify the sense of guilt and shame that corrode Orestes. But when the situation is finally resolved by the goddess Athene, the Eumenides are not banished. They are not regarded as formless diseases. Their role has been perfectly honourable, and they are given a place at the foundation of Athens, that is, at the foundations of civic life. 'For what man who fears nothing at all is ever righteous?' The Eumenides then, as it were, grow into deserving their name (the 'well-wishers'), because their presence under the civic order is its necessary guarantee against anarchy and wrongdoing.

We can certainly campaign for a society to becomes less moralistic and more forgiving. We can campaign for it to pay more attention to the social conditions that lead people to behave badly and less to the individual who is a victim of those conditions. And we can certainly attempt, as Nietzsche does, to revalue our values: in other words, to rethink whether some conventionally accepted goods or virtues really are so. But none of this amounts to a wholesale rejection of ethics. It is still making moves *within* ethics: changing the key, not refusing to play the tune. And in fact our reflections suggest that the rejection of ethics is not really an option. As we already saw, there is no getting behind ethics, because the decision to live a tolerant 'non-judgemental' life is itself an ethical decision, and not obviously one that can be sustained for very long, or defended for very long as likely to lead to wholly good consequences. Certainly people may moralize too much and too quickly and about the wrong things. But people may also be too slow to praise good behaviour, or to feel anger at behaviour that deserves it: cruelty, ingratitude, injustice of all kinds.

5. PRIVACY AND PRINCIPLE

Is there any other way of criticizing ethics as such, as opposed to criticizing the particular attitudes held by some people at some times? We have already come across the idea that we often do not want ethics to intrude into practical living, not because we feel guilty about what we are doing, but because it introduces 'one thought too many'. In a personal relationship, for example with one's partner or children, the last thing one wants is that people are acting with an eye to behaving well, or out of a sense of duty. Parents are to cherish children out of spontaneous love of them, not because they feel they ought to do so, or that it is what the world expects, or that somewhere in the future some good might come of it. A partner who realizes that the other is meeting them not because they want to, but out of a sense of duty, thereby recognizes that the relationship is lost. We do not want anything specifically ethical to intrude: a lover or parent who acts out of love, but

at the same time is always checking what ethics requires of them or is mainly pleased that he or she is acting dutifully, is inadequate. The delicate adjustment of one to another that communication needs is incompatible with one party having half a mind on duty or consequences, just as rapt engagement with a play is incompatible with having half a mind on the cost of the ticket. There are places, it seems, where only spontaneous emotion will do, and where ethical thinking should not intrude. If we think all practical living is like that, then ethical thought is left with no respectable place in our lives.

It is only a highly imperialistic conception of ethics that is under attack here: a conception according to which ethics is to intrude into everything. This just means that an ethic which recommends that we feel no attitudes and emotions without ethical thought is unfit for human beings, and on that account alone ought to be rejected. We need and cherish spheres within which we are completely absorbed by private concern and emotion, just as we need spheres of private property. But it is a fantasy to suppose that all areas of practical life might be like that. We have to think in terms of obligations and duties sometimes, and when we do they are important (although not, perhaps, important enough to trump everything. Rebellion has its own allure, and virtuous people may sometimes kick over the traces. I talk more of admirable naughtiness in Chapter 3).

We might have as a kind of Utopian ideal a world in which, without social penalties or rewards, people spontaneously act out of love, trust, benevolence, and care; where they do not have to think what they are doing, or pay attention to the consequences, or worry about the resources they are demanding from others, or about the amount they are contributing to the common good. This is the simple 'peasant goodness' recommended, for example, by Tolstoy, and by Christianity in its aspect of opposition to the rigid law-governed social world of Judaism. In the real world, however, utterly simple, innocent, inarticulate goodness is a rare bird (the idea that it belongs naturally to children, and equally to peasants, is of course sentimental rubbish). And it is hard to imagine it existing at all without education via mechanisms of admiration or disdain, reward and even punishment, or the setting of boundaries that are articulated in a common ethic. We may indeed hope that when an ethic is firmly in place, people spontaneously find themselves wanting to do only what it is right for them to do. But even if such a Utopian moment came about, there will be the constant need to pass on the success to new generations, and that means communicating and co-ordinating our attitudes in public discussion. In other words, simple, inarticulate, good conduct may be

admirable, but it no more supplants the need for articulate ethics than simple, inarticulate, consummate musicianship supplants the need for musical education.

There is another aspect of this that I am not here engaging: the wisdom of conducting political affairs on the presumption that ethics is more steam than substance: the duty of the lawgiver to presume that all men are wicked. The whole theory of constitutional design, from Machiavelli, through Hobbes, to the American revolution, is (rightly) based on this maxim. But that is not because the maxim is necessarily true, but because it is true often enough for a state to need the checks and balances to prevent one group from predating upon the others.[15]

The plot of the rest of the book is as follows. In the next chapter I look at the restless relationship between deontological, consequentialist, and virtue ethics. I then turn to the moral proposition and I introduce and defend a particular view of this, and compare it with other attempts to understand it. I then discuss the nature of human motivation, and in particular the question of our egoism or selfishness. Are people incurably selfish? Are they driven by selfish genes, and what implications does this have for their behaviour? Does it show us what rationality demands in various kinds of decision-making problem? I then turn to the problems of freedom and rationality as they work themselves out in two great rival traditions: the naturalistic tradition of Hume, and the rationalistic tradition of Kant. I turn to confront the problem of authority, and the nagging doubts of scepticism and relativism. Learning how to confront those, we emerge into relative daylight, able finally to give a satisfactory account of moral thought, its credentials, its scope, and its limits.

15 Paul Rahe, 'Antiquity Surpassed: The Repudiation of Classical Republicanism', in David Wooton, ed., *Republicanism, Liberty, and Commercial Society, 1649–1776* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994).