

# Does Moral Philosophy Pay?

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by John Benson

Thirteen years ago Professor G. E. M. Anscombe gave reasons for thinking that it is not at present profitable for us to do moral philosophy. The steady flow of books since then shows how little notice was taken. The three I shall be considering in this article present an opportunity to consider the case she made and its continuing relevance.

Miss Anscombe's essay, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', is included in *The Definition of Morality*,<sup>1</sup> together with twelve others which are meant to hang from the same peg: the question, 'What is the meaning of "morality"?' The most interesting of them get up and walk away with the peg, opening up issues beyond the matters of usage which the editors tidily catalogue in their introduction. This is certainly true of Miss Anscombe's. Her quarrel with modern moral philosophers is not that they are wrong in the way they use or define 'moral' and 'morality', but that in the way they use them these terms mean nothing at all. She argues that the concept of obligation, with its related moral sense of 'ought', which has been given pride of place by moral philosophers since the eighteenth century, is intelligible only within a law-conception of morality. To speak of a moral 'law', of being 'bound', 'obliged' and so on, makes no sense unless one believes that there is someone who issues the law. The decay of divine law as a basis for morality has left these terms bereft of content, but not, unfortunately, of their 'mesmeric force'. The smell remains for some time even when the gas-works has been dismantled. When 'ought' lacks the content provided by some actual law, telling a man that he *ought* not to commit adultery gives him no reason at all for not doing so.

We can at least avoid the pretence of invoking a rule when there is none by using, instead of quasi-legal terms, words like 'just', 'chaste' and 'truthful'. To tell the man that adultery is unjust is to tell him what sort of action it is, and that may strike him as a reason for not doing it. On the other hand it may not, and this is the point at which the helplessness of moral philosophy becomes apparent. We need an account of how the exercise of such virtues as justice is indispensable to human flourishing. But for that we lack the necessary philosophical account of human nature. In particular we do not know how to show that committing injustice is never in any circumstances the best thing for a man to do. At least, however, if we avoid the empty quasi-legal 'ought' we shall not be able to ask whether it might sometimes be the case that we 'ought' (morally) to commit injustice. It was their willingness to entertain this question that led

<sup>1</sup>Edited by G. Wallace and A. D. M. Walker. Methuen, London, 1970. 267 pp. £2.40 hardback, £1.25 paperback. A useful collection of recent articles, previously published in journals. It contains, besides those referred to in this article, papers by C. H. Whiteley, W. K. Frankena, T. L. S. Sprigge, K. Baier and D. P. Gauthier.

Professor Anscombe to charge the 'Oxford moral philosophers' with corrupting the young.

The reply of Professor R. M. Hare, the most formidable of the Oxford moral philosophers, would be that even if we could, in a quite general way, establish what we needed to do in order to flourish, there would still be, for each of us, the different question whether to do it. And that is ineluctably a matter for individual decision.

Moral principles are, on Hare's view, self-addressed injunctions to perform or avoid certain types of action. Further they must, if they are to count as *moral* principles, be universalizable; that is, one must be willing to say: 'Let anyone placed in these circumstances do thus.' He is under no illusion that moral principles are objective truths to which one can appeal to justify one's actions or judgments. They mark the point at which justification ends, in personal decision. His account enables Hare to give prominence to two features of morality which he regards as essential. The first is that moral judgments are action-guiding, practical not theoretical. The second is that the moral agent is autonomous in the extreme sense that there are no limits, save those involved in the requirement of universalizability, on what he may adopt as a moral principle. That moral principles cannot be derived from divine law or from facts about human nature is not a matter for regret. Attempts to validate moral principles in this way are to be resisted as inconsistent with the idea of the freely self-committing moral agent.

That is the merest sketch of a powerfully and subtly argued case. Though Hare is not represented in *The Definition of Morality*<sup>1</sup> his very substantial spectre haunts its pages, sometimes as a friendly familiar, sometimes as a spirit to be exorcized. Miss Anscombe's is the most radical criticism, but some of the criticisms and qualifications offered by philosophers more in sympathy with him than she provide arguments in her cause.

Alasdair MacIntyre attacks the view that moral judgments are necessarily and essentially universalizable, but in a way that leaves the moral agent even lonelier than Hare would have him. C. C. W. Taylor effectively criticizes Hare's attempt, in *Freedom and Reason*, to show that the requirement of universalizability is enough by itself to rule out, for all but fanatics, many kinds of ill-treatment of others.

#### *Individual choice and the claims of others*

Another aspect of Hare's view that comes up for inspection is his insistence on the absolute autonomy of the moral agent. Two essays in this collection (those of Neil Cooper and P. F. Strawson) remind us that one alternative to the picture of the moral agent pulling his

<sup>1</sup>Rightly, since his books are easily available in paperback. *The Language of Morals* (1952); *Freedom and Reason* (1963). Both O.U.P.

principles out of the air is to see them as arising from the demands made upon him by other people. Hare denies that such demands oblige us, in a moral sense, to do anything. To use an 'ought' sentence in invoking a rule of one's society is to use it in an 'off-colour' sense, unless one means thereby to express one's own decision to adopt it. But people certainly do guide their actions by rules which they do not think of as matters of choice, and all of us do some of the time.

For Strawson the place for individual choice is in the framing of ideal images of life, among which diversity and even incompatibility are desirable. But there is also the social morality of claims which must be acknowledged by most of the people most of the time if a common life is to be possible at all. The claims are actual, not unsolicited pieces of free self-legislation. He says that it is a merit of his view that it gives the kind of content to the moral 'ought' that Miss Anscombe finds lacking. It is certainly possible to see how such claims can give people reasons for action. For a man has in several ways an interest in abiding by the rules of his society (i.e. of any of the various groups to which he belongs). His survival depends on the existence of some organized social grouping, so he has *some* interest in obeying its rules whatever they are. A man can only be said to have a *moral* interest in the rules, however, if they safeguard his interests and if he has some part in deciding what they are. Not any set of rules can be a social *morality*, since there are some interests so fundamental that no one could have a moral interest in a system which did not acknowledge them, notably: human succour, security from physical injury, security from deception.

#### *Why do I need to be moral?*

Though the realism of such a view is welcome, it is not without difficulties. One's society may be corrupt and its demands consequently immoral. Hare is quite justified in insisting that morality cannot be *constituted* by the demands of any actual institution. But appeal to the freely judging moral agent who just has to make up his mind what principles to adopt is not much help. What reason is there to think that he will come up with anything strikingly better than the stock principles which his social milieu makes available to him? A more crucial difficulty is that it is fairly easy to show that no man can flourish except in a society in which certain interests are acknowledged and certain virtues practised. The hard thing is to show that he cannot flourish unless *he* as well as others practises the virtues.

In her article 'Moral Arguments', reprinted here, Philippa Foot argues that moral principles essentially concern what is good or bad for a man. Against Hare she contends that 'right' and 'wrong' cannot be applied to any sort of action we choose, and positively that from a description of certain actions it follows that they are,

e.g. wrong or unjust. This is not yet to show that a man who has been convinced of the wrongness of an action necessarily has a reason for not doing it. Torture is the deliberate infliction of pain on another, so it is cruel; but how does that give me a reason for not torturing? In an article<sup>1</sup> not reprinted here, Mrs Foot has tried to answer this question by indicating the lines on which it might be shown that a man *needs* courage and justice and other virtues as he needs hands and eyes, for his well-being as a man. She thinks that if this cannot be shown it is perpetrating a fraud to go on recommending courage and justice as virtues. But can it be shown?

D. Z. Phillips and H. O. Mounce, in their book,<sup>2</sup> administer a severe ticking-off to Mrs Foot, not for failing but for attempting to show that a man needs justice in this sense, for this is to go outside morality in search of a defence and reduces it to something else. It is a mistake to try to give anyone a reason for acting justly: it could not be a moral reason, for in saying that an action is just we have given the only possible moral reason, and any other reason would be morally debased. 'Actions are ruled out for the just man, not because they would not profit him, but because they are what they are.' They argue, further, that there can be no appeal to human good and harm in justification of moral practices, for what constitutes good and harm is determined by the moral practices one accepts. Physical injuries, for example, are not bad *per se*. The philosopher Brentano accepted his blindness as a blessing. The warrior may prize his medals.

#### *The notion of a moral practice*

Phillips and Mounce are equally critical of Hare's position, and their account of morality offers some hope to those who feel that to revive natural law is hopeless, but that prescriptivism (the view of morality as autonomous self-legislation) leaves them suspended in a void.

Their key notion is that of a moral practice. Truth-telling and promise-keeping are typical examples. Particular acts are judged right or wrong by the criteria implicit in such practices. It is only because no question as to the justification of 'Lying is wrong' arises that it is possible to condemn an act by saying that it is a lie. Justification can only be by reference to what does not itself need justification. Statements like 'lying is wrong' are a type of necessary statement, since for us, as participants in the society to which this practice belongs, lying is one of the things by reference to which 'wrong' gets its meaning. It follows that we cannot even raise the question, as a moral one, 'Is lying wrong?'. Thus Hare is quite mistaken in thinking that justification ends in decision; it can end only

<sup>1</sup>'Moral Beliefs', reprinted in *Theories of Ethics*, edited by Philippa Foot. O.U.P.

<sup>2</sup>*Moral Practices*, by D. Z. Phillips and H. O. Mounce. Routledge and Kegan Paul. London, 1970. 135 pp. £1.60.

in the recognition of something that logically could not be a matter for decision. Equally mistaken, however, is the view that antecedent to all moral practices there is some way of making a moral judgment on the basis of a set of facts. It is only a moral practice that gives moral significance to the facts, and while within one practice a particular judgment may follow from the facts, a quite different judgment may follow from the same facts within a second practice. Moral practices are irreducibly different and there are no criteria for judging between them.

*The distinctive moral odour*

To wish to reconcile or decide between moral practices is, they say, to misunderstand their nature. The diversity of the values that people fundamentally care about is simply to be accepted. Yet the authors repudiate the suggestion that they are relativists, for they hold neither that it is open to the individual to hold what moral opinions he likes, nor that it is unimportant what he holds. Recognition of the multiplicity of moral practices should not lead to scepticism—‘On the contrary, one can distinguish between this variety where, in different ways and forms, concern is shown for moral considerations, with expediency and complete lack of concern for any moral considerations’ (the anacoluthon is theirs).

Is it an antidote to scepticism to reflect that Mr Vorster in pursuing the policy of separate development is acting out of regard for moral considerations and not from mere expediency? Why should this distinction between *moral* practices, regardless of their content, and expediency be so important? And how in general are we supposed to recognize a practice as moral rather than something else? Although the authors deny that good and harm can be characterized independently of moral notions they assume that there is a distinction between the moral and the expedient which can be applied across the boundaries of moral traditions.

Against this it needs to be pointed out that although for one strand of our own tradition the moral and the expedient (or—though this is not the same distinction—the moral and the prudential) are in sharp opposition, there are not in all cultures two such opposed concepts. One has only to consider the range of qualities that the Greeks included in human virtue (as we translate it), or for a concrete illustration, the compatibility in Homer of being a cunning liar and a good man. Of course, it would be wrong to think that Homer must have thought of a cunning lie as morally praiseworthy—that he had to this sort of behaviour the same attitude that we have to integrity. The point is that he did not have the concept of the distinctively moral which goes with the marking of a sharp distinction between the moral and the expedient. For us such words as ‘honesty’ and ‘integrity’ have a peculiarly moral smell because they belong in a tradition which also draws this distinction.

Phillips and Mounce seem to suggest that the odour of the moral can be detected anywhere, in spite of their emphasis on the disparateness of the moral practices of different cultures. It seems best to read what they say about morality and prudence as an elucidation of the practices of our own moral tradition. Even so they distort that tradition in being unduly rigoristic. In their criticism of Mrs Foot they say: 'She fails to see that for anyone concerned about justice, death for the sake of justice is not a disaster.' There is a disagreeable ring of pulpit complacency in this, offered as a reproving reminder of a commonplace. Such things can only decently be said by the victim, with heroic exaggeration. If something appears to me a fate worse than death, it does not follow that death must appear no evil at all.

The main criticism to be made of their book on this issue is that what they attack is the crudest attempt to link justice and profit. They do not distinguish prudence and expedience, but assume that they are the same. They constantly assume that the claim that justice is necessary to man's welfare can only be read as meaning that justice is a policy which, as it happens, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise. And, they say, it doesn't, and if it did such a consideration could not be a moral reason. Their view of morality has such an extreme Kantian cast because they take such a low view of prudence. And their low view of prudence is the result of a simple-minded idea of the relation of means and end. If this is equated with the relation between a technique and an artefact then it is true that virtue cannot be a means to an end. It may be that either of two techniques will be equally effective, and so it makes no difference to one which one uses. Or it may be that the only available technique is unpleasant, so that one uses it unwillingly, just for the sake of the result. Either implication needs to be absent when the relation between virtue and happiness is in question. But this need be no objection. For neither implication is present when one says that to flourish a man needs friendship, health, or for that matter, justice. These things are constitutive of, rather than instrumental to, flourishing. This means that in one sense they are not contingently related to flourishing; that is, given that a man is the sort of animal he is, it does not just happen, for the most part, that he needs these things. But in another sense it is a contingent matter: flourishing is not defined in terms of these things. A man can neglect them and *find* that he is wretched; that he is wretched is not a conclusion that can be deduced from the fact that he lacks them. It is therefore open to argument whether in this sense virtues are necessary to a man, but even this sense of the *question* is unrecognized by Phillips and Mounce. If they had recognized it they surely could not have made Socrates into a proto-Kant.

Phillips and Mounce would still wish to block attempts to justify morality along these lines by their argument that human good and harm are notions determined by moral practices. But this point



needs more support than they give it. Their argument is enough to show that what is physically injurious may from the point of view of some moral practice be desirable, but it does not follow that judgments about what is harmful and beneficial can only be made from some moral point of view.

*Is man naturally condomistic?*

Phillips and Mounce may be right in saying that we cannot make progress in the attempt to show that morality is what is good for a man. They fail to show that it is obviously misguided, but Professor Macquarrie's book<sup>1</sup> nearly destroys the case by its support.

Macquarrie tries to show how a revitalized understanding of natural law can provide a common basis for discussion for Christians, Marxists and humanists. He begins fairly promisingly by warning Christian apologists against 'forcibly baptizing' Marxists and humanists by detecting in their moral achievements an unconscious acknowledgement of Christian values; there is no common ground where one party insists on treating the others as guests upon it. The aim should be to 'reveal moral foundations that belong to our humanity as such'. This means beginning with the nature of man. But the notion of man and his end must not be that of 'Aristotelian man', but 'the "new man" of the technological age'; not just because Aristotle got it wrong and we have new information about what 'man' is, but because we now know that human nature is not static and is in our age changing rapidly.

In a long central chapter Macquarrie offers five characteristics which are basic to the contemporary image of man. The 'new man' is a Being-on-the-way, a Being-in-the-world, a Being-with-others, an Agent, and a man come of age. The last phrase he uses 'with considerable reluctance because it has been made something of a slogan in recent theology', but this is the reluctance of a confirmed toper to accept his fifth double whisky. 'Man' in this technological global village of ours is a highly paid executive who by nature watches television, uses the latest contraceptive devices, skips across the Atlantic by jet and forms his image of himself from McLuhan and *The Naked Ape*. By talking about 'man' rather than men, and by supposing that what some men do as a normal thing automatically becomes part of the nature of 'man', Macquarrie arrives at the discovery that 'jet transport can now be said to have become a part of our nature', 'the pill and the condom are now part of (man's) nature'.

Beneath the with-it phrase-making there is simple inability to handle the concept of nature, in the sense in which a class of things can be said to have a nature, intelligibly. This I have already illustrated by the failure to distinguish between essential and accidental

<sup>1</sup>*Three Issues in Ethics*, by John Macquarrie. S. C. M. Press, London, 1970. 157 pp, £1.60.

properties. Another illustration is the treatment of the relation between man's end and his nature. Man's nature, we learn, is to exist, which means 'to go out of oneself', and his end is 'to be', which he attains when he *is* in the fullest manner open to him, and that again means achieving fuller humanity. But unless we are told something positive about what it is to be *human* we have no idea how to set about becoming more human. He might be talking about potty putty. The emptiness of this is not remedied by his saying that the dynamic change in man is, or can be, structured development, and that we have a guide to it because 'At least in general terms, we know where we *ought* to be going, and we experience guilt when we go in some other direction'. If we (whoever they are) do know this it is still obscure how we are helped to know it by natural law as understood here.

If natural law is to be saved from its friends as well as from its enemies then the task outlined by Miss Anscombe needs to be pursued (as it has begun to be) with energy, and with the help of anthropology and ethology, but the genuine articles, not the pop-versions of them.