

Beyond ‘Beyond Morality’

The revised version of Richard Garner’s *Beyond Morality*

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Preface (May 2012)

Eventually the results of earth's experiment with our species will be in. We may learn to end war, reverse environmental devastation, stabilize the world's economy, and take care of each other, and we may not. We prize our big brains and our adaptability, but we have used our cleverness to produce inventions that amplify our power to poison and destroy, and we may not be sufficiently adaptable to deal with the changes we ourselves have brought about. We could compare this behavior to that of an energized adolescent at the wheel of a fast sports car. Research has shown that the area of the human brain that says "Driving at 80 miles an hour by moonlight is a bad idea" is not fully engaged until the mid twenties. <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124119468>>. This helps explain why teens are often characterized as impulsive, aggressive, incautious, impressionable, disinclined to think about the consequences of their actions, and too impatient to reflect on their mistakes.

That characterization may sound familiar because it describes quite a few of us who are *not* teen-agers, and too many of the governments under which we live. Perhaps humanity has only reached its adolescence, and just needs time to develop some common sense and caution. In a family of four, there may be time for the new drivers to learn from their (non-fatal) mistakes, but patience is a dangerous prescription for the family of man in the 21st Century. What is at risk is not just the family car, and if we don't grow up soon we could find that our immature behavior has cost us everything we value. Our species may be terminally flawed, but we are also capable of love, language, understanding, creation, and compassion. It just might be in our power to solve our problems, save the planet, and make happiness the rule rather than the exception. The

question is, and always has been: “How do we manage to do that?”

Some of those who have noticed that we have become the greatest threat to our own survival have sought ways to stop the exploitation and slaughter that have been with us for so long. Moralists, often supported by religion, speak of values, virtues, rights, and obligations. They say that God commands us, or that the universe requires us, to do this or that, or to be unselfish, honest, or loving. Morality and religion have tried to guide us to a “better” world where more of us “do the right thing,” but the actual effect of moral and religious commandments is debatable. We are taught that God commands us not to kill or steal, and that everyone has a right to life; but then we learn that God has ordered massacres, that every rule has exceptions, and that there are rights capable of overriding even a person’s right to life.

As we survey the buffet of incompatible but enticing moral systems, it may seem as if our task is to reach out and grab the right one, the one that can show us our true duty, help us distinguish between good and evil, and tell us how we ought to live. But we are no closer to finding this out now than we were in Socrates’ day, so it may be time to shake things up by examining the assumptions behind our quest. The moral truths we are trying to grasp may only exist as projections of our own feelings and frameworks. This, at least, would help explain why so many people with utterly incompatible views are absolutely certain that they are right.

Whatever the explanation of our diverse moral beliefs and our failure to end our conflicts, the strategies we have employed so far have not worked; or they have only worked well enough to get us into our dangerous and deteriorating situation. We are stuck, but we can’t go forward until we develop a shared and non-distorted view of our

situation and, I would add, a clear understanding of our use of language. That is what will make it possible for us to avoid the traps set for us by our words, and by those who exploit language to manipulate us. Only by being attentive to what we hear and say can we hope to get beyond the rhetoric and the fictions essential to both religion and morality. What will heal us and our society is a diet of the best information we can come by, as fully understood and as deeply realized as possible. If our friends and our leaders don't tell us what is really going on, and if we aren't capable of listening when they do, we will continue to make decisions in ignorance, and then all the morality in the world won't help us.

If our best thinkers have any contribution to make to the debates of our day, it is to help us in our quest to figure out as much as we can about life, the universe, and everything. If, for example, there really is no god, then almost all of us would be better off facing this fact squarely. We can learn to cope with finitude, and then we can move on to construct a life free of the superstitions of people long dead who were utterly misinformed about the most elementary facts of nature. If, like religion, morality is also built on a belief in things that are not real, why wouldn't we choose to move on to some reality-based system of discipline and control?

In what follows, I will argue that we have a better chance of achieving many of the goals cherished by both religious thinkers and moralists if we can leave religion and morality behind. Some of the most gentle and generous people in the world are motivated by neither religion nor morality—and this is one thing that leads me to hope that if we (individuals *and* societies) can manage to restrain our moralizing, we might still learn to listen to each other and to our calmer and wiser selves, and say farewell to our hectic, disputatious, and painful adolescence.

Introduction (May 2012)

We have convinced ourselves, and taught our young, that our conventions, laws, practices, and principles are subject to “higher” standards. We subscribe to natural laws, acknowledge eternal values, respect inalienable rights, and agree that we ought to avoid evil. We fear that if morality were “merely” conventional, “merely” a product of evolution and intelligence, it would lose its authority and become, in Kant’s words, “a mere phantom of the brain.” (Kant 1981, p. 48)

To say that morality is a “phantom of the brain” is just to say, in scary language, that we make it up. But what if we do make it up? Would that be so bad? After all, we make up our laws and our rules of etiquette. But there is a difference. We take morality more seriously than we do etiquette, and we think that morality is above the law. We may fear that if we admit that we make up morality we would also have to admit that it is optional, malleable, and relative. Because such an admission would undermine our highly prized ability to impose moral duties and restrictions on others, we are strongly motivated not to admit, even to ourselves, that morality is only a clever human invention, rooted in our genes and our conventions and aimed at control.

It is natural for victims of deceit, cruelty, greed, or ambition to think in moral terms about the ways they were treated. As they see it, bad people broke their promises and violated their agreements, evil bureaucrats ignored the rights of the defenseless, and someone, or even everyone, ought to have acted differently. Moral judgments, moral arguments, and moral posturing permeate our social life and our private thoughts. Anything that lives will be attracted to some things and

repulsed by others, but our likes and dislikes have become so infused with moralistic concepts that we think we deserve what we want and that others are morally obliged to do things our way.

Many of our familiar traditions and practices are quite useful, and others are wasteful or even dangerous, but a natural conservatism awards all of them a presumption of fitness. Any attempt to alter them is likely to be resisted on moral grounds by those who favor them (or who they favor), so if reformers can't meet this resistance with their own moral arguments, or with something even stronger, they can forget about changing things. As new issues are propelled into the public eye by this or that discovery, disaster, election, scandal, or network special, the one thing that remains constant is the moral tone of the discussion. Everyone claims to have correct answers, and everyone has plenty of reasons and arguments to defend even the most extreme and absurd of those answers.

I believe that this moralist approach to questions about how to live and act is inherently flawed. It is too easy to find moral arguments to support both sides of any dispute, too hard to explain the claim that we are bound or required by morality, and too unsettling to see such widespread and apparently irreconcilable moral divergence. It is time to face these facts and to explore other alternatives.

Moralists assume more than they can prove, and promise more than they can deliver. They say we are "subject to" objectively binding moral requirements, but never explain what this means or why it is so. The moralist position was well-stated in a book by Jeffrey Stout, who wrote that it is a knowable truth, independent of human contrivance or agreement, that "slavery is evil" and that

“knowingly and willingly torturing innocents is wrong, impermissible, unjust.”

(Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, p. 245) He said that he was more certain of these things than he was of anything he might use to support them—so he didn’t support them. But neither Stout’s strong certainty nor his inability to support his moral intuitions lends much credibility to the “things” about which he is so certain.

The critic of morality will reject Stout’s dogmatic intuitionism and all the other forms of moralism, whether offered by Christians, Jews, Hindus, Platonists, Buddhists, Muslims, Unitarians, or atheistic defenders of natural rights. Here and in Chapter One I will call this critic “the amoralist.” We cannot ask the amoralist to refute every form of morality that has ever been devised, but we can hope for an attempt to make a case against the idea of inescapable and binding demands from supernatural demanders, or more strangely, from no demanders at all.

I believe that moral disputes are fated to remain unresolved and that this is because there really is no fact of the matter about what is “wrong, impermissible, unjust.” The first four chapters of this book are designed to support this claim. By the end of Chapter Four I hope that my proposal to abandon moral language, moral judgments, and moral thinking will no longer seem outrageous. In Chapter Five I will survey what is to be abolished by anyone who is rash enough to adopt my recommendation, and in Chapter Six I will further defend and explain the position I call “moral abolitionism.”

Next I will try to show that there are effective non-moralistic ways to reach some of the goals moralists set for themselves and for others—a reduction in suffering and an increase in the happiness and contentment of those capable of

happiness and contentment. In Chapter Seven I review some wise, but not at all moralistic, suggestions about how to deal with our troublesome desires and emotions. Then in Chapter Eight I urge us to look more closely than we usually do at what goes on when we decide what to do, and I identify some of the many factors we exploit to control the decisions of others (and of ourselves).

One of the principal influences on us is language, which we use to frame our world and tell our story. In Chapter Nine I will spend some time discussing some ways words can either save us or lead us astray. Then I will explore the efforts of Sextus Empiricus, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and The Buddha, to find ways not to be led astray.

The emphasis we place on morality is one indication of our fondness for control, so in Chapter Ten I raise the question of whether we need as much control as we think we do. Morality, which presents itself as the repository of truths about how things ought to go, gives us enough confidence to be comfortable about forcing others to do things our way. On the assumption that most of us are already deeply committed to planning, morality, and the use of force, and since I discuss devices of control in Chapter Eight, I will devote little attention to what I here call the Way of Control, and more to a different strategy, one that, as the Daoist might say, accomplishes more by doing less, and that I shall refer to as “The Way of Harmony.”

In Chapters Eleven and Twelve I take a fresh, that is, a non-moralistic, look at some of the traditional problems of applied ethics and at a few topics that have recently materialized. By the turn of the century most moral philosophers

considered the legal and moral questions about abortion to have been settled. This was naïve. Not only has abortion emerged as a hot-button topic, stem-cell research, cloning and, even more surprisingly, contraception are now in the docks alongside abortion.

The criminal justice system of the United States is in trouble, and it can be argued that a combination of greed, racism, ignorance and a moralistic and politically motivated passion to punish share the responsibility. Our treatment of non-humans is problematic, and our concern for the environment is as endangered as the species we are threatening. In these final two chapters I will show that if we leave morality out of the discussion, and make a few other changes about how we think about and relate to one another, we may find ourselves making decisions many moralists will not only admire, but also insist on calling “moral.” But we will know better.

By the end of the book I hope to have shown that we can do without morality if we supplement our amoralism with ***calmness*** (*Don’t panic!*), ***clear-headedness*** (*Consider carefully*), ***compassion*** (*Other people matter*), and ***curiosity*** (*Seek accurate information*). By “doing without morality” I do not mean doing without kindness, or turning ourselves into sociopaths. I simply mean rejecting the idea that there are intrinsic values, categorical imperatives, objective duties, natural rights, or any of the other preemptory items moralists cherish. Before we are through, I will have explained what morality is, what is wrong with it, and how we can construct, without self-deception, superstition, or duplicity, a morality-free strategy for living as harmoniously and happily as external conditions allow.

Chapter One (June 2012)

Moral Arguments and Morality

I like parties. I don't think there's anything wrong with that at all.

And if people think that's glamorous, fine. But if people think that's something bad, I'd like some reasons for it.

Simon Le Bon of Duran Duran

1. Moral Discussions. What Simon said was simple and reasonable. A demand for reasons is the natural and predictable reaction of anyone on the receiving end of criticism. If we enjoy hamburgers and some moralizing vegetarian tells us that eating meat is “something bad,” the first thing we are likely to do is to ask for his or her reasons. No one is going to be moved to vegetarianism by the mere claim that there is something “bad” about eating meat. What, we will inevitably ask, is bad about it? In fact, anyone who moralizes about anything to a skeptical audience can expect to be asked to come up with some reasons.

Tom Regan, a contemporary moral philosopher, has described the convention we seem to share: “When people say that something is morally right or wrong, it is always appropriate to ask them to give reasons to justify their judgment, reasons for accepting their judgment as *correct*.” (*Matters of Life and Death*, 1986, p. 8) Well maybe not *always*—we don't interrupt sermons, and politeness sometimes dictates forbearance. Nevertheless, the convention Regan mentions does seem to govern our day-to-day conversations. Other moral philosophers go even further—perhaps too far.

James and Stuart Rachels write that when someone says that you should do something, you may ask why, and “if no good reason can be given, you may reject the advice as arbitrary and unfounded” (*The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 2007. p. 12).

The word ‘rational’ can be understood in different ways, but however it is finally explained, it is likely to turn out that a rational being is one whose beliefs and actions are based on reasons and reasoning. The idea that we have (or should have) reasons for our actions and beliefs influences our conversations and it opens the way for discussion, persuasion, debate, compromise, and sophistry. The belief that rational beings need reasons to support their *moral* judgments is what leads Simon Le Bon, the moral philosophers just cited, and the rest of us to ask our fellow rational beings for their reasons when they make moral demands on us or judge the morality of what we have done. As we shall see, the real problems with this policy arise not from the fact that it is so hard to find reasons to defend our actions and moral judgments, but from the fact that it is so easy to do so.

Because the demand for reasons is the customary first line of defense against moral criticism, both critics and those being criticized come to every discussion primed with principles, argument-fragments, slogans, and facts to support the criticism or, alternatively, to turn it aside. We are helped here by the curious fact that the reasons we produce don’t have to be knock-down reasons, powerful enough to convince anyone, or even anyone who understands them. Almost anything not obviously false or irrelevant will do for a start. If we associate with people who share our moral beliefs,

and pay attention to what they say, we will develop an arsenal of arguments and replies that will see us through most challenges and debates.

When, for example, the moralist says that what is bad about hunting is the pain caused to the animal, there are plenty of well-worn replies—some of which have been collected by Cleveland Amory in his book, *Man Kind?* There Amory quotes from “Trapline Ramblings,” by trapper-reverend Roy Johnson of Hammond, New York, who argued that there is no question of a trapped animal feeling pain, and even extended the point to cover his dog:

If a man beats his wife every day, she suffers because she has an immortal soul. But if he beats his hound-dog, it may yelp some but it won't suffer because it has no soul and no consciousness (Amory, 219).

This is not merely the opinion of some grizzled woodsman; it was apparently Descartes' opinion as well. The father of modern philosophy thought that since non-human animals lack souls, they are unthinking machines that feel no pain. It is hard to believe that anyone who has actually seen a dog could think this, but when it is a matter of protecting some cherished philosophical position or some favorite activity like hunting, trapping, or hound-beating we will find people saying such odd things that it is easy to doubt that they believe their own words.

Arguments about moral issues can expand in many ways. Some degenerate into theological disputes. Others come to an impasse over some difficult or abstract philosophical problem (Do we have free will? What is a person?), and others evolve (or

devolve) into disputes about the meanings of words (the meaning of 'life', or 'rights', or 'moral'). My example had to do with hunting, but I could have chosen any topic about which people differ morally—capital punishment, abortion, sex, drugs, terrorism, political or personal duplicity, the treatment of the environment, or any of the problems associated with attempts to distribute the benefits and burdens of society. Each of these subjects is afloat in a swamp of disputation teeming with slogans, hidden assumptions, idiosyncratic definitions, hypocrisy, rhetoric, and ignorance. Many of the slogans are insulting in their simplicity, and many of the arguments are rhetorical displays, but even if no one is ever “rationally required” to admit defeat or error, we may feel that by engaging in this “argument dance,” this ritualistic tossing of reasons in each others’ direction, we have satisfied the minimal demands made upon those who wish to hold a moral position. We have not been unreasonable because very bad reasons are still reasons.

When we move from the question of whether abortion is morally wrong to the question of when human life begins, we have replaced a difficult moral question with a certifiably unanswerable philosophical one. This does not bring the argument closer to a resolution. Usually our theory of human life, of personhood, takes the shape it must to bolster our more personal beliefs and feelings about abortion. When challenged, we give new meanings to words, or say that our moral principles need no defense, or we acknowledge only principles and facts that can be used to support our conclusion. When those who are arguing are unevenly matched in skill, experience, energy, information, or eloquence, it is usual for the apparent loser to feel that the apparent

winner has capitalized on an unfair advantage. The ritualistic, rhetorical, and emotional nature of our arguments about morality helps to explain the fact that after discussing an issue like abortion for hours, the only change in the minds of the antagonists may be in their estimation of the intelligence or the sincerity of the opposition.

Why is disagreement about morality so widespread, so intense, and so rarely resolved by discussion? Traditional moral philosophers often say that it is because these questions are *really* difficult, but a growing number of moral philosophers are coming around to the thought that moral disputes are not resolvable because they are conflicts about objective moral truths in a world which is devoid of objective moral truths. If these skeptical moral philosophers turn out to be right, then it is time to put aside the endless arguments and to call off the search for moral truth. There are other more productive ways to spend our time.

This is not a new idea. The Sophists in ancient Greece had already rejected Plato's grand scheme of education and had adopted a relativist attitude about politics, customs, and morality. Plato was often critical of these Sophists, who were ostentatiously less interested than he was in using Reason to discover the Truth about "How a man ought to live," which is how Plato's Big Question is often presented. Instead, the Sophists concerned themselves with the art of disputation. They have been relentlessly criticized for this by friends of rationalism, but they were teaching a useful skill in a society in which arguing was a sport and anyone might be called on to defend his behavior before a jury of disputatious fellow citizens.

Religion and rationalism dominated morality until the Seventeenth Century, and in many places they still do. But the relativism and subjectivism of the Sophists, and their doubts about the power of reason to discover objective moral truths, eventually resurfaced in Hobbes, and later in Hume, who challenged the moral rationalists of his day by making “Reason” subservient to “Sentiment.” This emphasis on the subjective and emotive character of morality surfaced in the 1930’s and 40s in the writings of some Logical Positivists, who insisted that moral judgments are not even meaningful statements, in the emotivism of A. J. Ayer, and in the more sophisticated non-cognitivism of C. L. Stevenson, who claimed that moral judgments are primarily expressions of our attitudes and attempts to urge others to share them. For Stevenson, the measure of the value of an argument was its power to persuade. (See A. J. Ayer, *Language Truth and Logic*, 1936, and C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language*, 1944.)

By the end of the 20th Century, dissatisfaction with the rationalist’s belief in moral objectivity, and with the emotivist’s reaction to that belief, emerged in the work of John Mackie, Ian Hinckfuss, Richard Joyce, and others who found reasons to believe that, in the words of Mackie, “there are no objective values.” By then, the attack on moral rationalism had been joined by experimental psychologists employing scientific methods (interviews, questionnaires, and brain scans) to understand the moralizing mind. According to these moral psychologists, the skill we have always needed, the one that evolution rewarded, is not the ability to find moral truth, it is the ability to defend oneself with words—the very skill promoted by the Sophists so long ago.

As we emerge into sentience, we find ourselves with feelings, urges, attractions, and aversions; these develop into preferences and desires; and these eventually turn up as *moral* feelings and judgments. It is at this point that reason springs into action to make a case for what we have already come to believe, or already decided to do. As moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt claimed in “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail,” the point of our moral reasoning is self-defense and image enhancement (*Psychological Review*, 2001, v. 118, #4, p.817). As he explains in *The Righteous Mind* (Pantheon, 2012), “moral reasons are the tail wagged by the intuitive [no longer “emotional”] dog. The intuitions (the dog) cause reason (the tail) to go into action, and the tail (reason) wags along thinking it is running the show.

Since there are no moral truths for reason to discern, the most we can hope for from our moral arguments is victory over a less skillful or knowledgeable opponent. We may tell others, or ourselves, that this is the path to moral truth, but it is really only a way to defend our actions and burnish our image, and it has been so since the dawn of language. What Haidt & Kesiber call “motivated reasoning” (reasoning with an ax to grind), “is ubiquitous in the moral domain” (2010, ‘Morality,’ In *Handbook of Social Psychology*, pp. 805-806).

Many practicing moralists are not yet this cynical, and are emotionally committed to the view that we can argue our way to moral knowledge. But if the critics of morality are on the right track, it is very likely that if two people who disagree about some moral question can stay cool, avoid gross errors, and keep talking, both can be declared rational and unrefuted. Moral philosophers have no argument or device powerful

enough to compel rational beings to accept their evaluations and principles. The most any moral philosopher can do is to show opponents that, given the facts and their own moral assumptions, consistency requires them to accept this or that moral belief.

However, even when presented with what appears to be an overwhelming argument, one for which there seems to be no response, people are, as Haidt and others say, dumbfounded and though they have nothing to say this does not often lead them to change their disputed belief or judgment.

We can expose the problem with traditional arguments about morality (or about anything else!) by considering the following abstract, but revealing, point about asking for and giving reasons. Suppose you argue that **A** is true, and offer **a** as your reason.

$$\mathbf{a} \rightarrow \mathbf{A}.$$

If I don't want to accept **A**, I can deny that **a** is true, deny that **a** implies **A**, or claim that you have not given an argument for **a**. If I ask you for your argument for **a** and you give it, then I can start all over again. If, instead, I deny that **a** is true, then you can ask me for my argument. If I give **b** as my reason for denying that **a** is true

$$\mathbf{b} \rightarrow \mathbf{not-a}.$$

then *you* can deny that **b** is true or that **b** implies **not-a**, or claim that I have not given an argument for **b**. This explosive set of options alone is enough to guarantee that *if we want to*, we can argue till the cows come home, and then some. Add to this the fact that either of us can question the meaning of the other's basic terms and we can see that unless some parameters are taken for granted, nobody can be forced (rationally) to accept any conclusion. Since those who feel strongly about some difficult moral issue

like abortion or the death penalty will almost certainly be unwilling to accept any parameter that undermines their sincerely held moral beliefs, the outlook for cool, rational debate about moral issues is not promising.

2. Thinking about Morality. Midway through the 20th Century a few moral philosophers, sensitive to the deeply unsatisfying nature of moral arguments, decided to spend their time clarifying moral notions rather than searching for moral truths. Some said that if we aren't clear about what 'good' and 'right' mean we will never discover what things are good or right. Others said we need to investigate the nature of moral arguments, so that when the time comes to support our own moral judgments (or to attack those of our opponents) we will be ready. By saying this, even the clarifiers seemed to believe that we might eventually find answers to some of the moral questions of the day, or even to some 20th Century version of Plato's Big Question.

A growing number of moral philosophers specialized in this "analytic" approach to morality, which came to be called "metaethics." Disinclined to moralize, but unwilling to treat morality with the disdain they felt religion deserved, they turned their attention to questions about moral language. But it soon became clear that metaethics is at least as controversial as any other area of philosophy. A study of the meaning of 'good' leads to a study of the meaning of 'meaning', and eventually to questions about the relation between language, thought, and reality. By the end of the sixties, moral philosophers and students of morality had become impatient with metaethics, and by the mid-seventies, this analytic or "theoretical" approach to the study of morality was being replaced by what has come to be called "practical" or "applied" ethics. Someone who

works in the area of applied ethics begins with moral questions, such as “Is torture ever morally justifiable?” or “Would it be permissible to throw someone off a bridge to save five lives?” or “Would it be wrong for George to tell Jerry the secret he had promised Elaine to keep?” Sometimes general moral principles are used to arrive at answers to these questions, and sometimes not. We shall consider this enterprise in later chapters.

Skeptical challenges to morality itself and questions about its ultimate foundations became less welcome when applied ethics was moved to a front burner. Moral philosophers often acknowledged the existence and the concerns of their skeptical critics, but then they would quickly and gracefully brush aside those challenges. In his 1983 textbook, *Ethics and its Applications*, Baruch Brody admitted that “the moral dimension of human life” presupposes that there is an objectively knowable and important difference between what is right and what is wrong, he identified challenges to this presupposition by the nihilist, the subjectivist, the skeptic, and the determinist, and then he declared his intention to ignore all of these challenges:

Theoretical ethics is concerned with critically evaluating the foregoing presuppositions of the moral dimension of human existence in light of these theories which challenge those presuppositions. This book, however, is not about theoretical ethics. Therefore, we will accept the presuppositions of the moral sphere of life and go on to deal with the ethical problems described in the next section.

(Brody, *Ethics and Its Applications*, 1983, p. 6)

Moralists who want to take a stand on some actual moral issue do find themselves in an uncomfortable position. The conventions at work in our society allow us to ask each other to support the moral judgments we make, and we can all begin to meet this demand, but only so far. Since we will never be able to prove our basic moral assumptions, our specific moral judgments will only be justifiable relative to more basic judgments we can not justify. If that isn't trouble enough, there remain all of those "theoretical" worries that Brody bypassed. The viability of applied ethics depends on a conspiracy to keep the lid on theoretical ethics by assuming that the challenges and objections of the skeptics and the nihilists are not lethal. But if the critics of morality are correct, this assumption is fatally mistaken and the moralists are skating on thin air.

3. The Burden of Proof. Sometimes moral philosophers see themselves as called to keep people from traveling down the path to skepticism, relativism, or nihilism. The obvious way to block that path is to produce the credentials of morality. If moralists believe that morality is objective and not subjective, that moral rules inescapably bind those capable of understanding them, that moral judgments, principles or ways of life can be rationally justified, let them come forth with explanations of what they mean, and with convincing reasons why we should believe what they say. For reasons that have already begun to emerge, this is not likely to happen.

What, then, is a moralist to do? One time-tested method is to try to get the skeptics, relativists, and nihilists to put forward arguments to refute those who believe that there are moral facts, or truths, or properties. If a critic of morality can be talked into coming up with an argument, then the moralist is in business. Any student of

philosophy knows how easy it is to find a flaw or uncover an unproved assumption in any argument aimed at proving anything controversial. Getting your opponent to admit that it is his or her job to provide the first argument is called “placing the burden of proof on your opponent.” Anyone who can do that starts with an advantage because it is easier to criticize someone else’s argument than to present one of your own. In our legal system, for example, the state has the burden of proving guilt—we are “innocent till proven guilty.” So the burden of proof is really a burden, but how do we decide who has that burden in non-legal discussion? In simple cases the burden falls to the person making a claim or a demand, but not all cases are simple.

Since moralists are the ones making demands and judging others, it would seem that they must accept that burden when asked to do so. A moralist who objects to something we have done can (and as we have seen, will) be met with a demand for “some reasons.” When the discussion is more abstract, as it is when the defender and the critic of moral objectivity clash, then it is less clear where the burden of proof lies. But even at the “theoretical” level it would be rhetorically risky for the *critic* of morality to open a debate by asserting that moral judgments are all mistaken, or that none of them can ever be justified. Anyone starting in that way would be stuck with the burden of coming up with “some reasons” to defend that sweeping negative generalization. What is worse, he or she could be asked to define more clearly the nature of the thing that allegedly can’t be done. It can’t seriously be claimed that it is the critic’s job to construct and clarify every possible form of morality, and then to show that each is wrong. Since moralists are the ones who believe in morality, and who believe that some moral

judgments are true and defensible, why is it not up to them to explain and defend the moral rules and values they wish to impose upon themselves and others?

As we return to this issue in later chapters, we will see how some moralists take on the burden of proof by pointing out how difficult it is for the critic of morality to deny what almost everyone considers to be obviously undeniable moral truths. This seems to be what Stout was up to when he claimed that “slavery is evil,” and that “knowingly and willingly torturing innocents is wrong, impermissible, unjust,” and then acknowledged that he could not, and suggested that he need not, support them. There are indeed moral judgments that are believed by almost everyone, but contrary to what Stout says, the combination of a deep belief in, and the utter indefensibility of, a moral judgment does not even suggest, let alone support, the idea that the judgment is true. As we will see in Chapter Five, Jeremy Bentham was undeterred when he found himself unable to prove his unquenchable belief that we have a moral obligation to bring about “the greatest good for the greatest number.”

Has the rectitude of this principle [the Principle of Utility] ever been formally contested? It should seem that it had, by those who have not known what they have been meaning. Is it susceptible of any direct proof? It should seem not, for that which is used to prove everything else, cannot itself be proved; a chain of proofs must have their commencement somewhere. To give such proof is as impossible as it is needless. (An Introduction to the Principles of Moral and Legislation.,)

4. ‘Moral’, ‘Amoral’, ‘Ethical’, and some Related Terms. In Chapter Two we will explore several reactions to the Sophist’s belief and the Skeptic’s suspicion that there is no more to morality than rhetoric. We will see that moral philosophers react to this possibility in different ways, but in order to be clear about what they are saying, we need to pay attention to their (often divergent) uses of the fundamental terms of the discussion. This will be a constant theme throughout the book, so now we will just focus on the words ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ and a few others from the same family of troublemakers.

We sometimes use ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ interchangeably, as when we speak of moral (or ethical) codes or principles, we make moral (or ethical) judgments, and we criticize people and actions for being immoral (or unethical); but here a difference begins to emerge. Immoral actions seem worse than unethical ones. A merchant who overcharges, or a used car salesman who turns back the odometer, is unethical, but it would be absurd to describe a terrorist, a rapist, or a sadistic torturer in that way. If you have been charged with unethical conduct I will think of your profession, but if you have been charged with immoral conduct I will expect to hear about a different sort of misbehavior.

Moral philosophers speak of applied ethics and of nursing, medical, and engineering ethics, but not of applied morality, or of nursing, medical, or engineering morality. This may be because ‘morality’ suggests non-conventionality or universality, while ‘ethics’ suggests relativity. This difference carries over to the distinction between a moralist, who believes in and promotes morality, and an ethicist, who studies it.

Consider some uses of the word 'moral' as an adjective. When we say that someone is a moral person, we are saying that this person tends to do what morality requires, which, of course, is "the right thing." People speak of *moral courage* (the courage to do the right thing), of a *moral sense* (the ability to sense what the right thing to do is), or of a *moral compass* (a mental device that points to the right action and shows us the way to act in a given situation).

In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Bernard Williams proposed a useful way to understand the distinction between ethics and morality. He identified the "ethical" as a vague area that includes, among other things, ideals, practices, and obligations that arise from agreements and from one's position. We have all inherited, developed, and refined our methods of relating to others. Some of us return favors, some have a policy of honesty, some believe in revenge. When we talk about our personal rules, habits, and attitudes, we are talking about our ethics. This assortment of conscious and unconscious tendencies is constantly changing in this or that detail, and to the extent that it is open to our awareness it can be explained, questioned, criticized, or modified. Those who feel the need to defend their personal values or ethical practices usually do so by appealing to something stronger and more authoritative than mere habits and policies, and something more "worthy" of respect than self-interest. Our inherited or evolved ethical codes, they say, need to be brought into line with morality itself.

The moralist believes that there are objective and binding moral reasons for acting in certain ways, that when we are morally required we are *really* required. If we merely rank things, if we do no more than to recommend, discourage, or require

behavior, we are not thinking as moralists. But when we support our requirements and recommendations with allegedly objective moral principles, or claim that we have measured some actions or individuals by standards that are more than human conventions, we have crossed the line and become moralists. Like Stout, moralists think that certain ways of acting are “wrong, impermissible, unjust.”

Some moralists keep their opinions to themselves, and some are moderate in their attempts to impose their values on others; but other moralists are officious, meddlesome, sanctimonious, and annoying. They make moral judgments about trivial matters, or about matters that do not concern them. Often critics of “moralism” concentrate on the obnoxious forms, not realizing that even the most agreeable expression of a belief in objective values suffers the same philosophical shortcomings as its more offensive brethren. When I speak of someone who “rejects moralism” or “rejects morality,” then, I will be speaking of someone who calls *all* moral beliefs into question, not just someone who opposes excesses and rudeness in their expression.

What, then, shall we call someone who rejects even the mildest and most widely accepted moral beliefs? It would be easy if we could just say that such a person is an **amoralist**, and that is what I did in the Introduction and promised to do in this chapter. But I also promised that I would eventually adopt more useful terminology. For now, however, I plan to stick with my provisional use of the word, and say that just as an atheist rejects the theist’s claims about the objective existence of a god, an amoralist rejects the moralist’s claims about the objective existence of moral rules, prohibitions, virtues, vices, values, rights, and duties.

Unfortunately, amoralists (in the sense just introduced) do not always refer to themselves as “amoralists,” and if we aren’t careful, fluctuating terminology will leave us not knowing who we are talking about. It should come as no surprise that moral philosophers all too often use the same label for different views, and different labels for the same view. Ian Hinckfuss, for example, was speaking of *ethics* when he referred to “the ways in which some individual person would like everybody, including herself or himself, to behave.” He distinguished this from *morality*, which he considered to be a myth. “There are no moral obligations to be known,” he said, “and, even if there were, we are not possessed of the intuitive apparatus needed to apprehend them” (*The Moral Society, its Structure and Effects*, p. 1). I would happily call Hinckfuss an amoralist, but his own term for his view was *moral nihilism*. He proposed using the expression ‘moral nihilist’ to mean “one who believes that all moral statements . . . are false” (p. 4). After distinguishing between “objective values” and “subjective values,” he added that “by ‘moral nihilism’ I shall therefore mean the belief that there are no objective moral values” (p. 8). Incidentally, “There are no objective values” are the opening words of John Mackie’s important defense of his version of amoralism, which he called “moral skepticism” and others call a “moral error theory.”

To complicate matters further (or, better, to illustrate how complicated they can get), we can note that Hinckfuss had a different use for the words ‘amoral’ and ‘amoralist’. For him, an amoral person “has no wish to satisfy any moral obligations.” This led him to distinguish between amoralists who believe in moral obligations but ignore them, and amoralists who do not believe there are any moral obligations.

Hinckfuss was not alone in his use of the word ‘amoralist’ to refer to someone who believes in but disregards moral obligations. In “Externalist Moral Realism,” David Brink distinguished between the moral skeptic, who is “skeptical about the existence of moral facts,” and the amoralist, who “recognizes the existence of moral considerations and remains unmoved” (*Spindel Conference; 1985: Moral Realism. Southern Journal of Philosophy*, XXIV, Supplement, p. 31). When Michael Smith characterized Brink’s amoralist, he called the view “another traditional kind of skepticism,” and like Brink, referred to it as “amoralism.” Brink and Smith characterized this “skeptic” as accepting the existence of moral facts and failing to see any reason “why we should care about these facts” (*The Moral Problem*, Blackwell, 1994, p. 66), and Russ Shafer-Landau has recently claimed that “amoralists” just don’t care about morality. “They judge things right or wrong and yet are completely unmoved” (*The Fundamentals of Ethics*, Oxford, 2010, pp. 317-18).

I will not be using the word ‘amoralism’ to refer to a view that begins by *accepting* the “existence of moral facts,” and I shall stick with my provisional use of the word ‘amoralist’ to stand for someone who denies the basic assumptions of the moralist, not someone who believes in moral facts but ignores them. I would call the latter person a *moralist*, but one who is just not motivated to do what he or she believes to be right. My amoralist, who *really* rejects morality, has also been called an error theorist (someone who believes moral judgments are all false), a moral anti-realist (someone who rejects the moral realist’s belief that there are objective moral facts and values), a moral nihilist (by Hinckfuss), and a moral skeptic (by Mackie, which, as we shall see, is misleading).

My amoralist rejects morality and with it all moral beliefs, but there are other, similarly-expressed, beliefs that no amoralist need reject. Words like 'good', 'bad', 'better' and 'worse' and concepts of obligation and duty are available in many technical and conventional contexts. Amoralists can say that some people play the piano better than others, or that some people, because of their roles or goals, ought to do this or that. They can admit that some habits are good for us, or that some policies are bad for society. But for amoralists (as I am now using the term) all goodness and obligation is of this relative and dependent kind. Nothing is "good in itself." Amoralists believe that the idea that some people have more "intrinsic worth" than others (the philosophical basis for racism, sexism, and aristocracy) is ridiculous. We do not value the things we do because we discern their value, but because they meet our needs and satisfy our desires, because we have been taught to value them, and because we have been caused to feel positively about them by circumstances of which we are often unaware.

I use the term 'ethics' to include the rules and policies we live by, and the values we have come to hold. The moralist believes these can be judged at the higher court of morality, but the amoralist thinks that there is no such court. People who do not follow the moral requirements of the society to which they belong can be called *immoral* (at least by the moralists in their society), but an amoralist is someone who rejects the moralists' claims about those requirements, no matter how he or she behaves. The moral standards we accept (if any) determine who (if anyone) we will call immoral, but everyone should call an amoralist an amoralist. The amoralist "rejects" morality by coming straight out and saying that its claims are false, but, as we are about to see,

there is more than one way to question the beliefs of the moralists, and several options for someone who does.

Chapter Two (June 2012)

Doubts about Morality

Tao is hidden by partial understanding. The meaning of words is hidden by flowery rhetoric. This is what causes the dissention between the Confucians and the Mohists. What one says is wrong, the other says is right; and what one says is right, the other says is wrong. If the one is right while the other is wrong, and the other is right while the one is wrong, then the best thing to do is to look beyond right and wrong.

Chuang Tzu, *Inner Chapters*

The suspiciously unresolvable nature of moral disputes, their ritualistic character, and the astonishing array of incompatible moral stances to be found, should make us think twice about morality. If opposing moral claims and theories can be defended by those who know how to argue, and if evenly matched opponents need never concede defeat, then it is hard to see a distinction between reason and rhetoric. Maybe the ancient Sophists were right and the real point of arguing about morality has nothing to do with finding the truth, and everything to do with getting our way and defending our decisions. This is a disturbing possibility, and people react to it in different ways. Some moralists harden their positions and sharpen their skills in order to fortify and defend their positions. They may look for ways to deny the data, or to minimize its impact. Perhaps, they suggest, the widespread moral disagreement is more apparent than real,

or, if real, it may be only superficial. Others, unable to ignore the vast diversity in moral belief, embrace relativism, or, despairing of ever finding the truth, become skeptics. Moralists often treat relativism and skepticism as threats to morality but, as we are about to see, neither relativism nor skepticism need be hostile to morality. However, there are more extreme challenges to morality that may, when understood, incline us to listen more carefully to Chuang Tzu's advice to "look beyond right and wrong."

1. The Retreat to Relativism. People really do disagree about what is right and wrong, about values, duties, virtues, and rights. We all begin by believing what we are taught, and in different places and times we are taught different things. Circumstances change, and what at one time or place is considered a virtue or a duty, at another time or place is seen as a vice or a moral offence. Everyone knows this. Anthropologists travel to remote lands, or study their neighbors, to learn about their differing values and moralities. Someone who studies, describes, and compares different packages of moral rules and values can be called a **descriptive moral relativist**. Even those of us who have not traveled to distant lands would almost certainly agree with the descriptive relativist's belief that moral disagreement is a pervasive and interesting fact of life. Descriptive relativists may have their own opinions about the morality or immorality of the rules and values they describe, but when they are wearing their descriptive relativist hats they keep these opinions to themselves.

Naïve Moral Relativism. The comparative study of conflicting values and moral principles can be fascinating and even a bit unnerving. Humans are capable of believing almost anything, and so are researchers in the field. One reaction to the overwhelming diversity of opinions about morality is a good-natured tolerance based on

the idea that while our own moral views are correct, so are the views of those who embrace different demands and values. A descriptive moral relativist says that societies and individuals often disagree about what is right and wrong, but the person we can call a **naïve moral relativist** generously allows that both parties to a moral disagreement could be right. When George says that it is always wrong to lie and Martha says that lying is sometimes the morally right thing to do, the friendly naïve moral relativist will reassure them that they are both correct.

Naïve moral relativism may appeal to moralists who have grown tired of defending their own versions of morality, and who hope to buy tolerance with tolerance. It is also likely to appeal to those whose values are at odds with the prevailing morality. Moralists who are too polite to tell others what they really think may cover some moral disapproval with insincere expressions of tolerant relativism. But the naïve moral relativist appears to wink at *the* fundamental rule of speech and thought: “Avoid contradictions!” It is true that we sometimes appear to violate this rule in order to communicate something that is not contradictory, as when we answer the question “Is it raining?” by saying, “Well, it is and it isn’t” (by which the speaker might mean that it comes and goes, or that it is misting). But if we are speaking straightforwardly, a contradiction presents our audience with a version of a world that can neither be nor be understood. So when the naïve moral relativist says that both George and Martha’s judgments about lying are true, any competent attending philosopher will want to ask how this is possible. That philosopher would be right to ask, but naïve moral relativists are called “naïve” because they never even get to this question. It is, however, a

question that anyone who wants to develop a non-naïve form of moral relativism has to take seriously.

One attempted explanation simply fiddles with the word ‘true’. If you think it is morally wrong to eat meat and I do not, I might try to avoid an argument by conceding that your claim is “true for you.” This remark may or may not satisfy you, but the only kind of thing I could sensibly mean by saying that something is “true for you” is that you *believe* that it is true, or that from your point of view it *appears* true, but beliefs and appearances are often literally mistaken, and truths are not true “for a person.” Saying that your belief is true for you but not for me is a misleading, and possibly a condescending, way of rejecting what you believe. It is like saying: “Well you may believe that. I don’t, but I’m not going to call you on it.”

Subjective Moral Relativism. Someone we can call the **subjective moral relativist** has another way to explain how two people can both be correct when one of them says that something is a moral obligation and the other denies this. The work is done with the aid of a subjective “definition” of the relevant moral notion. A subjective definition is a definition that enables us to identify a moral or value judgment with a statement about the beliefs, principles, interests, desires, or attitudes of one or several “subjects,” real or imagined. For example, the following definitions are subjective definitions:

(a) X is good. = I like X.

(b) X is bad. = I don’t like X.

If we adopt these definitions (which is unlikely, if not impossible), then when I say that X is good I will be saying that I like it, and when you say that X is bad you will be saying

that you don't like it. Both claims can be true. Other cleverly chosen definitions can allow us to take both sides of the controversy over the death penalty. If we embrace the following pair of definitions (where 'D' stands for "applying the death penalty") we can say, without self-contradiction, that D is both a moral obligation and morally wrong:

(c) D is a moral obligation. = D is demanded by the rules of some society.

(d) D is morally wrong. = D is prohibited by the rules of some society.

The pair of definitions dissolves the contradiction.

Of course we need to think twice (at least!) about trying to escape from naïve moral relativism by resorting to subjective definitions if those definitions are either inaccurate reports or unappetizing recommendations—as our four examples definitely are. Even if we could somehow allow (c) and (d) to guide our thoughts and our speech, which is not likely, we would still not be able to say that two conflicting moral judgments can be true at the same time. If the claim that there is a moral obligation to apply the death penalty really meant that it is demanded somewhere, and the claim that it is morally wrong to do so really meant that it is prohibited somewhere, then when we say that applying the death penalty is a moral obligation, or that it is morally wrong, we would not be making *moral* judgments at all. The definitions turn what appear to be conflicting moral judgments into straightforward, and quite compatible (though misleadingly stated) factual claims about what different societies demand and prohibit. Thanks to the definitions, both the moralism and the disagreement disappear.

From the time of Socrates, philosophers have had a love/hate relationship with definitions. Socrates loved asking for definitions, but he was rarely satisfied with the answers he got from his victims. There are others who think that definitions, whether

they come from the tops of our heads or the depths of our dictionaries, are worse than useless. In reality, definitions are useful when a word is rare or technical, or when we are speaking with someone new to the language. But when our disagreements are about how to live or act, then starting with definitions of words like 'right', 'wrong,' 'good', 'bad', 'intentional', 'justifiable', 'real', 'free', or any of the other notorious sources of philosophical confusion, is almost guaranteed to lead to distracting arguments about words, meaning, definitions, and language itself. There are innumerable uses of the word 'good', but any learnable definition will leave most of them out. Our mastery of the conventions that govern the uses of our value-words can only be revealed by our competent performance under fire.

Perhaps these simple subjective definitions are never taken seriously but only used by philosophers to simplify matters beyond all recognition, and perhaps it is charitable even to look at them as starting points for a serious discussion. Some philosophers, however, have done a bit better. Gilbert Harman, for example, has developed a form of subjective moral relativism that he applies to what he calls "inner judgments." Inner judgments are judgments "such as the judgment that *someone ought not to have acted in a certain way* or the judgment that *it was right or wrong of him to have done so*." He says that these judgments are "relational," in the sense that:

if S says that A (morally) ought to do D, S implies that A has reasons to do D and S endorses those reasons ("Moral Relativism Defended," *Philosophical Review*, 84 (1975), 193).

Harman does not frame this as a definition, but as an account of what is implied and done by someone who says something. It is an account that has, as Harman

admits, some unusual consequences. It does not allow us to make certain criticisms of cannibals or Nazis, who do not share our moral principles. To say that cannibals *ought* to refrain from eating people and Nazi's from killing Jews would be to imply that they have reasons to refrain from doing these things, and we may know that they do not. Harman even says that it is "a misuse of language" to say that it is morally wrong for hardened criminals to steal and kill. "Since they do not share our conventions, they have no reasons to refrain from stealing from us or killing us" (*The Nature of Morality*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 113). There are, of course, other things we might say about Nazis, cannibals, and criminals—they are cruel and blinded by hatred, hunger, greed, or ignorance—but Harman is not addressing these claims. He is only talking about "inner judgments," judgments using 'ought', 'ought not,' 'right', and 'wrong', judgments that are essential to most, if not all, forms of moralism.

Harman admits that anyone who goes along with his relativistic interpretation of moral obligation will have to "think again" about morality. It has traditionally been assumed that "basic moral demands are demands on everyone," but, he claims, if moral relativism is true, this assumption is false. In that case,

the ordinary notion of morality is based on a false presupposition
and we find ourselves in the position of those who thought morality
was the law of God and then began to suspect there was no God.
Relativism implies that morality as we ordinarily understand it is a
delusion, a vain and chimerical notion ("Relativistic Ethics: Morality as
Politics," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 1973, p. 113).

This certainly threatens morality if morality essentially involves the idea that basic moral demands are demands on everyone. But Harman thinks we can abandon this idea and still have “a reasonable substitute for” and “a good approximation to” morality. We can just start using our moral language with an explicit awareness of its relativist implications, acknowledging that there are “various moralities, each involving different basic moral demands . . . which certain people accept or have reasons to accept . . .” (Harman, 1973, 113). We *could* do this, but it is not obvious that we would end up with “a reasonable substitute for” and “a good approximation to” morality.

According to Harman’s moral relativism, “different people are subject to different basic moral demands depending on the social customs, practices, conventions, values, and principles that they accept” (Harman, Is there a Single True Morality?” in Copp and Zimmerman, *Morality, Reason and Truth*, 1985, p. 35). Moral principles are “binding only on those who share them or whose principles give them reasons to accept them” (Harman, 1977, p. 90). This limited and local bondage may be the only kind of bondage a moralist could really defend. It does offer some of what morality is supposed to provide. The bondage can be felt as real, arguments can be constructed, and the relativistic qualifications are often ignored or forgotten in the heat of controversy.

But the question is whether this Balkanization of obligation is enough for the serious moralist. The answer is: “Probably not.” What good is morality if we are not allowed to bring its considerable (even if imaginary) authority down on those who have no reason not to kill and steal from us? These are the very people moralists want to influence by coming up with reasons for them to refrain from killing and stealing. Moralists who want to blame and punish thieves and killers will be more comfortable

doing so if they can believe that their targets are violating some objective moral requirements, not just our individual or collective desire to remain free from loss and harm.

Subjective moral relativism can be seen as either supporting or threatening morality. It threatens morality by offering to replace it with a substitute that retains moral language and a limited or local form of bondage, thus providing a relative kind of objectivity. It may be most accurate to say that subjective versions of moral relativism undermine morality while striving to preserve its appearance and to exploit its power. To the extent that these subjectivists are aware of what they are doing, we can think of them as amoralists who are unwilling or unable to break their habit of moralizing.

Situational Moral Relativism. Unlike the subjective moral relativist, who may have defined morality out of existence without admitting it, the **situational moral relativist** is not even an apparent threat to morality. Situational moral relativism contradicts only those few moralists (often referred to as “moral absolutists”) who believe that some things are right or wrong *no matter what the circumstances*. Of course there will always be a few absolutists who claim that lying, or killing, or eating the dead, is *always* morally wrong, but everyone else knows that nothing is that simple. Situational moral relativists may say that it is wrong to lie, but they will add that it is not *always* wrong because sometimes there are good moral reasons for lying. What if our lie could save a life, or thousands of lives, or the planet? What the *situational* moral relativist is saying, then, is that there is a truth about what we morally ought to do, and that this truth depends on the circumstances of the actual situation we are in. This is

not a challenge to morality because it is, in fact, the most natural and popular form of morality.

2. Moral Skepticism. Another reaction to the wide variety of incompatible moral beliefs, and to the inconclusiveness of discussions about them, is **moral skepticism**—the belief that there is no way to tell which of the many moral theories are true and which false. Sextus Empiricus (c. 160 – 210 AD), the best known of the ancient skeptics, divided philosophers into three groups: The **Dogmatists** claimed to have discovered the truth; the **Academicians** (so called because they taught in The Academy, a school begun by Plato) claimed that the truth can't be discovered; and the **Pyrrhonists** (named after Pyrrho of Elis) tried not to commit themselves even to that negative claim. Sextus explained how a skeptic arrives at Pyrrhonism:

For the Sceptic, having set out to philosophize with the object of passing judgment on the sense impressions and ascertaining which of them are true and which false so as to attain quietude thereby, found himself involved in contradictions of equal weight, and being unable to decide between them suspended judgment; and as he was then in suspense there followed, as it happened, the state of quietude in matters of opinion (I, 26).

The word translated as 'quietude' is *ataraxia*, which can also be translated as 'peace of mind' or 'tranquility'. To maintain this perfect balance between one side and the other, Sextus amassed a collection of skeptical arguments and observations that could be used to cast doubt on any dogmatic claim that a person might be inclined to make about the way things are. These "tropes" emphasize how the condition of our

sense organs and the peculiarities of our points of view and circumstances undermine our attempts to find out how things “really are.” By resorting to his tropes, Sextus was able to “suspend judgment.” He claimed that this suspension is what resulted in his quietude, and he applied this discovery to the idea of objective value. He said that

the person who believes that something by nature is good or bad is constantly upset; when he does not possess the things that seem to be good, he thinks he is being tormented by the things that are by nature bad, and he chases after the things he supposes to be good; then, when he gets these, he falls into still more torments because of irrational and immoderate exultation, and, fearing any change, he does absolutely everything in order not to lose the things that seem to him good. But the person who takes no position as to what is by nature good or bad neither avoids nor pursues intensely. As a result he achieves *ataraxia*.

(*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I:12, tr. Mates, p. 93).

Note that Sextus only argued that believing that things are “by nature good or bad” is regularly followed by suffering. He did not argue, and as a skeptic he could not claim, that things are in fact free of any positive or negative value.

John Mackie called his belief that there are no objective values “moral skepticism,” but this is misleading. He was not *skeptical* about objective values—he was sure there are none. A skeptic would not be so certain. “Academic” skeptics claim that we cannot know whether there are objective values; but a Pyrronhist like Sextus just leaves the question of whether things are “by nature good or bad” unanswered

(and, if possible, unasked). Since he did not claim to know that moral judgments cannot be true, Sextus had to allow that the moralist, who claims that some things really are good or bad by nature, might be right. A skeptic, says the Pyrrhonist, is a seeker.

It appears that moral skepticism, like situational moral relativism, is compatible with the existence of objective values and obligations. Skeptical and relativist beliefs flourish in an environment characterized by inconclusive moral disputation, but neither the relativist nor the skeptic denies morality—one says that it is relative and the other claims not to know, or says nothing.

3. Moral Realism and Moral Anti-Realism. We have just seen that moral skeptics find themselves unable to determine “what things are by nature good and bad,” but we can add that they are not even able to determine whether anything at all is ever good or bad by nature. That is, they are unable to take a stand on the dispute between **moral realism**, and **moral anti-realism**. The moral realist thinks that there are moral facts and that moral properties are “real” and independent of what anyone thinks or feels. The moral anti-realist believes that there are no moral facts and that the moral properties we talk about are human constructions, products of evolution and imagination. While the reality of human constructions cannot be denied, it is a reality that we create, not one we discover. The moral realist, on the other hand, believes that moral facts and properties, like gravity and the weather, exist and do their work independently of anything we think or want.

Nietzsche urged moral philosophers to “place themselves beyond good and evil.” He said that this demand “follows from an insight first formulated by me: *that there are no moral facts whatever*” (Nietzsche [3], 65). We can thank Nietzsche for giving us an

explicit formulation of this important metaphysical claim, but not for helping us to understand what the existence or non-existence of moral facts amounts to. What is the difference between a world with moral facts and a world without them? What are moral facts supposed to be, and where?

For more than a hundred years philosophers have offered an answer to these questions made famous by the British philosopher G. E. Moore, who certainly believed in moral facts. In *Principia Ethica*, published in 1903, he said that the word ‘good’, like the word ‘yellow’, is the name of a simple and indefinable property. It is a simple fact that some things are yellow, and Moore held it to be an equally simple fact that some things are good. The difference is that yellow (yellowness) is a “natural” property while good (goodness) is a “non-natural” one. We get a moral fact when something has a moral property (goodness or badness) and we get a natural fact when something has a natural property (yellowness or roundness). We detect natural properties with our senses, but we “intuit” the non-natural ones. Hence the name given to theories that incorporate this unexplained way of acquiring moral knowledge—**moral intuitionism**.

Moral philosophers who could not bring themselves to agree with either Nietzsche or Moore settled for a compromise that has come to be called **moral naturalism**. Moral naturalists reject Nietzsche’s claim that there are no moral facts, but they part company with Moore and the intuitionists by claiming that the moral facts they believe in *are* natural facts. This is what is going on in Harman’s version of subjective moral relativism mentioned above. He claimed that there are no “absolute facts of right or wrong,” but there are “relative facts about what is right or wrong with respect to one or another set of conventions.” Moral facts exist but only as “relational facts about

reasons” (Harman, 1977, p. 132). The moral fact that Albert ought to do something turns out to be no different from the natural fact that Albert has certain reasons to do that thing. The natural fact and the moral fact are one and the same. What should bother moral realists about this identification is that it completely undermines their *moral* realism by “reducing” a moral fact to something that is not a moral fact.

Moral anti-realists, who have managed to avoid being enticed by moral naturalism, have two ways to criticize moral realism. First, they can say that the notion of a moral fact doesn’t even make sense because it is impossible to know or to say what a moral fact could be. This is the kind of attack initiated by the emotivists, who insisted that moral (as well as religious and metaphysical) language is “nonsense.” A. J. Ayer was famous, even notorious, for his claim that our “exhortations to moral virtue are not propositions at all, but ejaculations or commands which are designed to provoke the reader to action of a certain sort.” (Ayer, 103) Even today, many of the critics of moral realism hold a view descended from Ayer’s emotivism and the more refined non-cognitivism of C. L. Stevenson. (See his 1944, *Ethics and Language*.)

The second way moral anti-realists can criticize moral realism is to say that the notion of a moral fact makes enough sense for us to be able to say that there are no such things. Our “exhortations to moral virtue,” they say, either are, or presuppose, false statements about what is objectively good, bad, right, or wrong. This second form of moral anti-realism is often characterized as an “error theory.” John Mackie is its best known defender.

4. Non-Cognitivism. According to **non-cognitivism** (also called emotivism, expressivism, and non-descriptivism) it is a mistake to see moral judgments as

statements about the way the world is. Some non-cognitivists say that moral judgments are expressions of emotions or attitudes, and others identify them with some other kind of non-descriptive speech-act, like commending, or commanding, or inviting, or forbidding. They all insist that moral judgments, not being statements, are not the right kind of thing to be called true or false.

Non-cognitivism is a theory about the meaning or use of moral language, so it will never take us all the way to moral anti-realism, which is a metaphysical thesis about what there is and what there isn't. Nevertheless, there is every reason to think that a non-cognitivist will be a moral anti-realist. It would be just too strange to believe in moral facts that we could never state or formulate in meaningful words. How would we even know what it is that we were believing in?

Non-cognitivism was based on the realization that a moral conflict is a clash of wills, and non-cognitivists characterized moral disagreement as "disagreement in attitude" rather than "disagreement in belief." They held that moral disputes will not be resolved by finding moral facts, but by finding out how to resolve our clashing desires and inconsistent goals.

The non-cognitivists were (and still are) right to emphasize the close connection between morality and our desires and emotions. Saying that something is good is one way to express a positive feeling about it, and we often do this to influence the ways others feel and act. But it is also *saying* that the item in question is good, and that is what the non-cognitivist is always in danger of neglecting. Even if nothing in the world is either good or bad, that doesn't mean that someone who says that something is good or bad isn't saying something. Moral disagreements may involve practical

disagreements about how to act and what to choose, but they are built on, and nourished by, disagreements about what is good and bad and right and wrong.

5. The Moral Error Theory. I began by referring to the belief that there are no objective moral facts or values as “amoralism,” but near the end of Chapter One I noted that the term ‘amoralist’ has been adopted by quite a few moral philosophers to refer to someone who believes in moral facts and values, but is unmoved by that belief. Such a person may agree that it is morally wrong to torture innocents, but will then add: “And what is that to me?” I promised to adopt a less contested label, so henceforth I shall drop the term ‘amoralism’ and refer to the belief that there are no moral facts, properties, or values as moral anti-realism. I have, in fact, begun doing this above in Section Three. Non-cognitivism is one type of moral anti-realism and, if we set aside for now the moral naturalists, the other is the moral error theory. A moral error theorist says that the moral realists’ claim, or assumption, or presupposition that there are “objectively prescriptive” moral properties or facts is an error.

‘Objective prescriptivity’ is a phrase introduced by Mackie to refer to the special characteristic of moral judgments he planned to discuss. An **objective** claim is a claim about the way the world is, one that is made true or false by “objective facts.” An objective fact is a fact just waiting to be discovered. If it is objectively true that killing is wrong, then even if the whole world loved killing, it would still be a genuine, existing moral fact that killing is wrong.

To say that a claim is **prescriptive** is to say that it is a claim *on* us, not a claim *about* us, or about anything. A prescription prescribes—it tells us what to do, not what is true. It can be put in the form of an imperative (“Get rid of capital punishment!”) and

offered as advice, a suggestion, or an order. By contrast, “Capital punishment is morally wrong” is not framed as a prescription, but as a straightforward statement of fact, a statement as true as the statement that capital punishment has been illegal in Michigan since 1846. If I say: “Get rid of capital punishment,” this is *my* prescription, *my* personal plea, *my* demand for an end to capital punishment. But if I say “Capital punishment is morally wrong,” I state what I represent myself to believe about capital punishment, namely that there is some independent demand for its end, a prescription (or perhaps a proscription) issued not just by me, or by any person or set of persons, but by Reason, or Nature, or God, or some other objective source.

We tend to see morality as having authority over us. We think of its prescriptions, the things it tells us to do and not to do, as **objective** requirements, not as guidelines that we invent or imagine or agree on, and not as demands that we can ignore without going wrong in some way. Mackie is not alone in identifying this cluster of puzzling notions as central to morality. Kant said that reason “commands what ought to happen” (*Grounding*, 1981, p. 20), and the British moral philosopher Philippa Foot, commenting on Kant’s idea, identified inescapability as the mark of the commands of morality. “People talk,” she said, “about the ‘binding force’ of morality, but it is not clear what this means if not that we feel ourselves unable to escape” (“Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” in *Virtues and Vices*, 1978, p. 162). Another moral philosopher, Bernard Williams, also saw inescapability as a fundamental feature of moral obligation. He said that this inescapability means that there is no opting out of morality, and he identified this idea with Kant’s claim that morality is “categorical” (*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 177-178).

It is clear why moralists claim that the judgments of morality are inescapable, but it is not so clear what that claim means. Foot explored several ways of expressing the “fugitive thought” that morality binds us, that there are things we *must* do, or *have to* do. But she found nothing standing behind the words, and concluded that there may not be such a form of bondage, and that our belief and our feeling that there is results from education and training. “Perhaps,” she reluctantly suggested, “it makes no sense to say that we ‘have to’ submit to the moral law, or that morality is ‘inescapable’ in some special way” (Foot, 1978, p. 163).

Even though the nature of this ‘moral bondage’ remains unclear, and even though we have no clue as to the source of an “objective demand” (*pace* the theist, who will be considered in the next chapter), the thought that we are inescapably bound is an indispensable part of the common understanding of the institution of morality. Mackie, argued that the failures of the naturalist and the non-cognitivist analyses of moral language arise from the fact that both neglect to explain the “apparent authority” of ethics—naturalists by excluding “the categorically imperative aspect” (the prescriptivity), and non-cognitivists by excluding “the claim to objective validity or truth” (Ethics, p. 33). If moral judgments were **objective without being prescriptive**, they would make no demands and require nothing from us. They would merely inform us that our action has a property of “wrongness,” or that it merits the term ‘wrong’. In that case, learning that something is wrong would be like learning what time it is—its relevance would depend on our commitments. If, on the other hand, moral judgments were **prescriptive without being objective**, they would be “mere” commands or demands. Even if they

are strongly stated, without that claim to objectivity, they would amount to no more (and no less) than demands from others, most of whom are complete strangers.

Moral error theorists believe that ordinary users of moral language assume that their moral judgments are “objective,” and they also believe that this assumption is embedded in our language and our practice. Those who use moral language may not comprehend everything that the assumption involves, or how peculiar it is, but this does not prevent them from making it, nor, as Mackie insisted, from being wrong every time they do. But he conceded that since his error theory does go against widely held beliefs it needs “very solid support.” He aimed to supply this support with two arguments—**the argument from relativity** and **the argument from queerness**.

The Argument from Relativity. Mackie introduced this argument by drawing our attention to “the well-known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, and also the differences in moral beliefs between different groups and classes within a complex community.” But he immediately added that “it is not the mere presence of disagreements that tells against the objectivity of morality” (p. 36). Disagreement is found in science and at the ordinary factual level, but this doesn’t lead us to doubt the objectivity of scientific or everyday discourse. We can find as much moral disagreement and agreement as we want, both within and among cultures, and Mackie’s argument from relativity says: “The actual variations in the moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values” (*Ethics*, p. 37). We agree about morality and have strong moral “intuitions” because we have learned our lessons; and we disagree

because we haven't all learned the same lessons, because our interests often conflict, and because we tend to see and believe what we have been taught to see and believe.

Mackie's argument is an instance of what is called an argument to the best explanation. We start with a collection of facts about those "actual variations in the moral codes," and with facts about the "phenomena of morality," that is, the language, experiences, beliefs, and behavior of practicing moralists, and then we look for a version of reality that makes sense of all that without appealing to anything that we do not already understand, or at least to anything that we have no hope of ever understanding. This style of reasoning is familiar to the scientist, the detective, the historian, and, Mackie adds in his brief discussion of it in his *The Miracle of Theism*, "there is every reason to believe that this kind of thinking has been and is intelligible to reasonable people at all periods of history and in all cultures" (p. 5).

The moral realist's explanation of the phenomena of morality depends on the claim that there are objective, non-natural moral facts or properties that we apprehend (visually, rationally, intuitively, or miraculously). Error theorists think that they can improve on this thin and mysterious account of the source of our moral beliefs. They build their explanations on what we have learned about our nature and our history, and on what we know about the influence that self-interest, socialization, propaganda, and human credulity can have on what we believe.

One thing Mackie wanted to explain was how, if there are no objective values, "people not only might have come to suppose that there are but also might persist firmly in that belief" (*Ethics*, p. 49). If the version of the world that the moral anti-realist develops makes sense of both the supposition and the persistence without appealing to

questionable entities, then that version wins the race to the best explanation. The winning argument will never be the final word, it will just be the best we can do at the time, and very often it will be good enough for our needs and purposes.

Mackie's critics have not been kind to this argument. They often start off on the wrong foot by treating it as an inference from actual (or irreconcilable) *disagreement* to the absence of moral objectivity. Russ Shafer-Landau devotes a chapter of his book, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* (London, Oxford , 2004) to the destruction of an argument he calls "the argument from disagreement," and characterizes as saying that wide and deep moral disagreement among informed and intelligent parties provides "excellent evidence for skepticism." He might be right, but Mackie's denial of moral objectivity is neither a deduction nor an induction from any amount of disagreement, as he made clear when he said that "it is not the mere occurrence of disagreements that tells against the objectivity of values."

Ironically there will probably always be disagreement about how much moral disagreement there really is. Some moralists even argue that there is already more agreement than disagreement, and insist that there might be even more if we could calm our emotions and eliminate bias and factual errors. Perhaps so, but what makes this speculation irrelevant is the fact that moral anti-realism could be true even if everyone agreed about what is right and wrong; and moral realism could be true even if no one realized it. It is no wonder Mackie was unwilling to rest his case on an argument from *disagreement*.

Thomas Nagel, in *The View from Nowhere*, considers and responds to several arguments against "the objective reality of values," one of which seems to be a version

of the argument from relativity. But when he expresses surprise at the popularity of this argument, it is the argument from *disagreement* that he attacks. He remarks that “the fact that morality is socially inculcated and that there is radical disagreement about it across cultures, over time, and even within cultures at a time is a poor reason to conclude that values have no objective reality” (147 – 148). It may be, but Mackie’s argument from *relativity* is not an attempt to argue from moral disagreement to the claim that there are no objective values.

Actually it is not so much moral disagreement or agreement itself that requires explaining. If two people disagree about the morality of abortion, what needs to be explained are two separate facts—the fact that the one has the set of opinions he has, and the fact that the other has the set of opinions she has. Anyone who can explain how they separately came to their different opinions will have explained their disagreement. Suppose one of them is a Catholic father of five and the other an atheist feminist. We can predict which one supports abortion rights, and we can make some good guesses about the natural history of their respective stances. Is there any point at all in thinking that one of them has noticed some sound argument or some self-evident moral truth that the other has missed?

A different criticism of Mackie’s argument from relativity turns up in Michael Smith’s *The Moral Problem* (pp. 200 – 201). Smith’s strategy is to counter both this argument and the argument from queerness by giving an explanation of what it is to say that an act is right that opens the question of rightness to empirical investigation, offers a way for moral judgments to be true, and eliminates the possibility of moral relativism. According to Smith:

to say that an act of a certain sort in certain circumstances is right is . . . to say *inter alia* [among other things] that there is a normative reason to perform it. And this, in turn, is simply to say that fully rational creatures would desire that such an act be performed in such circumstances. . . (p. 200).

If this is what we are saying when we say that an act is right, then Smith thinks that we can reject Mackie's error theory because the moral judgment that some action is right will turn out to be true just in case "fully rational creatures would desire that such an act be performed in such circumstances." But this is *not* what we are saying when we say that an act is right. If there were such a thing as the rightness of an act, and if there were any "fully rational creatures," then maybe those creatures could tell when an act was right, and maybe they would desire that those acts be performed—we have no way to know. But to say *now* that some act is right is not to say that creatures of *any* type do, or would, want it to be performed. In any case, the interesting question is "Why would they want it to be performed?" Of course, they can't answer this question by saying that they want it to be performed because it is the right thing to do.

Definitions of 'right' are sometimes presented as accounts of what people actually mean, but it is also possible to offer them up for adoption. If we adopt Smith's definition, we will eliminate the possibility that conflicting moral judgments could both be correct (if fully informed and rational creatures would all come up with the same answer). But we are not likely to adopt that definition because most users of moral language are moral realists who would almost certainly resist any definition that turned moral judgments into verdicts about what some imaginary being might desire to happen.

Mackie's argument from relativity is a philosophically respectable argument to the best explanation. But, as we have just seen, some of his critics have confounded it with what we have been calling the argument from *disagreement*, a pitiful argument that Mackie never used and explicitly rejected. After taking a few swipes at the argument from *disagreement*, these critics pretend that they have undermined the argument from *relativity*, and that it only remains to dispose of Mackie's other argument, the argument from queerness. With both arguments out of commission, the way will be clear for them to subscribe to as much absolute value and as many binding obligations as they please.

Even when it is understood properly, the argument from relativity is often seen as a minor obstacle to be cleared before the real discussion can begin. Critics point out that Mackie did not really show that the error theorist's explanation of the moral phenomena is the best one available; and then they observe that Mackie did not rest his case after discussing the argument from relativity but supplied another argument, as if to supplement the first one. But I would like to suggest that the case for the error theory is stronger if the argument from queerness is seen not on its own, but as a vital part of a single argument to the best explanation that combines both arguments and then blends in the notion of projection. Let's see how the two arguments fit together and then, in Chapter Four, we can add projection to the mix.

The Argument from Queerness. Mackie offers what he identifies as metaphysical and epistemological versions of this argument. According to the metaphysical version, objective values don't exist, because if they did they would have to be "entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe." Nothing so different, so unrelated to everything we know

and understand, so “queer,” should be said to exist, so there are no objective values and morality is an invention.

The epistemological version of the argument dwells on the fact that we can’t even imagine how we might detect these objective moral values, obligations, or rights. A “natural property” like yellow(ness) fits comfortably in a network of beliefs about the relation of color to light, prisms, paint, and photography. Objective values and moral obligations do not fit into any such system. We have no duty receptors or instruments to detect the presence of value. Mackie says that in order to “discover” moral properties we would need “some special faculty of moral perception or intuition utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else.” (Mackie [1], 38)

By calling moral properties “non-natural,” and positing a faculty of moral intuition, G. E. Moore bought into both the metaphysics and the epistemology being attacked by this argument. We will return to Moore and the plausibility of intuitionism later, but so far it appears that the proper conclusion of the argument from queerness is that moral properties, because of their incoherent attempt to combine objectivity and prescriptivity, their inaccessibility to investigation, and their discomfort with the laws of nature, are too “queer” to be taken seriously or to be used to explain anything. By exposing the oddity of moral properties we strengthen the argument from relativity by undermining the explanations of moral phenomena available to the moral realist.

Michael Smith, who we found responding to the argument from relativity by defining ‘right’ in terms of what fully rational creatures would desire to be done, makes the same move in his reply to the argument from queerness. After giving his definition of “rightness,” he asks if Mackie can “really lay a charge of strangeness against

rightness, at least as that feature of acts has been analysed here” (p. 210). Well, Mackie’s argument from queerness is indeed nullified if rightness is defined as something that is not queer. But, as I have already urged, when we say that something is right we are not saying something about what some perfectly informed and perfectly rational creature would want to happen. In fact if that is what we were saying, or if Smith should manage to talk us into trying to mean that, then rightness would inherit a new queerness from the definitely queer notion of a perfectly rational being. Not only are there no such creatures, we are so far from that status that we can have no idea what such a being would want, if it wanted anything.

Mackie’s critics sometimes reply to his argument from queerness by saying that reality contains many strange things—quarks, black holes, and ourselves—so why not moral properties? This criticism might be stronger if moral properties and facts were just rare and unusual properties and facts, but to think this is to ignore their special and distinctive feature. Unlike plain facts (*the fact that the cat is on the mat*), moral facts (*the fact that you ought to keep the cat off the mat*) prescribe.

But this is where the puzzle lies. We know what it is for a person to prescribe something, but can there be pure prescriptions, prescriptions from the blue? Mackie does not do a good job explaining what he means, and as result, he left a door open that invited critics to jump on a minor glitch. Mackie (unwisely) illustrated what he took to be one aspect of moral properties by relating them to Plato’s Forms. Seeing the form of *Rightness*, he said, “will not merely tell men what to do, but will ensure that they do it, overruling any contrary inclinations” (p. 24). This “industrial strength” objective prescriptivity seems powerful enough to strip philosopher kings of their very freedom to

do anything wrong. “Platonic Rightness” would be a truly queer property, but so would *any* property or feature of a thing that could, *by itself*, exert a causal influence on any person’s decision. C. L. Stevenson spoke of the “magnetic” power of moral *language* to move or *incline* us toward an option being praised; but this comes through conditioning. What Mackie is objecting to is the idea that there are “moral properties” or “moral facts” that operate causally in the world, and that they will determine our action no matter what we might want.

Searching for some way to capture the idea that moral properties and facts inhabit our world and exert a genuine influence on us, Ronald Dworkin describes a universe that

houses among its numerous particles of energy and matter, some special particles—morons—whose energy and momentum establish fields that at once constitute the morality or immorality, or virtue or vice, of particular human acts and institutions and also interact in some way with human nervous systems so as to make people aware of the morality or immorality of the virtue or vice (“Objectivity and Truth: You’d Better Believe It,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25 (1996), pp. 87 – 139.

Morons, he adds, “surrounding a genuinely good end or a genuinely wrong act might have the power to suck people into an attraction or repel them into an inhibition.” Of course Dworkin is not tempted by this picture theory, but he notes that it would be one

way to explain how moral properties motivate, and it would give us a source for our metaphors of being “attracted by the Good” or “repelled by evil.”

While the much-debated power of moral facts to motivate is indeed peculiar, or perhaps incomprehensible, there is an even stranger feature of moral facts than this. If something is a moral duty, a moral obligation, then, in some sense of ‘must’ compatible with our not doing it, we *must* do it. In general terms, a duty is something we owe. In non-moral cases the nature of our obligation is usually easy to explain. Teachers have a contractual duty to meet their classes, letter-carriers a postal duty to deliver the mail, and police officers a sworn duty to protect and defend. But a *moral* duty, should there be such a thing, does not arise from a contract or agreement. A moral duty would still be a duty if the institutions were to disappear or to change in radical ways. If protecting the weak is a moral duty, people say, then we are just required to do it. It is this notion that Philippa Foot was commenting on when she referred to the “fugitive thought” that morality binds us, and suggested that the idea may make no sense. It may indeed make no sense to say that we cannot escape from the binding commands of morality, but people continue to say it, and to believe it. This feeling and the accompanying belief in what Mackie characterized as objective “ought-to-be-ness” make moral realists sitting ducks for Mackie’s arguments.

While the criticisms we have so far seen of Mackie’s two arguments have not been very impressive, one thing that keeps moralists from giving up hope is the fact that if a poll were to be taken, a sizable majority would show up as moralists. Moral thinking is such a part of our daily life that anyone who refuses to make and assent to standard moral platitudes is likely to be considered peculiar, if not dangerous. How much support

can the moral realist claim from the undeniable fact that a majority of us believe (or at least believe that we believe) in the objectivity of morality? I will take a brief look at a version of this concern in the next section and then return to it in Chapter Six.

6. An Argument from Agreement? By denying that any moral judgments are true, error theorists go against widely held beliefs, and are open to an obvious objection. Gilbert Harman argued that the position of the moral anti-realist (or, in his terminology, the “extreme nihilist”) is hard to accept because

it implies that there are no moral constraints—that everything is permitted. As Dostoevsky observes, it implies that there is nothing wrong with murdering your father. It also implies that slavery is not unjust and that Hitler’s extermination camps were not immoral. These are not easy conclusions to accept (Harman [2], 11).

He describes the “extreme nihilist” as “believing that nothing is ever right or wrong, just or unjust, good or bad,” that there are no “moral constraints,” and that “everything is permitted.” Moral anti-realists will, of course, be quite willing to say that there are no moral constraints, or that nothing is ever morally right or wrong, but since our world is replete with conventional rules and obligations, and since we have been honing our ethical policies forever, it is easy to see that much is forbidden and required—just not by rules of an objective morality.

Moral anti-realism is a set of beliefs about the claims and presuppositions of moralists, and has no necessary relation to the way moral anti-realists feel about genocide, parricide, or slavery, or to what they do about them. A moral philosopher who

says “Hitler’s extermination camps were not immoral” is probably emphasizing the claim that no moral judgment, not even one about extermination camps, has the sort of objective status moralists want moral judgments to have. Sensible anti-realists will refrain from saying that Hitler’s extermination camps were “not immoral.” They understand that ‘not immoral’ does not mean the same as ‘moral’, that the ‘not’ and the ‘im’ do not cancel each other, but to avoid misunderstanding (and silly criticisms) they will probably not express their moral anti-realism in this peculiar way. If we do not want to be mistaken for a moralist, we should avoid talking like one.

When we use moral language, or the language of any institution, we represent ourselves as believing what the use of that language implies. But we do not become moralists merely by using moral language. Genuine moralists (as opposed to moral anti-realists faking moralism) actually accept, or unthinkingly operate as if they accept, the traditional implications of their use of moral language. Most of these implications have already been mentioned. Moralists see moral principles and duties as binding and values as objective. They are the philosophers who, like Samuel Clarke, believe that some things “are in their own nature Good and Reasonable and Fit to be done” and that other things “are in their own nature absolutely Evil” (Clarke, 9). They are the contemporary moral realists who believe that “there are objective moral facts and . . . true moral propositions” (Brink, 111), or that “moral reflection and moral judgment are a matter of discovery, rather than of invention, projection, expression, or even self-discovery, because the good and the right are ‘in the world’” (Zimmerman, 80).

Many ordinary people and moral philosophers assert and believe that there are objective moral facts, and many of them take their own moral principles seriously

enough to require that others conform to them. But when we step back and reflect about this, we find serious questions to which there seem to be no satisfying answers. Why should we modify our behavior to fit what some group takes to be objective moral demands? What is the nature of this morality, and what is the source of its authority? How can we be inescapably bound to act in specific ways? What does it even mean to say that we are? Who or what allows or forbids us to do what is said to be permissible or impermissible? Many, and perhaps even most, people resort to religion to answer these questions. They say that the authority of morality comes from God, and that without religion, there can be no real, no sincere, morality. In Chapter Three, we will look into this by considering the attempt to answer the impudent question of why we have a moral obligation to obey the commands of a god. Then, in Chapter Four, we will explore some ways secular moral philosophers try to explain and defend the claims of the moral objectivist about the good and the right.

Chapter Three (June 2012)

Divine Commands and Attitudes: Religious Morality

The attempts to found a morality apart from religion are like the attempts of children who, wishing to transplant a flower that pleases them, pluck it from the roots that seem to them unpleasing and superfluous, and stick it rootless into the ground. Without religion there can be no real, sincere morality, just as without roots there can be no real flower.

Leo Tolstoy, “Religion and Morality”

1. Religion and Morality. Moral error theorists and religious moralists agree that “without religion” there can be no real morality, but the error theorist adds that the addition of religion changes nothing. Religious moralists believe that the moral obligations and rights we have arise from the decrees and commands of God, and that an alleged moral principle or moral right without this divine backing is a mere human invention with no more authority over anyone than a request from a stranger or a demand from a committee of philosophers.

The most direct way to criticize religious morality is to show that there is no god; but the history of religious discussion does not encourage this approach. There are plenty of arguments for and against the existence of gods, variously conceived, but no

one from either side has ever managed to emerge with an undisputed victory. Like most philosophers, John Mackie was unconvinced by any of the proofs for God's existence. In *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, where he presented his defense of the moral error theory, he briefly considered religious morality and remarked that "there is no cogent positive argument for the existence of God," and then added that "the advance of scientific knowledge renders a theistic view . . . superfluous as an explanatory hypothesis and utterly implausible" (*Ethics*, p. 232). He later defended these claims in his lucid and convincing book, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (1982).

In the years since Mackie's books were published, philosophers seem to have been losing interest in these arguments, but at the same time public interest in religion has been on the rise worldwide. The arguments are no better now than they were 25 (or 2500) years ago, and in any case those who embrace religion do not usually arrive through the doors of an argument, but via tradition and personal experience. The rise in more conservative, activist, and politicized forms of religion has resulted in more pressure on atheist beliefs and on liberal behavior, and there has been an inevitable push-back by atheist writers. (See Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*; Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*; Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*; and Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*). These authors glance at the traditional arguments for (and against) God's existence, but they treat them as relics of a less enlightened time. They have more interesting fish to fry. Dennett discusses the "natural

history” of religion and the taboo on forthright critical discussions of it, Dawkins emphasizes the evolutionary basis of religious beliefs, Hitchens reminds us how crazy and harmful religions can be, and Harris locates the real problem with the fact that we have elevated faith, which is belief in the absence of evidence, to the “highest place in the hierarchy of human virtues” (p. 65). These “New Atheists” provide a powerful assortment of challenges to any fair-minded theist. But there is no need for us to go into any of this here because I plan to argue that even if it should turn out that there is some all-powerful and all-knowing creator who issues commands, we may (and if we think it through we will) remain unconvinced that we are morally obliged to obey him, her, or it.

Discussions of religious morality often begin by taking a page from Plato’s *Euthyphro*, in which Socrates questions Euthyphro, a young man on his way to court to prosecute his own father for the death of a slave. Because the prevailing morality ranked family loyalties over justice for slaves, Socrates used the event to investigate Euthyphro’s claim to be doing the right thing. Euthyphro said that he was acting properly because he was doing what his religion requires. Over the centuries this debate has been boiled down, for our easy consumption, to what philosophers have come to call *the Euthyphro question*—“Is something right because the gods command it, or do the gods command it because it is right?” If we choose the second answer we will have abandoned religious morality, and can be asked for a secular explanation of the nature of rightness. If we choose the first alternative, saying that divine commands create moral obligations, we can then be deluged with a series of really hard questions

to which there have never been any good answers. We can be asked if absolutely anything at all (genocide, torture, revenge, hatred, you name it) would be right if only it were commanded by a god, or your god, or God. We might bite the bullet and say that those things would be right, but that is a hard sell to all but the most fanatical of believers. The better answer to “the Euthyphro question,” the one that would be given by the moral error theorist, is “Neither the one nor the other.” The basic problem moral error theorists have with the *Euthyphro* question is that it presupposes the existence of both gods and values, and asks about the relation between two amorphous fictions.

Incidentally, error theorists are in a position to avoid two other popular arguments that involve questions of divinity, good, and evil. One is the “Argument from Evil,” according to which there can be no omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent being (as God is assumed to be) because there is so much evil in the world. The other comes from Aquinas, who claimed that since some things are good and others better, there must be something absolutely good to act as a standard, and that is God. Anyone who believes that the world contains neither good nor evil, will not be interested in arguing for God’s existence from the one, or against it from the other.

If we assume that there are gods who issue commands and enforce those commands with rewards and punishments, then prudence may motivate us to obey them. But why is obedience not only good policy, but also our moral obligation? It may seem odd or irreverent to ask why we have a moral obligation to do as God commands, but as we saw in Chapter One, when someone tells us that we ought to do or refrain from doing something, our natural and predictable response is to ask for reasons.

When we are told that it is morally wrong to work on the Sabbath, we ask why. We may be told that the Third Commandment forbids it. “And why,” we ask, “are we morally obliged to obey that Commandment, or any other?” Answers have been given but, as we shall see in Section 4, each of these answers suffers from obvious defects.

2. Enforcement and Revelation. The story of the events and forces that eventually resulted in a near universal belief in deities is a story of ignorance, superstition, greed, lust for power, good intentions, altered states of consciousness, hopes, fears, genes, dreams, delusions, and lies. Early humans understood next to nothing about the way nature works. Birth, death, the seasons, fire, storms, animals, and eclipses were shrouded in mystery and interpreted by myth. Goddesses and gods create worlds, weep rain, breathe life, eat sacrifices, and speak to mortals. They cause disasters, send prodigies, and make it possible to give simple, comprehensive, and utterly fictional answers to countless questions that troubled the developing minds of our curious ancestors.

Thanks to their fertile imaginations and to mind-altering substances (soma, sacred mushrooms, Greek wine, Mesopotamian beer) and practices (yoga, meditation, and fasting), our ancestors enjoyed a variety of altered states of consciousness about the causes of which they were completely in the dark. When even the ordinary is a mystery, the extraordinary—dreams, visions, hallucinations, powers—is either explained supernaturally or not explained at all.

Religious beliefs were reinforced by rulers and priests, who promoted the deities from whom their authority was supposed to flow. Hammurabi named Marduk as the

source of the laws he promulgated, and in Exodus 32:15-16, Moses was said to have brought down tablets inscribed on both sides in the “handwriting” of God himself. In Egypt the pharaoh was believed to *be* a god. Chinese emperors claimed the Mandate of Heaven, and in India, *brahmin* priests cited the sacred *Vedas* to support their privileges. Clearly, a religious backing was valuable to have, easy to claim, difficult to refute, and available to anybody. Without it the word of a prophet, king, priest, or reformer carried little more weight than that of the next person.

The god who gave the laws to Moses made it clear that he would handsomely reward those who obey him, and rain horror on the disobedient. (See Leviticus 26:3-12, and 14-17.) But because the distribution of good and ill fortune so often appears unrelated to what we do, this idea is easy to question and hard to defend. If one is to believe it, something must be done to explain the bad fortune of the good and the good fortune of the bad. One solution was to make the punishment reach beyond the grave to the agent in some future life here on earth or elsewhere, and another was to apply the punishment to the innocent descendants of the guilty party.

The undesirable consequences that have been imagined to threaten evil-doers were almost without limit. A violation could bring undesirable consequences to the agent, his family, or his progeny for generations. The harm may come through the agency of other humans, gods, ghosts or spirits, and it may come in this or another life, on this earth or in some suitable hell. If a person does some forbidden thing and something bad then happens to him, we can take this as evidence that the system is working. If an innocent person suffers, the explanation will be that he had a secret

crime, or that in another life he broke the rules, or that some ancestor of his did. If we give up all of these beliefs, we will find that we have also given up the comforting thought that justice is always served “in the fullness of time.”

If the gods do exist and do decree laws and mete out penalties for infractions, then it is reasonable to expect them to inform us, their subjects, of those laws and penalties. Richard Swinburne claims that it is “quite likely” that an all powerful and all good creator God would “intervene in human history to reveal things to us.” (Swinburne, *Revelation*, 70) Revelations come in many forms. Some arrive in dreams and visions from a deity or angel. God spoke to Moses, and through the prophets; Jesus addressed his disciples and those who would listen; Marduk presented laws to Hammurabi; the angel Gabriel spoke to Mohammed; and the angel Moroni to Joseph Smith.

But problems emerge when the gods speak in riddles, or abandon language altogether. Some say that divine direction comes through subtle signs and portents, and that it would deprive us of something valuable if God were to reveal himself in completely unambiguous terms. It is hard to see what value obscurity has, but the main problem with this style of revelation is that anyone can take just about any phenomenon at all—a breath of wind on the cheek, a sudden chill, a bolt of lightning, or the appearance of a toad—as a revelation. The recipient of the revelation, or perhaps the official interpreter, is then relatively free to interpret the meaning of the event as he or she sees fit.

3. What to Believe? We begin by believing what we are taught, and by striving to see what we are told is there. We assimilate the beliefs of those around us—from beliefs about what we can eat to beliefs about how the world came into being. We believe in the gods, ghosts, fairies, angels, portents, and stories that everyone else accepts. Eventually we realize that not everything we have been told is accurate, and that some of it is absurd. As we mature, we continue to improve our version of what is going on by adding new details and replacing false and inaccurate beliefs with true and accurate ones. But beliefs are not isolated atoms in a memory bank, subject to inspection and removal one by one. They interact and hang together in such complex ways that to add, delete, or change one is to introduce a spontaneous cascade of revisions into our ever-evolving understanding of the world.

In ordinary situations it is easy enough to find out if one of our beliefs is correct, but this changes when we turn our attention to religious beliefs. Of all our beliefs, the religious ones may be the most difficult to check and the most in need of verification, and yet they are almost invariably given a free pass. Like the Trinity, this is something of a mystery. Given the progress we have made in understanding our world and ourselves, how can people believe so many things that fly in the face of reason and common sense? This is not a rhetorical question and it is being answered in surprising detail by moral psychologists who study what they call confirmation bias, the tendency to seek out and take seriously only evidence that supports what you want to do or believe. (See Haidt's, *The Righteous Mind*, pp. 79-81.)

But heredity doesn't get all the credit. Another answer to the question, thanks to Daniel Dennett in *Breaking the Spell*, is that over the centuries the shepherds of religious ideas managed to silence scientific and common-sense criticism of even the most peculiar religious claims. The sad history of persecution reveals that religious authorities have discouraged dissent and criticism with as much force as their society would tolerate. Once infidels (unbelievers) were routinely tortured and burned alive, but now, at least in countries that have attained some freedom from religion, they are merely mocked and considered boorish and unfit for public office. In some Islamic countries, however, apostasy is still punished by death.

That particular punishment is quite unreasonable because it is pretty clear that belief is not a matter of the will. We do many things voluntarily, but believing is not one of them. Even the threat of death or a promise of eternal life cannot make me believe in a god if I don't believe in a god. Most people, however, do believe in a god—or at least say that they do. Those who identify themselves as believers in a particular sect of some religion will claim to believe the doctrines of their sect, but few will be able to explain those doctrines with any clarity, and some won't even be able to list them. In June 2006, Georgia congressman Lynn Westmorland, who was sponsoring a bill to display the Ten Commandments in the Senate and the House, was a guest on "The Colbert Report." At the end of the interview Stephen Colbert challenged the congressman to list the commandments and, after some stammering, he was able to come up with only three. (The video is still out there—you can just google "Ten

Commandments Congressman,” or go <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/70730/june-14-2006/better-know-a-district---georgia-s-8th---lynn-westmoreland>

As a child, I learned “The Apostle’s Creed” and repeated it every Sunday. Among other things, I avowed that I believed in “Jesus Christ . . . who . . . was conceived by the Holy Ghost.” (In 2000 the Episcopal Church replaced the words “Holy Ghost” with the words “Holy Spirit” a better rendering of Spiritus Sactus, and less spooky. I remember wondering about this peculiar claim, but like almost everyone else I was uncurious and just said what I was supposed to say. Since I would have been unable (and am still unable) to make sense of that Ghostly conception, can I say that I was speaking truly when I said that I *believed* it? It is more likely that what I believed was that the words in question expressed a truth that I did not yet understand. I was, in a usage embraced by Dennett, professing.

Many who do not understand the doctrines of their religion are satisfied to be professing, which is just as well, because most religious dogmas can neither be understood nor explained by those who profess them, nor alas by the priests and pastors who tell us that these “mysteries” are so deep and difficult it takes a specialist, a mystic, or even someone chosen by God, to understand them. By buying into this ruse we have outsourced the hard work of critical thinking to our priests and philosophers, and we are paying the predictable price—we are losing the ability to think about these things for ourselves, and this puts us at the intellectual mercy of those whose orientation and interests are often very different from our own.

We are born with the ability to put together a relatively coherent version of events. We quickly learn to identify and re-identify objects and people, to come up with plausible explanations for what we see and hear, and to replace false beliefs with true ones. This natural and effortless acuity is, in fact, one of our crowning achievements, and a source of great hope for our species. But somehow we have been talked into bypassing our natural wit when the issues involve the monumentally implausible ideas of religion. Then we just relax and take the existence and reported exploits of our favorite supernatural being as axiomatic. If we reflect at all, it may be when we try to figure out how to cope with the conflict between the truths we have discovered in our lives and those false but not-to-be-questioned beliefs on which our religions are built. This exercise can do irreparable damage to our ability to make sense of things, depending on how many of our true beliefs, and how much of our logic, we have to sacrifice to feed and shelter the dogmas.

As Dennett pointed out, a popular way to insulate ourselves from the conflict between our good sense and what we have been taught by our religion is to declare discussions of religious topics out of bounds. Many people consider it rude to bring up questions about a person's religion, or to raise the topic before, during, or after dinner. Religious doctrines are so difficult to explain and defend, and so easy to question and attack, that a discussion between a believer and an even mildly talented skeptic may seem like an intellectual mugging. So it is natural for theists not to want to be subjected to constant intellectual scorn for not being able to answer bantering questions from the atheist's ample supply. However, if questioning and criticizing religious beliefs can be

put out of bounds, or confined to coffee houses, bars, and philosophy classes, then many bizarre and dangerous superstitions will remain unchallenged. By getting us to think of religious questioning as impolite, the shepherds of religious ideas have found a way to protect their flocks from predation by doubters and critics.

When the area is religion, why are so many people so unwilling or unable to question what is questionable? Why are they so quick to believe and so slow to doubt? An important part of the explanation is offered by Dennett. It is because they “believe in the belief in God.”

People who believe that God exists are sure that God exists, and they are glad, because they hold God to be the most wonderful of all things. People who moreover believe in belief in God are sure that belief in God exists (who could doubt that?) and think that this is a good state of affairs, something to be strongly encouraged and fostered whenever possible. . . . People who believe in belief in God try to get others to believe in God and, whenever they find their own belief in God flagging, do whatever they can to restore it. (221)

Everyone knows that much harm has been brought about by religion, and everyone knows that religion has helped countless people through hard times and brought people together in life-enhancing ways. It is also fairly well understood that a tendency to flirt with the supernatural is a part of our nature, so religious belief is one

way of filling a natural human need to hook up with “something larger than ourselves.”

But the question I want to deal with in this section is neither whether God exists, nor whether belief in God is necessary (is isn't) or good for us (it depends). I want to ask how we can help ourselves hone our ability to make sense of what we experience so that we can arrive at a relatively accurate version of what is happening. It is obviously not by holding on for dear life to our childhood beliefs.

If we really want to figure out what is happening, then we must open ourselves to multiple sources of data and to alternative hypotheses. We should rely on first hand experience when we can, and when we can't, we should be wary of the reports of others. We also need to learn when to trust our instincts and our first impressions. If we hear a report of some supernatural or even unlikely event, unless we are already in the thrall of some superstition, the first thing that will pop into our minds is a set of possible natural explanations. Miraculous cures can be explained by the placebo effect, and images of the Virgin Mary on bridges and toast can be traced to rust, uneven browning, and projection. Our species has got this far because when something odd or unexpected occurs, our first and natural impulse has been to explain it in terms of our own experience. This sometimes leads us astray, but what else can we do?

What we come to believe is not a result of what we decide to believe, or even of what we deduce to be true. We develop the core of our evolving story of the world long before we acquire the skill to weigh evidence. Even when we try to eliminate bias and motivated reasoning, and to let the evidence “speak for itself,” we ourselves determine what to treat as evidence and how to weigh it. We *arrive* at belief, and few of us could

trace the path that led us there. We might even say that it is the belief that arrives. What we can do is clear away some of the rubble (greed, hatred, and fear, for example) that blocks our path to true and undistorted beliefs—or their path to us.

Accepting a belief forces an unconscious correlation of what we have learned with what we already believe—a subtle reinterpretation of the world to make room for new information, and a subtle interpretation of the information to make it fit the picture. As we move about in the world, we pick up information which our brain automatically processes and merges with what we already know. When we discover hard data—letters, tapes, information about secret bank accounts, photos, fossils, and fingerprints—we alter our theories and our beliefs, if we are healthy, to incorporate what we have learned. This interpretation of experience, this understanding of what is going on, is too deep and detailed to have been arrived at by conscious rational deliberation. Fortunately, nature has not assigned this important task to such a fragile instrument. We usually take in new information, and make it fit with the old, as naturally as breathing, and as automatically as we digest our food. Because so much of this activity takes place “offstage” we are occasionally surprised by the beliefs we develop and the changes we go through. One day it may simply occur to us that we no longer believe in the resurrection, the creation account in Genesis, the existence of Moroni, the truth of astrology, or the fidelity of a mate. Another time, like a Zen monk experiencing a satori, or like Saul/Paul falling from his ass, we may be jolted by some insight or conversion experience we had been unconsciously nursing for years.

So what are we supposed to do when we encounter some data or claim that goes against what we believe? It would be wise to begin by reminding ourselves that a claim is not automatically disqualified by contradicting something we believe. We are constantly being forced to revise our versions of reality, so we can expect to lose some of our favorite beliefs over time. This means that if we want to see things clearly, and to construct the most accurate version of reality we can, we will have to keep our minds open. If we allow ourselves to be exposed to new information, if we take a full and friendly look at what counts for and what counts against our beliefs, then the modifications in our belief-systems that result will help us find our way. But they will neither be worked out by reason nor decided by free choice—they will just happen. We will return to the question of how we determine both what is true and what to do in Chapter Eight.

4. Divine Commands and Moral Obligation. Many religious believers allow that the arguments for and against the existence of God are inconclusive, and yet almost everyone believes (or at least believes that they believe) in God. Some have never questioned what they have been taught, and others have had dramatic experiences resulting in beliefs too firm for any argument to dislodge. What I have to say here about religious morality does not depend on proving or even assuming that no god exists. Instead, I will argue that even if we suppose that there is an all knowing and powerful creator, and that this being issues commands to humans and enforces those commands with punishments and rewards, there is still no good answer to the question

of why the values and directives of such a being would generate moral values and moral obligations that “apply to” us.

Religious moralists, who give the first of the two answers to the *Euthyphro* question, say that acts such as eating lobster, stealing, and adultery are morally wrong because God has commanded us not to do them. This account of the source of moral obligation is referred to as the **divine command theory of morality**. A divine *command* theory is an attempt to answer a question about obligation or duty; but a related theory can turn up as an account not of obligation but of value. Someone may say that what makes kindness, mercy, and generosity valuable, or good, is the fact that they are liked, admired, cherished, or desired by God. These things would be good even if no one had received any divine commands or in any other way managed to discover what God prefers. It is the Holy Attitude itself that makes them good.

Nobody thinks we are morally obliged to obey every command we hear or read of in some Holy Book, so the question that naturally arises is this: **“What features of God explain how and why his commands create moral obligations?”** I will sometimes refer to this question as “The Question.” I will start by focusing on divine commands as a source of obligation, but later I will have more to say about value.

God's Power. If there is an all-powerful and all-knowing being who issues commands, punishes the disobedient, and rewards those who submit, then we all have good prudential reasons to obey it. This sort of a god bears a suspicious resemblance to those autocrats who have ruled society with fear and violence from the beginning of recorded history. Both human and divine monarchs are usually quick to anger,

sensitive to disrespect, callous in the treatment of their subjects, and suckers for lavish praise. They have immense power, but we would probably all agree that might, even infinite might, doesn't make right. The power to punish those who cross him and to reward those who follow his orders does not make a god a moral authority any more than immense power made Adolf Hitler one. After Abraham demonstrated his complete obedience to God by being willing to kill his son Isaac, God said:

Your descendents shall possess the cities of their
enemies. All nations on earth shall pray to be blessed
as your descendents are blessed, and this because
you have obeyed me (Genesis 22:18).

Why are we not bothered by this tale? We would all be horrified (and moralists would feel *moral* outrage) if someone sacrificed a child to escape some difficulty, or to win the favor of some powerful being. I suggest that, whatever the moralists among us might say, few if any of them really believe that something is right because it is commanded by some being with the power to give cities to those who obey, and to destroy those who do not.

God's Ownership and Creation of Everything. When we reflect on the story in Genesis, we may feel that God had a right to order Adam not to eat the fruit because it was God's tree and God's garden. He used his power to make the tree spring up from the ground. But he also used that power to form Adam from the dust, and Eve from Adam's rib (or whatever). Does this mean that Adam, Eve, and all their descendents, belong to God in the same sense in which the tree and its fruit belongs to God? Is this

why the divine command theorist thinks we are morally obliged to obey God's every command? John Locke thought so. He claimed that it is wrong to harm one another in any way since we are all "the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker; all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by his order, and about his business." We are God's property, "made to last during his, not one another's pleasure" (Locke [2], 9).

Property is a human concept, and a social one. It may have its roots in a territorial instinct, but as we now understand the concept, it is tied up with labor, occupancy, use, deeds, wills, exchange, and transfers. When we talk about God's tree we are relying on our human understanding of the human institution of ownership, and on the natural belief that if we have produced something, we own it. But the idea that a single being "owns" everything does not fit with the concept of property as we understand it. God's ownership of everything may be too different from my ownership of something to allow us to use the latter to make sense of the former.

But even if it made sense to talk about a transcendent being owning the world and its denizens, it still does not follow that such a being has absolute authority over the persons who occupy its real-estate. We consider our children to be *our* children, and while we usually take ourselves to be responsible for their well-being, we do not feel that we own them as we own our furniture or our pets. As they grow older they remain ours, but any claim we make to ownership, and with it jurisdiction, becomes ludicrous.

The Mesopotamians looked upon themselves and their cities as the property of their gods, just as they looked upon their slaves as their own property. They were both

masters and slaves, owners of other humans, and owned by their gods. The first duty of a slave is obedience, and as a slave-owner sees it, it is morally permissible to demand obedience from slaves, and to do what is necessary to secure it. Job, who was said to be a “righteous man,” had many slaves, and God, who considered Job his “servant,” treated the old man like a laboratory hamster, and his wives and slaves worse than that. This slave mentality is no longer acceptable in most parts of the civilized world, but even when the institution of slavery was flourishing, it was, like the ownership of land, organized around certain procedures and rules by which some people became the property of others. There may have been a purchase or proceeding, and often there were documents. By what procedure and according to what rules, then, did we all become the property of God? The usual answer is that God’s ownership is not based on conventional contracts or laws, but on the fact of creation. He created the world out of nothing, Adam out of mud, and the natural laws that led from Adam and Eve to us. That is why we are his possessions, his property. That is why we are morally obliged to obey him.

But suppose that billions of years ago scientists from a distant galaxy performed experiments that resulted in the formation of our galaxy, our sun, the planets, and finally, life as we know it. Suppose that their life-spans are as great as their power, and that they have returned and insisted that since they created us, we are obliged to obey them and to serve as phaser-fodder in their imperialistic adventures. We might be forced to obey these aliens, but few of us will agree that it is our moral duty to obey their commands simply because they created us. Why, then, do we think that we owe

obedience to some god, just because he, she, or it, set going the process that resulted in our short and often miserable existence? If there is anything about God that makes us morally obligated to obey his commands, it must be something other than his claim to be The Creator.

God as a Parent. Sometimes the analogy between God and a parent is used to support the claim that we are obligated to obey God. But there are very few respects in which God “the Father” is like anyone’s actual male parent. He doesn’t speak to us, and if one of us were about to fall off a cliff, he wouldn’t lift a finger to save our life. When you think about it, it makes more sense to call the earth our mother. At least we are grown out of her substance. But the earth doesn’t issue commands, or demand obedience.

Even if there were several similarities between God “the Father” and a human father, we must remember that a parent’s order would rarely be thought to create more than a *prima facie* obligation—that is, an obligation that is overturned if the order is crazy, or even in conflict with the prevailing moral standards. A child is not morally obliged to shoplift because her father orders her to do so, nor would anyone say that her moral obligation *not* to shoplift is a function of her father’s will. The analogy between God and a father, therefore, is of very little value to the divine command theorist, who appears to believe that if God wants us to steal something (or to wipe out a rival tribe or a city) then we do have a moral obligation to do just that.

For the Love of God. Love is a difficult matter at best. It is not clear whether we are supposed to be obligated to obey God because we love him, or because he loves us, or both. If we love each other though, why aren't we obligated to obey each other? It is hard to see what there is about love that creates an obligation to obey. If we love an ordinary person (not a god or a goddess) nobody thinks our love obligates us to obey his or her commands. Indeed, the idea that love requires obedience is a pathological understanding of love. It is true that love often inclines us to try to please those we love. It is therefore often effective to appeal to another person's love when we want them to do something for us. So if we love God we may be inclined to do what we think he wants us to do—but the inclination to obey God is one thing and the obligation to obey God is something else (or nothing at all).

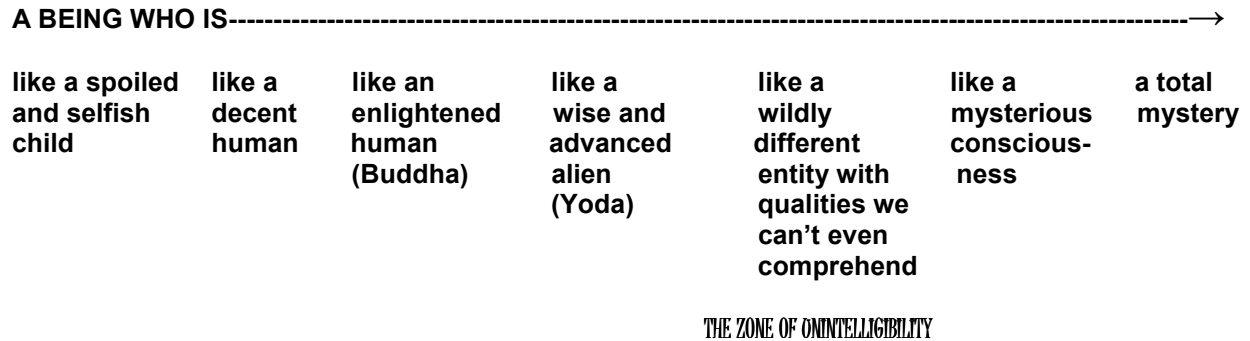
God's Goodness and Perfection. Among other things, God is said to be good, and perfect, and even perfectly good. The problem is that anyone who starts here will have already abandoned religious morality by having adopted a notion of goodness or perfection that can be used to judge God. But if we reverse ourselves and say that something originally not good *becomes* good when God loves it, then the claim that God is good will only be made true by the fact that (and as long as) God loves himself. That just seems absurd.

The other problem with basing morality on God's goodness is the likelihood that God is not really very good—on anybody's definition of what it is to be good. Moralists have always had a hard time reconciling God's alleged goodness with all the things he has done and has ordered to be done in his name. A moral abolitionist would not say

that God is *evil*, but how can a *moralist* withhold that term from any being who commands genocide, rape, and ethnic cleansing? (See <http://www.angelfire.com/pa/greywlf/biblegod.html>.) The four above-mentioned books by the New Atheists are clear about the double standard that allows gods to do things that mere humans are sometimes forbidden even to contemplate. They all emphasize what almost all of the moralists in the world would be forced to call the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad behavior of the gods and their minions.

We are no better off if we attempt to defend religious morality by insisting that God is, by definition, a perfect being. If a perfect being issued a command, it would be a perfect command, but we have no idea of what a perfect being, or a perfect command, might be. Even if we could understand what a perfect being is, and if one of them existed, we still wouldn't know why its perfection would oblige us to obey its orders or adopt its desires. One might think, rather, that its perfection would make it unnecessary for it to issue any orders, and impossible for it to have any desires.

5. Another argument—Intelligible and Unintelligible Beings. Imagine a line along which divinities are arranged in the following way. At one end are anthropomorphic gods who have human features, consort with other humans, lie, disregard private property, and suffer from emotions like anger, fear, jealousy, love, and impatience. They see, smell, feel, communicate, and rest. The more any particular divinity resembles a human, the more we humans can relate to it. Unfortunately, the more it resembles a human, the less plausible it is to suppose that its bare preferences create value, or that its mere word morally obligates us to do something.



As we move along the line we subtract human qualities like lust, brutality, pride, jealousy, and a bad temper. At the same time, we intensify qualities we find desirable in humans. These beings are quite a bit nicer than the ones we started with, but not really much nicer than enlightened humans. While we respect enlightened humans and Jedi Masters, and if we know what is good for us, listen to them when we have a chance, we do not think that their words or preferences give rise to any moral duties.

Perhaps we have not moved far enough along the line and it is time to bring in other standard attributes of gods—attributes like omniscience, omnipotence, perfection, atemporality, eternality, and infinite love, patience, and mercy. The problem is that when we start to add extraordinary super-qualities, the beings enter the Zone of Unintelligibility where the occupants are so remote from anything with which we have had experience that it is ridiculous to speak of them as if they engage in human-like thinking, suffer human emotions, give away real estate, or even issue commands. Their spectacular qualities make them inaccessible and unintelligible. We dare not speculate about their motives. How can they be the source of our moral laws? They are all mysteries, and the less said about them the better.

6. Conclusion. Without some rather special (and superhuman) characteristics, a god is no more qualified to be the source of obligation or value than an advanced or enlightened human. But as soon as we attribute some of these special characteristics to a being, we push it toward the Zone of Unintelligibility. There we no longer understand what such beings would be like or how they could be enough like humans to have preferences and issue commands. And even if we could manage to believe that these beings have preferences and issue commands, there is still no reason to suppose that any of their super qualities qualify them to serve as the source of value and moral obligation. Why did we ever think they did?

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud gave a psychological explanation of the persistence of religious belief in the face of embarrassingly minimal evidence. Religious beliefs, he said, are held because they are “fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind” (Freud [2], 30). They offer the believer answers to questions about the meaning of life, they guarantee protection against the terrors of the unknown, they offer hope for a life after death, and they can be used to motivate the cooperative behavior societies must ask from their citizens. He said that gods offer those who believe in them the moral authority and the protection from danger that real fathers offer to their frightened but willful children.

Freud saw humans as instinctively selfish, aggressive, and inconsiderate. He thought that these “unserviceable” instincts “have to be tamed by acts of repression, behind which, as a rule, lies the motive of anxiety” (Freud [2], 43). This anxiety produces childhood neuroses, most of which are outgrown “spontaneously in the course

of growing up.” He believed that the development of society as a whole parallels the development of each of its members. Just as young children need (or at least often get) a stern father to drive them crazy with repression, young societies pass through a similar stage and develop analogous forms of neuroses. In society at large the role of the father is played by God. Freud’s claim, then, is that religion is “the obsessional neurosis of humanity” (Freud [2], 43). It is not necessary to agree with everything that Freud said to be impressed by his vision of the similarity between the roles given to gods and fathers. In any case, what we have seen here is that there is no reason to think that gods, or fathers, or even mothers, can, by their attitudes or commands, bring value or moral obligation into being.

Chapter Four (June 2012)

Reason and Experience: Secular Morality

Belief in God, or in many gods, prevented the free development of moral reasoning. Disbelief in God, openly admitted by a majority, is a very recent event, not yet completed. Because this event is so recent, Non-Religious Ethics is at a very early stage. We cannot yet predict whether, as in Mathematics, we will all reach agreement. Since we cannot know how Ethics will develop, it is not irrational to have high hopes.

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If there is a problem with religious morality, and there is, then there may be even more of a problem with non-religious, or secular, morality. At least the religious moralist can point to a source for moral obligations, duties, and rights. The secular moralist, on the other hand, has to find some way, without appealing to a divine law-giver, to explain the source of all those demands and requirements. Error theorists and religious moralists think that the secular moralist is doomed to fail at this task. But there are atheists who are not willing to give up morality, and theists who are not convinced that morality depends on the commands of God, so there is a demand for a secular morality.

1. Secular Moralists. After Descartes, Anglo-European philosophy was dominated by two movements, **rationalism** and **empiricism**. Although there are empiricist elements in rationalism and vice versa, we can see a real difference between two distinct approaches to our knowledge of the world. ***While the empiricists located the source of ideas and of knowledge in sense experience, the rationalists believed in innate ideas and in truths that could be known only by reason.***

A rationalist thinks that many things (God, infinity, and perfection, for example) can only be understood by reason. Plato, one of the first rationalists, belittled beliefs gained in our everyday transactions with the world because he thought that the senses are tuned in to an inferior reality, and subject to error at every turn. He said that true knowledge, knowledge of “The Real” and “The Good,” is gained only by rational thought untainted by the second-rate input of experience. Empiricists, by contrast, believe that the only source of genuine knowledge about anything real is experience. Moralists who are rationalists say that reason can reveal the truth about what is good and right. Moralists who are empiricists claim that moral truth can be discovered by experience.

There are plenty of moralists who are empiricists, but since empiricists tend to be more skeptical than rationalists, empiricists have been reliable critics of the claims of the moralists. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) sounded a wake-up call for both religious and secular moralists in England when he argued, with great power and wit, that humans are motivated solely by self-interest, and that in a state of nature, where there is no one to legislate and enforce laws, “the notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place” (Hobbes, 108). He said that people call the things they like and desire

“good” and the things they hate “evil,” and that these words “are ever used with relation to the person that uses them, there being nothing simply and absolutely so, nor any common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of objects themselves” (Hobbes, 53). Here, at the rebirth of secular reflection about morality, three of the most alarming “isms” are in place, egoism, subjectivism, and relativism. Hobbes’s reflections were so disturbing, and so contrary to what almost everyone believed, or wanted to believe, that the best philosophers of the age devoted themselves to contesting his claims about morality and human nature.

One reply to part of Hobbes’ disquieting view of human nature came from an Anglican bishop, Joseph Butler (1692-1752), who convinced nearly everyone that there is a good argument against “psychological egoism,” the idea that we are only motivated by self-interest. The bishop argued that if we did not desire something other than our own satisfaction, we would never know what we need to acquire in order to bring satisfaction on. For example, if we were not motivated by the desire for something other than our own pleasure, we would never manage to get pleasure because pleasure only arises when some specific desire, like the desire for food, or comfort, or respect, is satisfied.

This argument silenced some egoists, but of course not all of them. More importantly, it had nothing to say about the objectivity of value, which Hobbes had seriously challenged. What was needed was a demonstration that morality has a foundation that is neither divine nor purely conventional, and that its influence on us is both necessary and sufficient to take us out of a state of nature. A step in this direction

was taken by Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688), who belonged to a group of moralists known as the “Cambridge Platonists.” Like Plato, these philosophers believed that things in the physical world are reflections or imitations of universal patterns—Plato’s famous “Forms.” Unwilling to rest the objectivity of morality on commands, even those of God, Cudworth claimed that it is not “meer Will that Obligeth, but the Natures of Good and Evil, Just and Unjust, really existing in the World” (250). This was definitely not a divine *command* theory, but since, unlike Plato, Cudworth believed that everything, including the world, the “Natures of Good and Evil,” and the faculty of reason capable of discerning them, was created by God, we can’t really think of him as offering a *secular* morality.

Samuel Clarke (1675-1729), another moral rationalist, agreed with Cudworth that morality is independent of God’s commands. Clarke realized, as many of the proponents of the divine command theory did not, that the obligation to obey the commands of God cannot be traced to God’s command. God can’t successfully command us to obey his commands unless he already has the right to command, or we have the duty to obey. Clarke left the divine command theory behind by claiming that morality is about a natural relation of **fitness**. Some things, he said, “are in their own nature Good and Reasonable and Fit to be done, such as keeping Faith, and performing equitable Compacts, and the like.” Other things “are in their own nature absolutely Evil” (Clark, 9).

'Tis evidently more Fit, even before all positive Bargains and Compacts, that Men should deal one with another according to the known Rules of Justice and Equity, than that every man for his own present Advantage, should without scruple disappoint the most reasonable and equitable Expectations of his Neighbours, and cheat and defraud, or spoil by violence, all others without restraint (Clarke, 5).

Clarke said that “these things are so notoriously plain and self-evident that nothing but the extremest stupidity of mind, corruption of manners, or perverseness of spirit, can possibly make any man entertain the least doubt concerning them” (quoted by Mackie in HMT, p. 18). This blithe confidence and shameless dismissal of those who might disagree with him (not about treachery and violence, but about the objectivity of morality) illustrate how firmly attached even the best thinkers can be to their belief in morality. To someone not impressed by the credentials of this moral relation of fitness, it may appear that Clarke simply declares the things he likes “evidently more fit” than their opposites. It would be hard to show that this impression is mistaken, and that is the problem with this sort of moral rationalism. Anyone can declare that some principle or collection of principles is reasonable or self-evident, and anyone who disagrees can say that they are not. Beyond that, there is little more to be said.

John Locke (1632–1704) is usually identified as the father of empiricism, but he was a rationalist when it came to morality. Hobbes said that in a state of nature nothing is right or wrong, and that morality in civil society is purely conventional. Locke

disagreed, claiming that “The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges everyone.” Reason, he said, “teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions” (Locke [2], 9). This is a lofty thought, but actually, nothing follows about how we ought to treat each other from the fact that we are equal and independent, and in any case, it is not clear what is meant by saying that we are all equal, or that we are all independent—in some ways we are and in some ways we are not. To get morality going, Locke finally resorted to religion and to the idea that God owns his creation. As we noted in Chapter Three, he argued that since we are God’s property, “made to last during his, not one another’s pleasure,” killing someone, or even committing suicide, is wrong because it is a violation of God’s property rights.

2. Three Empiricist Attempts to Develop a Secular Morality. Secular moral rationalists say that moral truths are self-evident, or that reason can discover them, but they have not been able to explain or defend these claims, and they have no answer to the question of how there can be so much disagreement among intelligent and reasonable people. Empiricists who have not given up their belief in objective moral truth will also owe us an explanation of what moral truths are, how we come to know them, and why, if they are objective and available to everyone, there remains so much disagreement among people with no discernible cognitive defects.

The empiricist philosophers who wrote in England, Ireland, and Scotland in the 18th Century (Locke, Berkeley and Hume) were committed (in varying degrees) to what their senses told them, and skeptical (in varying degrees) about everything else.

Empiricist caution has led many to cast suspicious glances at the concepts basic to morality, and both non-cognitivism and the error theory have sprung from empiricist soil. But not all empiricists are moral anti-realists. There are (at least) three ways to embrace both empiricism and moral realism.

(1) First, we can insist that we do experience moral properties like fitness and intrinsic value, and that anyone who does not experience them just doesn't know how (or where) to look. This is the way of **moral intuitionism**. It can be seen as a form of empiricism because it speaks of apprehending, or sensing, or experiencing objective moral properties. As we saw in Chapter Two, Moore believed that we can intuit the presence of the simple, non-natural, indefinable property of "goodness." However, intuitionists turn away from empiricism when they begin to speak, as Plato did, of an extra-sensory intuitive grasp of unchanging essences, or of "Goodness Itself."

(2) The second way an empiricist can be a moralist is to say that while we do not actually perceive moral properties like goodness and badness, we have a moral sense that is activated by those qualities. When exposed to badness, we feel moral indignation; when exposed to goodness, we feel moral approval. The moral emotions are evidence that we have been exposed to moral properties. The "part" of us doing the feeling was called the "moral sense," so this way of looking at the relation between experience and moral properties has been called a **moral sense theory**. On this view we would not be wrong to say that there is an objective moral quality out there, but we would be mistaken if, like the intuitionists, we thought we could apprehend it directly. It works on us in the way that radiation or gravity does—we know it by its effects.

(3) The moral intuitionist believes in moral properties and thinks that we are capable of apprehending them. The moral sense theorist believes in moral properties and thinks that although we do not apprehend them, our emotional reactions to them can be seen as evidence for their existence. The third way an empiricist can (at least appear to) embrace moral realism is to adopt **moral naturalism**. This is the view that we *can* apprehend moral properties, but that these moral properties are neither the peculiar “non-natural” properties of the intuitionists, nor the invisible items favored by the proponents of moral sense theories. Rather, they say, moral properties are identical with perfectly unobjectionable and empirically respectable “natural” properties. Recall from Chapter Two the sample and simple definitions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and Harman’s claim that moral facts are natural facts, that is, “relational facts about reasons.”

The error theorist will say that trouble with this reasoning comes early because these moral faux-realists start out by asking “What are moral properties?” and “What are moral facts?” But if the error theorists are right there are no moral properties or moral facts, which means that the question to ask is: “What do people who believe in them think moral properties and moral facts are?” Not many non-philosophers would volunteer the answer that they are “facts about reasons” or “facts about what a fully informed and perfectly rational person would want to be done.”

I have already complained about the way we exploit definitions to make a case for our beliefs. As reports of what words like ‘good’ and ‘right’ mean, or of what people mean by them, the definitions moralists come up with can be laughably simple, obviously incorrect, or just too complicated to be useful. As recommendations, they are

optional and very unlikely to be considered seriously. Further, if by some miracle we all did come to adopt some naturalistic definition of 'good' or 'right', we would find that we have changed the subject from what we formerly called goodness or rightness to whatever natural property (*promoting human survival, being approved by the majority, or being ordered by the sovereign*) our definition introduces. As we have already observed, Mackie argues that naturalists lose the prescriptivity when they try to retain the objectivity of moral judgments by turning them into statements about the natural world or about what people think, feel, or want (Chapter 2, 18-19). We cannot "save" morality by turning its claims into neutral reports about what some (or even all) people want or think. Without *objectivity* moral demands have no more bite than requests or suggestions, but without *prescriptivity* they are just bits of information.

We have noted various shortcomings in intuitionism and naturalism, and later in this chapter we will note some more, so let us take this opportunity to consider what might be said to someone who is tempted by a moral sense theory. There is no doubt that people feel emotions like outrage, approval, anger, and disgust. But moralists sometimes attach moral riders to these feelings and speak of *moral* outrage or *moral* approval. Psychologists are in the business of explaining plain old anger, but what about "moral outrage"? Moral sense theorists seem to want to explain these moral emotions as reactions to an objective moral property (outrageousness), but that is a bit hasty given that there is a much more informative and intelligible story to tell about the natural history of these feelings, about their biological and social bases and functions.

When we see an act of cruelty, most of us will feel some disapproval or disgust, or compassion for the target. But in the minds of the moralists, these very useful feelings are accompanied by the thought that the act was “wrong,” or “evil,” or “a moral outrage.” From the moment such thoughts are taken seriously we are looking at (that is, we are thinking about) the act in a new way—not just as something that has hurt somebody, and not just as something that we dislike or that we would like to prevent, but as something that should not have happened. As Mackie says, “we have some tendency to feel that the moral wrongness of a proposed act is an externally authoritative feature which tells us not to do this—which is part of what Clarke was getting at with his talk about necessary relations of fitness and unfitness” (*HMT*, 34).

The question, of course, is what to make of our tendency to feel this way and to say these things to ourselves and others. Moral realists claim that near universal acceptance of some form of moral realism, however varied the content, places the burden of proof on the critic of morality. How, they ask, could so many people be so very wrong about their deepest beliefs? As it happens, this is the very question the empiricist critics of objective morality claim to have answered. If this collection of objectivist tendencies and beliefs can be explained by instinct, education, and projection, then the fact that so many people feel objectively bound need not be seen as compelling evidence for the claim that *anyone* is objectively bound. As we are about to see in the next section, Hume stands at the head of a long line of empiricists who have added to our understanding of our very natural and very human, but also very mistaken, tendency to embrace moral objectivity.

3. The Projection of Moral Sentiments—Hume and Mackie. David Hume (1711-1776) found himself in opposition to moral rationalists, moral intuitionists, and moral sense theorists, all of whom (at least appeared to have) adopted some form of moral objectivity. In his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, published a year after his death, he argued that morality arises from our feelings and is a product of convention, not nature. There he presented a catalogue of the virtues of his day—everything from benevolence and justice to cleanliness and chastity. His aim was not to justify his (and our) high regard for these qualities, but to explain why we praise some traits as virtues and condemn others as vices. He asked whether moral distinctions are derived from Reason, or from Sentiment; whether we attain the knowledge of them by a chain of argument and induction, or by an immediate feeling and finer internal sense; whether, like all sound judgment of truth and falsehood, they should be the same to every rational intelligent being; or whether, like the perception of beauty and deformity, they be founded entirely on the particular fabric and constitution of the human species (Hume [2], 170).

With some minor qualifications, we can say that Hume chose the second of each of the above alternatives. Our moral judgments are delivered by sentiment and feeling, not by reason and argument, and they are closer to judgments of taste than to judgments of fact.

When he said that morality cannot be derived from reason, Hume was using the word 'reason' broadly enough to make his claim into a denial of both rationalist and empiricist forms of moral objectivism. Reason, he claimed, draws conclusions, assigns causes, and predicts effects—it tells us what is the case and how it came to be the case. When we deliberate about what to do, reason lays the “circumstances and relations” before us, but then its work is done. Mere facts, (eg. today is Monday, John ate lunch, George told a lie) suggest no actions and generate no feelings until they are combined with some end, goal, plan, desire, preference, impulse, or aversion. It is not contrary to reason alone, Hume provocatively said, “to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger” or to choose my total ruin “to prevent the least uneasiness of an *Indian* or person wholly unknown to me” (*Treatise*, II, iii, 3).

If reason has no way to tell us how to choose among our alternatives and no way to determine which of our traits are virtues and which are vices, where do we get our moral opinions? Why do we approve of the traits we call virtues and disapprove of the ones we call vices? Hume's answer was that we approve of virtues because they are *useful* and *agreeable* to ourselves and others. We don't need to ask why we approve of things that are useful or agreeable to ourselves, but the question of why we approve of things that are useful and agreeable to others is more difficult. Hume answered it by appealing to a natural tendency to be happy at the thought of the happiness of others. Everything that contributes to the happiness of society, he said, “recommends itself directly to our approbation and good-will” (Hume [2], 219). Seeing or thinking about human happiness or misery “excites in our breast a sympathetic movement of pleasure

or uneasiness.” He called this sentiment “humanity,” and described it as “some benevolence, however small, infused into our bosom; some spark of friendship for humankind; some particle of the dove kneaded into our frame, along with the elements of the wolf and serpent” (Hume [2], 271).

Natural sympathy and benevolence may help explain why we approve of the traits we call virtues, but why does almost everyone believe that this approval is not optional but demanded by the existence of objective moral facts? Hume would say that this widespread tendency to think of virtues, values, and duties as objective and independent of our desires and conventions results from strong feelings, extensive conditioning, and the habit of projection. What he did say in a famous passage in Appendix I to the *Enquiry* is this:

Thus the distinct boundaries and offices of reason and of taste are easily ascertained. The former conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood: the latter gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. The one discovers objects as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution: the other has a productive faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation (*An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, Appendix I, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1902)).

The new creation of course, is the virtue or the vice, or as Mackie would have said, the “to-be-done-ness” or the “not-to-be-done-ness” (*Ethics*, p. 40).

When we “paint” an object with colors borrowed from our sentiment, the object does not suddenly present us with a different visual appearance. Projection is frequently explained by relating it to the notion of “seeing as,” but seeing some behavior as evil, or seeing a habit as a vice, is different from seeing a line-drawing as a duck, or an ink blot as an orgy. Let’s not be misled by the visual metaphor. We neither see nor hallucinate objective moral properties. Sometimes we experience a suite of positive or negative feelings about some event we have observed. Because of what we have been taught to think and say, those feelings can become part of a complex of causes and conditions that lead us to think and speak as we would if we had somehow apprehended an objective moral property. Moral objectivists think that an experience of a moral property (the evil of the intention or the wrongness of the deed) is what elicits their moral sentiment, but it is more likely (or, as Mackie said, less paradoxical to think) that it is the sentiment that gives rise to the belief that a moral property has been experienced.

Mackie called Hume’s idea that we “invent” rather than discover virtue and vice his “Objectification Theory.” Hume’s view, he said, is that

we tend to project these sentiments onto the actions or characters that arouse them, or read some sort of image of these sentiments into them, so that we think of those actions and characters as possessing, objectively and

intrinsically, certain distinctively moral features; but these features are fictitious (*Hume's Moral Theory*, p. 71).

We “think of” the actions and characters as having “certain distinctively moral features,” and we say this to ourselves and to others, using language designed to express that very idea. A moral realist does not look at a deadly stabbing and observe some badness, wrongness, or vice that the anti-realist misses. Both see the stabbing and both are almost certainly horrified, but the moral realist still habitually resorts to the moral language and beliefs that he or she acquired as a child. There is pressure on everyone to use moral language because we want evidence that others not only believe in morality, but even that they have what we consider to be the correct morality. This means that there is pressure to project, because projecting is not *seeing* good or evil in an act, it is sincerely *saying* (to others and/or to ourselves) that an act is good or evil.

Projection is a widespread occurrence, but the process is rarely transparent to the projector. Mackie noted that “the apparent objectivity of moral value is a widespread phenomenon which has more than one source” (*Ethics*, p. 46). The task of identifying these sources has been made easier by the fact that we are developing a better understanding of what sort of beings we are and of what makes us tick. A natural history of moral error has yet to be written, but we can already identify a few of the many factors that have contributed to our habit of embracing groundless moral beliefs and defending them beyond all reason.

We have seen how Hume assigns us a **natural sympathy** that makes us uneasy at the sight of suffering. This generous feeling is encouraged and shaped by our

parents and mentors, and if they have done their jobs, we will not only be uneasy when we become aware of suffering, we will have been primed with beliefs and dispositions that activate a process that takes us from uneasiness and sympathy to the belief that we have a moral obligation to act.

Those charged with our upbringing are able to educate and socialize us because we come into the world with **a tendency to imitate and an automatic and unquestioning credulity**. The cave-babies who survived and prospered were the ones who believed what was said and who did as they were told. As Richard Dawkins observes, ‘there will be a selective advantage to child brains that possess the rule of thumb: believe, without question, whatever your grown-ups tell you’ (2006, p. 174). Our credulity, like our language-acquisition skills, may abate as we age and as credulity becomes dangerous, but long before we learned how to think for ourselves, or to spot liars, we were shaped by lessons that presuppose the objectivity of morality and model the use of moral language.

Another of our inherited traits that amplifies our credulity and promotes projection is **a tendency to defer to those who are in some way “above us.”** We learn to show respect and to yield precedence early and well. In our first few years we automatically imitate, believe, and obey, but soon enough we start revising some of our beliefs to match what we have learned for ourselves. This is part of growing up, but the process is often disturbing to the authorities and to those who are inconvenienced or marginalized by the change.

Not everyone thrives on independence and autonomy, so sometimes credulity and deference metastasize into mindless adulation and obedience. When the word of some alpha-plus male becomes law, his preferences can appear to his brain-washed subjects as unquestionable values. For someone under this spell, an act of disrespect or disloyalty to the leader, to the system, or to some book or relic, can “appear” objectively atrocious, worthy of punishment or even death.

Sometimes just thinking about things we have learned to despise can make us physically ill or mentally guilty. The despised objects and acts may or may not literally look different to a brain-washed disciple or devotee, but they will be thought of and spoken of as acts and objects that are unquestionably to be avoided.

Another characteristic that leads us to turn our strong feelings into moral beliefs is our **tendency to feel various forms and degrees of dissatisfaction or anger at inequities that leave us and those we care about at a disadvantage**. We share this “inequity aversion” with other primates, and we manifest it when we complain about unfairness or speak in praise of justice. When we end up with less than we expect, we often feel that we have not been given our “fair share.” When we project this feeling, we turn an unequal distribution into (what we judge to be) an “unjust” one.

These and many other factors conspire to convince us that the world contains moral facts and properties, and that we can recognize them. If, as the moral error theorist believes, there are no moral facts or properties then those moral philosophers who hope to pull a rabbit (a justified moral judgment) out of the hat will remain forever empty-handed. The fact that centuries of reflection have produced no rabbits should

suggest that it is time to acknowledge that no moral judgment is ever going to be as straightforward and checkable as the simple statement that there is a beer in the refrigerator. When (and if) we tell others that they have a moral obligation to do something, we now know that they are likely to ask for a reason. We also know that when they do, we will always be able to say *something*, but we will never be able to satisfy an opponent who knows how to argue and who has a different set of values, or none at all.

Not everyone has been this pessimistic about the possibility for “Non-Religious Ethics.” There were many brilliant thinkers after Hume who tried (vainly, the error theorist will say) to show that there really is a truth about how we should treat others, and that our morality is not a mere projection, invention, convention, or scam. The most formidable of those thinkers to set this task for himself was Immanuel Kant.

4. Immanuel Kant. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) rejected both Hume’s idea that morality is rooted in feelings, and the moral objectivist’s idea that moral truths are detected by intuition or a moral sense. Hume wanted to *explain* our moral feelings, but Kant favored *ignoring* our moral feelings because he believed that morality can have nothing to do with anything empirical. He was searching not for the subjective origin of moral feelings, but for the objective foundation of a moral law that commands all rational beings. His announced goal in the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* is to arrive at “pure rational knowledge separated from everything empirical,” knowledge that will yield “the principles of morality.” He insisted that

unless we want to deny to the concept of morality all truth and all reference to a possible object, we cannot but admit that the moral law is of such widespread significance that it must hold not merely for men but for all rational beings generally, and that it must be valid not merely under contingent conditions and with exceptions but must be absolutely necessary. Clearly, therefore, no experience can give occasion for inferring even the possibility of such apodeictic [necessary] laws (Kant [3], 20).

The universality and necessity of the Moral Law will not be discovered by experience, which is confused by the facts and inclined to see a need for exceptions.

From our limited human standpoint, we might observe that this or that lie is wrong, but no number of observations will warrant the claim that every lie is wrong, no matter what. Only a purely rational method divorced from all experience could arrive at the “pure rational knowledge” of a Moral Law capable of ratifying such a universal exceptionless, and ill-advised rule. This fundamental Moral Law is not a general statement of some identifiable duty; it is more like a template that rational beings must place on every candidate for any specific moral judgment. A correct moral judgment (or “maxim”) must not violate what Kant called **The Categorical Imperative**: “*I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law*” (Kant [3], 14).

There is, of course, a real question about what this supreme moral law is supposed to be and to do. If it is a test other maxims have to pass, then it only rules out specific maxims that do not satisfy it. Since this is less than we usually want from a Supreme Moral Law, Kant sometimes gave the impression that the Categorical Imperative yields more specific maxims. He said that reason commands “pure sincerity in friendship” (Kant [3], 20), and he tried to generate (by arguments that are widely acknowledged to be less than cogent) prohibitions against suicide and lying promises, and injunctions to develop our talents and give aid to others (Kant [3], 31).

“When it is said that you should not make a false promise,” he claimed, “the assumption is that the necessity of this avoidance is no mere advice for escaping some other evil, so that it might be said that you should not make a false promise lest you ruin your credit when the falsity comes to light” (Kant [3], 28). The command not to make a false promise does not depend on any bad effects of the false promise, and remains in force even if the effects would be positive. The command is categorical (no exceptions) and binding (no escape).

Few philosophers have been convinced that Kant was able to show that reason has the power to provide us with universally binding moral principles, or that it has the authority to command anyone. But discussions of this and of other formulations of Kant’s “Supreme Principle” are likely to continue as long as morality is taken seriously. The basic idea, captured in Kant’s formulation, as well as in many of the other maxims we have devised for ourselves, is to encourage us to consider the needs and interests of others. Kant’s principle is often compared to the Golden Rule (Do unto others as you

would have them do unto you), and to the Confucian Silver Rule that was stated by one of Confucius' students (What I do not want others to do to me, I do not want to do to them). The Golden Rule tells us what we ought to do "unto others," and Kant's Law tells us what kinds of acts we ought not to perform (the ones we cannot will universally). Both come across as aimed at generating moral directions. The Silver Rule of Confucius, on the other hand, reminds us of the kinds of thing we *do not want* to do to others. Only this third "rule" is presented in an explicitly non-moralistic way.

Almost every religion and system of morality will urge us to consider the needs of some others, and to help them. We would like to think that people do have that particle of the dove Hume mentioned, but we can have a perfectly satisfactory world even if most of us do not love our neighbors or model our treatment of them on the way we would like to be treated. The Golden or Silver Rules may be useful when we know nothing about the others; otherwise a better, but still far from perfect, rule might be "Do unto others as they would have you do unto them," or "Do not do unto others what they do not want you to do to them."

If the moral anti-realist is right, we are not morally required to follow any of these rules, but if we want to get along in the world, it never hurts to pay attention to the situation of others, and to their beliefs, attitudes, desires and feelings. Life is complicated, too complicated for poor old Kant, who wanted some totally general set of rules because he knew that once we start thinking up exceptions, there is no end in sight. An absolute rule such as "Never lie" is memorable and neat, and it will save us

from the need to think about our actual situation or to learn about the people involved, but that is exactly what is wrong with it.

5. Intuitionism. Kant claimed that Hume's reflections awakened him from his "dogmatic slumbers," but plenty of other moralists had also read Hume, and some of them were no more willing than Kant to give up their belief in objectively binding moral judgments. **Richard Price** (1723-1791) answered Hume's skepticism with the claim that we have a "moral faculty" capable of discerning objective moral properties like right and wrong, which, he said, are "real characters of actions." Another early intuitionist, **Thomas Reid** (1710-1796), said that "all moral reasonings rest upon one or more first principles of morals, whose truth is immediately perceived without reasoning, by all men come to years of understanding" (Mackie [3], 19). The claim that we *perceive* these truths "without reasoning" suggests that Reid's intuitionism is of the empiricist variety. He opposed subjectivism by emphasizing the way morality presents itself as objective. "That I ought not to steal, or to kill, or to bear false witness," he said, "are propositions, of the truth of which I am as well convinced as of any proposition in Euclid" (Mackie [3], 142). Mackie allowed that Reid was right about one thing. People who take morality seriously do experience it as if it were authoritative and beyond doubt. But, as we have seen, this moral conviction and the ensuing feeling of moral bondage can be understood to result from our genetic make-up, the socialization process, projection, and the pressure of our needs and desires.

Moore's intuitionism is similar to that of Price and Reid, but he directed his intuitions to goodness rather than rightness. Moore, you will recall, argued that

goodness, like yellowness, is a simple indefinable property that presents itself directly to the knower. The difference is that yellowness is a natural property, open to visual inspection (and the instruments of science), while goodness is a non-natural property, and is therefore not to be discerned in the way colors or sounds are. Because he believed that 'good' denotes a simple non-natural property, Moore directed his arguments against those who held that the word denotes a complex property or a simple natural one. He called "the supposition that 'good' can be defined by reference to a natural quality" naturalism, and he devised "the open question argument" to demolish all forms of naturalism, and more generally, all attempts to define 'good'.

If we temporarily suspend our suspicion of philosophers who spend too much time talking about definitions that are too simple to be serious, we can take a glance at this very famous controversy about defining 'good'. Moore said that if the word 'good' means the same thing as the word 'pleasant', then this can only be because they denote the same property. In that case we ought to be able to replace any occurrence of the word 'good' with a designation of the other property without changing what the sentence says. If 'procrastinate' means 'put things off', and it does, then when I say Bill is procrastinating, it is not really an open question whether or not he is putting things off. In a similar way, Moore argued that if, contrary to what he believed, the words 'good' and 'pleasant' mean the same thing, then they stand for, or "denote," the same property, in which case they ought to be freely interchangeable, and the question:

(a) Is pleasure good?

should be no more open than the question:

(b) Is pleasure pleasant?

But, he insisted, question **(a)** is open in a way that question **(b)** is not:

Whoever will attentively consider with himself what is actually before his mind when he asks the question 'Is pleasure (or whatever it may be) after all good?' can easily satisfy himself that he is not merely wondering whether pleasure is pleasant (16).

While the answer to question **(b)** is given as soon as the question is asked, this is not the case with question **(a)**. That is what it is for question **(a)** to be open. Now, since question **(a)** is open, Moore concluded, 'pleasant' does not mean the same thing as 'good', and the naturalist's definition of 'good' and, he boldly added, all other similar definitions of 'good', are mistaken.

In the last hundred years we have learned that Moore's argument depends on assumptions about language, meaning, and definitions that are far more controversial than even he realized. There is no reason to think that every meaningful term denotes something, and there is so little clarity about what denoting is that it is hard to discuss these matters without stumbling into a swamp of confusing and outdated philosophical terms and assumptions. Over the years, naturalists predictably found the argument unconvincing, while those who rejected definitions of moral terms found the argument congenial, and used it themselves, even when they disagreed with Moore about almost everything else. Eventually the torch of the struggle against naturalism passed to the non-cognitivist, who adapted Moore's argument by changing it from an argument about meaning to an argument about use. According to the non-cognitivist, no naturalistic

definition can be correct because evaluative language has an expressive or imperative use that the naturalist's moral judgments, having been reduced to empirical statements of fact, lack.

Moore did not reject all definitions, only those aimed at giving the meaning of the word 'good'. In *Principia Ethica* he claimed that it was true by definition that it was right (or even obligatory) to produce goodness. He put it this way:

What I wish first to point out is that 'right' does and can mean nothing but 'cause of a good result,' and is thus identical with 'useful'; whence it follows that the end always will justify the means, and that no action which is not justified by its results can be right (Moore, 147).

This has the strange consequence of making utilitarianism true by definition, a procedure to which there are plenty of objections. Moore was not the first to try to make it true by definition that the end justifies the means, but he should have asked himself his own open question. "That is useful, but is it right?" seems to be the kind of question a sensible moralist would want to be open, but if we accept Moore's definition, it is not.

Moore said that the word 'good' denotes a simple, indefinable, "non-natural" property. This property cannot be discovered by the ordinary senses, nor can its presence be established by argument. It can only be noticed by a special kind of apprehension that he failed to explain, but called intuition. He compared the non-natural property of goodness with the natural property of yellowness, but, as we noted in Chapter Two, if goodness is a property, then it is a strange and unusual one, utterly

different from the “naturalistic” properties we do understand. As we have seen, Mackie called this objection “the argument from queerness,” and it shows up in G. J. Warnock’s summary of his own objections to intuitionism:

Now we have . . . seen that the theory [intuitionism] leaves it,
at best, unclear how pieces of moral information are related
to any other features of the world, and rather more than
unclear how their truth can be established or confirmed
(Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, p. 15).

Moral anti-realists are likely to see this sort of attack as devastating, but moral intuitionism has always had supporters. The waves of criticism may have failed to overwhelm the belief that goodness and badness are objective knowable qualities because that belief is so deeply entrenched in our language and our conventional ways of talking and thinking. As Mackie said, “intuitionism merely makes unpalatably plain what other forms of objectivism wrap up” (Mackie, *Ethics*, 38).

The moral intuitionists H. A. Prichard and W. D. Ross were contemporaries of Moore, but while Moore believed intuitions tell us what is good, Prichard and Ross held that intuitions tell us what is right. In 1912 Prichard published his article, “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” His answer was that it does, and that it is “the mistake of supposing the possibility of proving what can only be apprehended directly by an act of moral thinking” (p. 16). He believed that some actions are obligatory, but he was certain that we do not come to appreciate our obligations by hearing an argument. He

said that “our sense of the rightness of an act is not a conclusion from our appreciation of the goodness either of it or of anything else” (9).

Prichard may be right about that, but the problems with his intuitionism are similar to those facing Moore. If goodness is a “queer property,” can rightness or obligatoriness be less so? Prichard said we “appreciate” our obligations, but how is this done? He said that if we become aware of the circumstances surrounding some action—the consequences, relevant behavior of those involved, intentions, contracts agreements, etc., then at some point we will just “see” what we ought to do. We do not deduce that some act is our duty from our belief about these circumstances, we “appreciate the obligation immediately or directly.” In such a case what is apprehended is a moral truth that is, like an axiom of geometry, self-evident.

While Prichard claimed that in each particular case we can “appreciate the obligation immediately,” Ross, in his 1930 book, *The Right and the Good*, said that it is not the rightness of *particular* acts that we “apprehend,” but rather the rightness of *kinds* of acts—for example, promise-keeping, paying debts, etc. He further differed from Prichard by introducing the concept of a “*prima facie* duty.” To say that an action is a *prima facie* duty is to say that it is the kind of act that would be the right thing to do if other morally relevant factors did not intervene.

Ross listed several kinds of *prima facie* duties. **Duties of fidelity** rest “on a promise or what may fairly be called an implicit promise, such as the implicit undertaking not to tell lies, which seems to be implied in the act of entering into conversation” (Ross, 21). **Duties of reparation** arise when someone has done a

“wrongful act.” **Duties of gratitude** rest on previous acts of others. Other duties, he says, rest on the “fact or possibility of a distribution of pleasure or happiness . . . which is not in accordance with the merit of the persons concerned” (Ross, 21). Surprisingly, Ross said that in such a case we have **Duties of justice** “to upset or prevent such a distribution.” However, the radical teeth of this *prima facie* duty are pulled because it is only a *prima facie* duty, and because it is not clear what is meant by ‘merit’. Some duties rest on the fact that we can “improve our own condition in terms of virtue or intelligence,” and some on the fact that we can improve the virtue, the intelligence, or even the pleasure of others. The former duties are **Duties of self-improvement**, and the latter are **Duties of beneficence**. Somewhat less demanding than duties to do good for others are duties not to do harm, **Duties of non-maleficence**.

Ross deviated from Prichard’s position in another way. He rejected Prichard’s idea that the “property” of rightness is *sui generis*, that is, that it is not related to or constructed from other things. According to Ross, “whether an act is a duty proper or actual duty depends on all the morally significant kinds it is an instance of.” Have I promised to tell a truth that will damage someone? Then what it would be right for me to do depends, in some way that Ross never specifies, on balancing the claims of the duties of fidelity and non-maleficence. Each case is unique and, Ross says, when I confront a conflict like this “what I have to do is to study the situation as fully as I can until I form the considered opinion (it is never more) that in the circumstances one of them is more incumbent than any other; then I am bound to think that to do this *prima facie* duty is my duty *sans phrase* [without qualification] in the situation” (Ross, 19).

Neither Ross nor Prichard avoids the problems that plague Moore's theory. All three fall victim to the argument from queerness, and while the intuitions of Ross and Prichard may correspond more closely to our actual moral beliefs and attitudes than the conclusions of the utilitarians, this may be because those intuitions are projections of our actual moral feelings and attitudes. After all, if our moral beliefs and attitudes were placed in us early, if some of them are even a function of our biology, then how could they seem other than obvious to us? The intuitionist takes this appearance of obviousness as a sign of objective truth, but, as we now know, there are other ways to explain it.

6. Making Moralism True by Definitions. As we noted in Chapter Two, the strategy of offering definitions for moral notions lies behind subjective forms of moral relativism. We have just seen how Moore targeted those "naturalists" who offer definitions of 'good', and while it is hard to take Moore's intuitionism seriously, it is not surprising that many find more value in his criticisms of those who define moral terms naturalistically (call them *naturalist definists*). Even divine command theorists may try to make it true by definition (of 'ought' or of 'God') that we ought to do as God commands, thus generating a kind of "supernaturalist definism."

Subjective Definitions. Subjectivists base value and/or obligation on "subjective" mental states. They hold that nothing would have any value if there were no beings with desires, attitudes, or preferences. We get different forms of subjectivism depending on which beings we set up as the ones whose desires and preferences count. Harman's explanation of what we are saying when we say that someone ought

not to have acted in a certain way is a subjective account of some moralist language. Richard Taylor's moral anti-realism came out in his book *Good and Evil* (Macmillan, 1970) when he said that words like 'good' and 'bad' designate nothing "in the world," but he appeared to cross-over to subjectivism when he added that when humans desire things, those things "become" good. He said that "if we suppose the world to be exactly as it is, except that it contains not one living thing, it seems clear that nothing in it would be good and nothing bad" (Taylor, 123). The anti-realist, of course, would say that even when we add the living beings, there is still nothing in it that is good or bad. We desire some things and dislike others, and because we have language, we call some things "good" and others "bad." But it is misleading to say that these things *become* good or bad just because someone likes or dislikes them, or calls them good or bad.

Subjectivists who want to be moralists understand desires and feelings (or think they do), so they give us definitions that identify what we *ought* to do with what we *want* to do, or with what someone else does or would want us to do. At the same time, they continue to use the language of morality with its assumption of objectivity. No wonder Moore took Butler's remark that "everything is what it is, and not another thing" for the motto of his book. If "being good" is really being desired or favored by the appropriate party, then there is nothing more to being good than that, and that is just not enough.

Non-subjective Definitions. Definitions of moral terms may make use of subjective notions like interest and desire, but there are other possibilities. Some have said that 'right' can be defined in terms of a tendency to promote survival, or that 'good' means 'natural'. Moore aimed his open question argument at all such definitions, and it

still can serve as a reminder to anyone who tries to claim that it is true by definition that it is always right to act to secure our survival, or that the best behavior is really the behavior that comes most naturally.

I have repeatedly pointed out that the problem with naturalistic definitions is that they backfire. If 'good' and 'pleasant' are synonyms, then our talk about goodness and pleasantness is really talk about only one thing—and that thing is most easily identified as pleasure. By trying to define value into existence, naturalists actually define it out of existence. Rather than giving values a boost by identifying them with facts, their definitions pave the way for a value-free conception of the world.

A similar difficulty infects other forms of naturalism that defend non-definitional identities between moral and natural properties. They concede that the word 'good' doesn't *mean* 'promotes survival', but they still insist that being good and promoting survival are in fact the same thing. But this hardly supports moralism. By "identifying" goodness with the natural property of promoting survival, they end up with a natural property (that of promoting survival) and two ways of referring to it. Again, the moral property seems to have disappeared.

7. Conclusion. Divine command theorists are moralists; and so are the moral rationalists and the empiricists of the moral sense school who hold that moral properties of objects give rise to special feelings which alert us to their presence. It is more difficult to know what to say about those who offer definitions of moral notions in non-moral terms. If someone who holds that 'good' means 'pleasant' says that a thing is good,

should we charge him with believing in objective moral properties, or with adopting a misleading way of saying that something is pleasant?

These points all remain controversial. Some philosophers continue to search for better definitions of moral terms, while others seek better arguments to show that moral terms can't be defined. Other moral philosophers would admit that we may eventually have to confront difficult "theoretical" questions about meaning and justification, "metaethical" questions, but they hope to be allowed to put those "theoretical" questions to one side so that they can move directly to questions about what is truly valuable and about which actions or kinds of actions we ought to perform or avoid—"normative" questions. This hope is often frustrated in practice because the theoretical questions about meaning and justification always seem to pop up before philosophers interested in the normative ones want them to.

In the next chapter, after glancing briefly at metaethics, we will survey the main theories of normative ethics. There are two attitudes someone might adopt when examining these theories. The first attitude is that of a convinced moralist looking for the true (or at least the best) moral principles. Here the only questions are within morality. Which account of moral obligation stands up best to criticism? Is happiness the only end worth seeking or only one such end? What duties do we have to strangers, to the poor, and to animals? Moral skeptics are rarely welcome at conversations where this first attitude is dominant.

The second attitude one might take toward normative ethics is that of someone who has not embraced any of these normative ethical theories but is willing to look at

what they have to offer. This could be a moralist who is just beginning to have doubts, or it could be a convinced but intellectually curious error theorist who wants a closer look at all the things he or she is committed to denying. In either case, if we are considering rejecting some belief, or some whole class of beliefs, it only makes sense to get a relatively clear idea of that belief or class of beliefs. Doing that will be our project in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five (June 2012)

A Survey of Moral Theories

Intense, long, certain, speedy, fruitful, pure—

Such marks in *pleasures* and in *pains* endure.

Such pleasures seek, if *private* be thy end:

If it be *public*, wide let them *extend*.

Such *pains* avoid, whichever be thy view:

If pains *must* come, let them *extend* to few.

Jeremy Bentham

We have seen how the “suspiciously unresolvable nature of moral disputes, their ritualistic character, and the astonishing array of incompatible moral stances to be found” have generated various relativistic and skeptical challenges to morality, the most serious of which is “the error-theory,” according to which moral judgments are always in error (or untrue, or false). Since moral realists want to say that moral judgments are sometimes true, I have suggested that it is up to them to explain how they understand this, and to support their claims.

It is only to be expected that some moralists will try to defend their moralism by appealing to religion, so Chapter Three contained an examination of the claim that value and obligation depend on the attitudes and commands of a god. Unfortunately for the moralists, religious morality not only fails to solve their problems, it is burdened with a host of new ones. In Chapter Four we tuned to the attempts of secular moralists to

establish morality without reference to divine commands and attitudes, and to the efforts of empiricists like Hume and Mackie to criticize the very idea of objective morality.

Most moral philosophers today would admit that the proponents of the religious and secular versions of morality discussed in Chapters Three and Four have not yet succeeded in answering the main objections that have been raised against them. This, however, has not prevented everyday moralists and those same moral philosophers from making and attempting to defend their judgments about what they take to be good, bad, right, and wrong. Since moralists continue to moralize, the main business of this chapter will be to survey some ways they have of doing that. After a brief look at metaethics, on which we have already spent some time, we will examine a range of answers that moral philosophers have given to “normative” questions about what we ought to seek, and do, and be. We will hear about egoism, hedonism, utilitarianism, deontology, and other isms and ologies; and in the process we will be exposed to a number of relatively subtle distinctions. While this will in no way be the full story of normative ethics, I hope it will be enough to make it clear what the error theorist wants to reject. Even navigating this truncated account will take a bit of patience from the reader, but there is no other way to come to understand the kinds of moral beliefs people adopt and philosophers defend and attack. Skeptics doubt, and error theorists reject, normative theories of value and obligation like hedonism, egoism, and utilitarianism, but both intellectual caution and philosophical etiquette advise us not to reject a belief without first checking it out.

1. Metaethics. According to Gilbert Harman, it should have been obvious to philosophers sooner than it was that “the whole distinction between meta-ethics and normative ethics had to be abandoned” (Harman [2], viii). It would, he claimed, be better to investigate the philosophical problems of morality “without the meta-ethical baggage” (Harman, viii). He said that two things are wrong with metaethics: it is based on “highly controversial and possibly even incoherent assumptions about meaning,” and it isn’t interesting. And yet after saying this, Harman himself gave some pretty interesting answers to several metaethical questions. We have already seen how he explained the moral ‘ought’, and in both *The Nature of Morality* and more recent writings he has criticized competing metaethical theories and defended his own form of ethical relativism.

Richard Taylor was another philosopher who took a dim view of metaethics. He opened the preface to his book *Good and Evil* with these words:

One would search in vain in these pages for any discussion of the naturalistic fallacy . . . or the other fastidious puzzles that have somehow come to be thought of in some circles as important to ethics. Also missing are appraisals of utilitarianism, deontologism, intuitionism, cognitivism, and the rest of the baggage of what has pretentiously come to be known as *metaethics* (Taylor, xi).

Like Harman, Taylor can occasionally be found indulging in metaethics. His claim that “the moral rightness or wrongness of anything is entirely relative to accepted rules of

behavior, and without meaning except in relation to such rules” is pure metaethics, as is his claim that moral right and wrong “can be defined in terms of rules” (Taylor, 139-40).

Both Taylor and Harman wrote about metaethical baggage, a metaphor that suggests unnecessary supplies and superfluous equipment. As they saw it, just when we get excited about some question about what is good or right (a normative question), the metaethicist snaps open his bag and drags out endless distinctions, demands for justification, and quibbles about meaning. Perhaps Taylor, Harman, and the many devotees and practitioners of “applied ethics” feared that we may never get back to (what they took to be) the real questions unless we can manage to keep that Pandora’s bag of metaethical diversions closed.

They may have been right about that, but we will only be in a position to determine the fairness of this complaint if we invite the metaethicist to lay some of the contents of the bag before us. What are these “boring” questions and “fastidious” puzzles but questions and puzzles about meaning and justification? When we ask what words like ‘good’, ‘right’, ‘justice’, ‘rights’, or ‘duty’ mean, or what some person means by them, or how they are being used in a moral judgment, or even what a moral judgment is, we are asking **metaethical** questions. When we learn that Moore believed that “the enjoyment of beautiful objects” is intrinsically good, we learn something about his **normative** theory of value. When we ask what he meant by ‘good’, we have again asked a **metaethical** question, and when he said that there is no way to answer this question, that ‘good’ is an indefinable term, he was taking a **metaethical** stand.

Taylor didn't want to waste time with "utilitarianism, deontology, intuitionism, cognitivism, and the rest of the baggage," but responsible philosophers cannot ignore (or adopt) these theories just because it pleases them to do so. Moore was an intuitionist who said that goodness is a "non-natural property," and a utilitarian who said that the principle of utility is true by definition. Would Taylor and Harman encourage us not to ask whether these ideas are to be accepted or rejected?

Moore's metaethical targets were those who thought that 'good' can be defined. The controversy between Moore and his opponents was indeed flawed by a primitive concept of meaning, but even when we let primitive concepts of meaning go, we cannot safely ignore the question "What do you mean by 'good'?" Everyone who uses words like 'good' and 'right' in moralist ways is caught by conventions we all share, one of which is that people who make moral and value judgments may be asked to explain their words and support their claims. What, then, is the point of complaining about metaethics? What could be clearer than the contrast between making moral judgments and discussing their meaning, use, and support? And if we do make them, how can we hope to avoid discussing their meaning, use, and support?

We must admit that our metaethical baggage does contain, in addition to our necessities, superfluous distinctions and fastidious puzzles. No matter what the topic, some of the philosophers who discuss it will end up light-years away from the heart of the issue. But a topic is not disqualified as a legitimate candidate for investigation by the fact that it can lead philosophers astray. Even if we were to ban philosophical talk about meaning, there would remain many legitimate and sometimes answerable

questions about how people are using moral and evaluative language. If our serious metaethical requests for explanation and justification are disallowed, then it won't even be possible to find out whether our apparent moral disagreements with others are real disagreements, or merely verbal. That is the sort of thing we discover by asking metaethical questions or, as philosophers say, by "doing" metaethics.

2. Normative Ethics. Some *normative* judgments tell us how we ought to act, some tell us how we ought to be, and others express evaluations. Moral judgments, aesthetic judgments, even judgments of etiquette, are normative judgments. Two components of what has come to be called "normative ethics" are **the theory of value** and **the theory of obligation**. The question "What things are goods or ends in themselves?" said G. E. Moore, is the "fundamental question of Ethics" (Moore, 184). It is, at least, the fundamental question of the theory of value. But the theory of value isn't everything. Even if we come to believe that pleasure is intrinsically good, we would still lack an answer to the question of how we ought to behave. When we turn our concern from what is **good** to what is right, or to what we **ought** to do, we have moved to the theory of obligation and to questions about moral duties, principles, and prohibitions: Are we obliged to increase the pleasure (or happiness) in the world, or to keep our promises, or to treat others as we would like to be treated? When, if ever, is killing, lying, stealing, or violence morally permissible?

One further area of normative ethics, **the theory of rights**, may be added to the other two. The belief that we have moral rights, and the set of associated beliefs about what bearing this has on what we must and may do, are now inalienable components of

many moral theories. If someone has a moral right, like the right to life or liberty, others have a moral obligation to behave in ways that respect that right. Even normative theories that do not make rights basic owe us an explanation of where rights do come from. Utilitarians, for example, argue that we can recognize rights because (and when) the consequences of doing so are good. Theists, of course, will usually claim that rights come from God.

Before we look more closely at these three types of normative theory, I want to re-emphasize the point that there are many uses of evaluative terms that are not involved with any kind of moral realism. It is not words like 'good', 'bad', 'right', and 'wrong' that draw the fire from moral error theorists, it is uses of those words (or of any others) that presuppose the existence of objective values or the inescapability of the demands of morality.

3. Nonmoral Uses of Evaluative Language. To say that a knife is a good one, or that someone is a good burglar or a good friend, is to make a value judgment, but not a judgment of intrinsic value. These uses of 'good' depend on interests, purposes, and conventional standards that even error theorists may find useful to adopt, or impossible to do without. Sharpness in knives, stealth in burglars, and loyalty in friends are qualities sought by everyone looking for good knives, burglars, or friends.

The words 'ought', 'right', 'must', 'obligation', and 'duty' are used in making judgments of obligation. To have an obligation is, to use a metaphor dear to the moralist, to be *bound* to do something. If it is a moral obligation then we are "morally bound," but not all judgments of obligation are judgments of *moral* obligation. When we

say that someone who wants to avoid colds ought to take Vitamin C, our use of 'ought' has nothing to do with morality. We are using the word to give advice or to make a recommendation. Other non-moral uses of 'ought' show up in "The train ought to be here in five minutes," and in "You ought to have seen them in their funny hats."

When we speak of the *right* road, or wrench, or size, or color, we are not speaking about "moral" rightness, but about the ability of the item mentioned to meet a specific need. It is the right road to take to get to Pataskala, or the right wrench to use on your lug bolt. When we say it is the *duty* of a letter carrier to deliver the mail, we are talking about a "postal duty," an "assigned duty," not a moral one. Letter carriers acquire this "postal obligation" in virtue of their job. They may or may not assume that they have a *moral* duty to perform this contractual duty. Other professions generate other professional (but not yet moral) obligations. Teachers *ought* to meet their classes, keep appointments, and give grades related to the students' performance; bus drivers *ought* to stop at red lights and bus stops, and plumbers *ought* to make house calls.

The concept of a right also has both moral and non-moral uses. Many of our rights are firmly and fully based in the constitution and our laws. Skepticism here is out of place—if the relevant documents say we have them, we have them—even if we aren't allowed to exercise them. We don't have to be moral realists or believe in abstract moral rights to appreciate the right to make a right turn on a red light, to remain silent when arrested, or to engage in the pursuit of happiness.

It is important to emphasize these points because moralists sometimes take advantage of our innocent (that is, non-moral) uses of 'ought' or 'good' or 'right'. If an

error theorist claims a civil right, or tells a speaker that he ought to use a microphone, or uses the word 'good' in any of a thousand non-moralist ways, then an opportunistic moralist might accuse him or her of hypocritical moralism. The charge is based on pretending that the speaker's non-moral use of a word is really a moral use of that word. This "Gotcha" move is often not meant completely seriously, but if it is, it is evidence of a failure to understand that error theorists only need to avoid certain uses of certain words, or of a failure to realize that this is something that can be done

4. Value. Moore made the metaethical claim that 'good' is the name of a simple nonnatural property, but when he began to enumerate the things with that property, he was answering a normative question about value. His question was "What things are good?" and his answer was a **Pluralistic** one: many things (including pleasure) have the property named by the word 'good'. For example, he said that while the "mere existence of what is beautiful does appear to have some intrinsic value," that value is negligible beside "that which attaches to the consciousness of beauty" (Moore, 189).

Someone with a **Monistic** theory of value says that only one kind of thing is good in itself, and that if anything else is good, it is because it is related in the right way to what is good in itself. **Hedonism** is the best known monistic theory of value. Hedonists say that only pleasure is intrinsically good. To this they often add the rider that pain is the only intrinsically bad thing. Other value monists identify the good as power, or friendship, or life, or naturalness, or virtue, or happiness, or some other thing.

For as long as there have been hedonists, there have been questions about the nature of happiness and about its relationship to pleasure. Happiness is usually said to

be deeper and longer-lasting than pleasure. In Aristotle's famous words, "one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy" (Aristotle [2], 1098 a 18-20). But not all hedonists distinguish between pleasure and happiness. Jeremy Bentham, who tells us that the standard of right and wrong is "fixed to the throne" of pleasure and pain, uses 'pleasure' and 'happiness' as synonyms, and with staggering inaccuracy says that "benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness" all amount to the same thing (Bentham, 2). John Stuart Mill, who also held that pleasure and the freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends, stipulated that "by happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure" (Mill [2], 7).

Even though Bentham and Mill claim to be using 'happiness' and 'pleasure' synonymously, there are important differences between the ways these two hedonists understand these concepts. Bentham appears to think of pleasure and pain as feelings, definite sensations with quantitatively comparable intensities and durations—equal quantities of pleasure are equally good, but greater quantities are better. "Quantity of pleasure being equal," he said, "pushpin is as good as poetry." If we get twenty units of pleasure (philosophers jokingly call them "hedons") playing *Angry Birds* or watching reality shows on TV, then, unless there are other factors to consider, that is just as good as getting twenty hedons listening to Bach, discussing philosophy, or helping orphans.

Mill could not bring himself to believe in Bentham's quantitative approach to value, and insisted that "some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others." It is better to be "a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied, better to

be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied,” he said (Mill [2], 8). The *quality* of the satisfactions available in an average human life must certainly outweigh the quantity of pig or fool satisfaction felt by the most favored pig or fool.

When Mill asked what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, which is the right question, his answer was that the better of two pleasures is the one that would be preferred by those acquainted with both. I doubt that everyone equally acquainted with both will make the same choice, but even if they would, and even if we were willing to call what they chose the better pleasure, we would still only have a way to *tell* which of any two pleasures is “better,” and not an answer to the question of what *makes* one pleasure better than another. It cannot be that one pleasure is made better by the fact that it is or would be preferred by some person or group of people, however qualified.

Immanuel Kant also subscribed to a belief in intrinsic value. He said that a “good will” is not good because of its effects, it is good in itself. A good will acts from the motive of duty, not in pursuit of any desire or end. “When a good will is considered in itself,” he said, “then it is to be esteemed very much higher than anything which it might ever bring about merely in order to favor some inclination, or even the sum total of all inclinations.” Even if a good will is powerless to attain its end, it would, “like a jewel, still shine by its own light as something which has its full value in itself” (Kant [3], 7-8). A moral error theorist might wish to inform Kant that jewels do not shine by their own light, and that the traits we value are cold and inert until we radiate them with our affection.

Four fundamental phrases nourish and perpetuate the theory of value—they are: ‘intrinsically good’, ‘inherently good’, ‘good in itself’, and ‘good as an end’. They all

emphasize the objectivity and independence of the kind of goodness the words are used to identify. Different philosophers favor different ways of putting it, but basic idea is the same. ***Intrinsic or inherent goodness*** is a kind of goodness a thing has apart from its relation to other things. Something is intrinsically or inherently good if it is good no matter what else is true and no matter how anyone feels about it. A thing is ***good in itself*** when it is good just because of the kind of thing it is—its goodness is part of its very nature. Finally, a thing that is ***good as an end*** is worth choosing apart from any consequences that might flow from choosing it, or use to which it might be put. The four phrases are virtually interchangeable, and while our explanations may combine to throw some light on the intrinsic part, they do nothing at all to help explain the goodness.

Some moralists follow Aristotle and say that happiness is “The Good,” and that other things are good only because they lead to happiness. But what do we say when someone asks what makes happiness good? It is not easy to say what happiness is good for, and if we do think of something, we will soon find ourselves facing the further question of what that is good for, and so on till we run out of answers or time. The claim that something is *intrinsically good*, or *good in itself*, or *good as an end*, is designed to stop this game by heading off further questions. If something is intrinsically good, it is good, period; and nobody gets to ask “What makes it good?” or “What is it good for?”

Even if the claim that something is intrinsically good is used as a way to terminate a regress of questions, is it any more than a useful rhetorical device? Do things actually have a kind of value that has nothing to do with their purpose, effects, or relations? Since we learned to use ‘good’ to evaluate actual items according to familiar

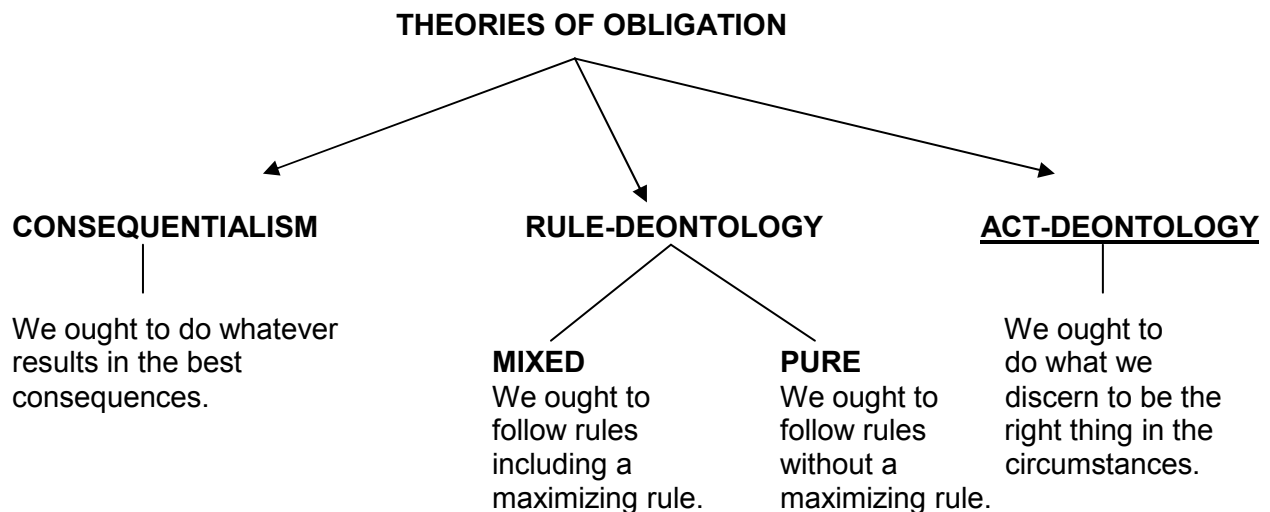
(if implicit) standards and purposes, why would we ever think that we can apply the term to evaluate items apart from all standards and purposes? Something is a good apple if it is tart, large, unmarked, and free of worms. Those are the kinds of apples we want. A car that does not break down and is fast (or easy on gas, or impressive) is a good car. Bill is a good plumber and Bob is a good friend. But what is it for a thing not to be “a good X,” and not to be “good-for Y” or “good as Z,” but just good, period—good-in-itself? If someone were to speak up for the “intrinsically useful,” that which is useful in itself, useful as an end, we would see the joke. Here, we do not.

The claim that something is intrinsically good, good as an end, or good in itself defies both explanation and understanding. And yet the idea is as widespread as moralism itself. Most moralists would say that unless some things are good in this special way, we are doomed to arbitrary meaninglessness. Depending on how ‘arbitrary meaninglessness’ is defined, the error theorist can either reject that conclusion or point out that since nothing is intrinsically bad, neither is arbitrary meaninglessness. The worst thing about not having intrinsic value to anchor our choices is the frustration of our desire for security and leverage—but those desires can be overcome, and the lack of intrinsic value can eventually be seen as liberating. In any case, we gain no stability by dropping our anchor into a perfect vacuum.

5. Obligation. If we say that a thing has intrinsic value, nothing follows about what we or anyone ought to do with, to, or about it. For example, we can believe that pleasure is good in itself without believing that we are morally obliged to experience or to cause as much of it as possible. The idea that the value of something requires action

from us takes us beyond the theory of value to the theory of obligation, where we encounter the belief that there are things that we are bound, in the moral way, to do or to refrain from doing.

Since most moralists think obligations are expressed by rules and principles, we can classify most theories of moral obligation on the basis of the kinds of rules they take to be fundamental. The exception is the **act-deontologist**, who believes that there are no general rules about what is right or wrong. Those moralists who believe that our only obligation is to choose actions with the best consequences are called **consequentialists**. By contrast, **rule-deontologists** reject this exclusive focus on results, and make moral obligation depend on rules that mention something *other than* or *in addition to* good or bad consequences. **Mixed rule-deontologists** say that the duty to maximize the good is only one of a number of our duties, and **pure rule-deontologists** say that any value we produce by acting is irrelevant to whether we have done what is right. Our duty is given by rules that say nothing about consequences.



Consequentialism. Consequentialists say we ought to do what produces the best consequences. A consequence of some action is something that *results* from the action, something the action brings about; and the best consequences are those that produce the most of whatever is good—happiness or possibly some other valued thing. What could be more plausible than a duty to do good and prevent harm? But when that idea shows up as the moral duty to do what leads to the best consequences it is hardly simple, and, when you think about it, it is not even that plausible.

The consequentialist, who says that our obligation is to do what leads to the *best* consequences, needs a theory of value to determine which consequences are the best. It is traditional to choose hedonism, the idea that pleasure alone is good as an end, and then to join it to some form of utilitarianism. The result is “**Hedonistic utilitarianism**,” the idea that we ought to do what maximizes happiness (or maybe pleasure) and/or minimizes unhappiness (or maybe pain). Other accounts of value produce other versions of utilitarianism, some more plausible than others, but none immune to devastating criticism.

We must also ask our consequentialists who they want us to take into consideration. Consequentialist accounts of obligation can be classified on the basis of whose happiness (or whatever) is taken into account in judging the action. As we can see by glancing at the following chart, at one end of the spectrum we find the **ethical egoist**, who holds that the only consequences that matter are those that affect the agent. At the opposite end we find those who want us to take into consideration the happiness or interests of all sentient beings—all beings capable of feeling or having

interests. These consequentialists are frequently identified as **utilitarians**, but so are those less inclusive moralists who count only the humans.

**A PERSON OUGHT TO DO WHAT LEADS
TO THE GREATEST GOOD FOR**

himself herself	the members of his/her family or tribe	the people in his/her state	all humans with some special feature	all human beings	all rational beings	all sentient beings
ETHICAL EGOISM	TRIBALISM	NATIONALISM	RACISM SEXISM	SPECIESISM		
				UTILITARIANISM		

Utilitarians need not agree on what Peter Singer has called their “spheres of considerability.” The speciesists, who include only humans within their spheres, still can be said to be utilitarians. Those concerned only about the good of the citizens of their own country (state, city, neighborhood), or those who include only blood relatives, or people of the same race, religion, or sex, cannot be called utilitarians. But even those utilitarians who include all sentient beings within their sphere of considerability can be asked whether they include future as well as present sentient beings. They can also be asked whether they want to compare the value of what actual beings have experienced with the value of what they *might have* enjoyed, had different choices been made. In deliberating about an abortion, for example, are we to compare the value of the state of the world after the abortion, with the value of a (hypothetical) state that includes the unaborting child? How could we possibly do that?

Since ethical egoism is sometimes used to justify selfishness, we can understand why someone may embrace it. But it is hard to imagine that anyone could actually believe that our only moral duty is to maximize the good for ourselves. How could anyone defend *that* duty, or take seriously a moral theory that made self-sacrifice immoral and described the exploitation of others as our moral obligation? Where would the duty to be selfish come from? It is clearly not a feature of our conventional morality, which points in the opposite direction.

While there is little call for a morality that limits the sphere of moral considerability to the person performing the action, there is an almost irresistible drift toward more and more inclusive groups. One reason for this is that we prefer generosity to selfishness in others. Another is that it is difficult to provide a moral justification for limiting our concern. If we consider only *some* of the creatures who suffer, how is the suffering we have ignored irrelevant? Bentham was clear about this and explicitly included “the rest of the animal creation” within his sphere of moral considerability. That makes sense because when we recognize a duty to increase happiness or diminish suffering we must either include all beings capable of happiness and suffering, justify excluding some, or admit that our discrimination is arbitrary.

We all discriminate, but rarely do so arbitrarily. We live in a complex society and are embedded in a constantly fluctuating matrix of relationships. What we choose to do with, for, and to others varies with time and circumstance, and in ways that no rule could ever fully determine and no team of scientists could ever fully describe. When we decide what to do, the interests of our friends, relatives, and even those strangers that

we manage to care about, are factored in, but usually spontaneously, and not in any systematic or deliberate way. We will return to this point in Chapter Eight, where we discuss the making of decisions.

Objections to Utilitarianism. The moral advice of the utilitarian may turn out to be as bizarre as that of the egoist, but for the opposite reason. The idea that we have an obligation to maximize the good of others is revolutionary and demanding. The hedonistic utilitarian, for example, says it is our duty to neglect our own happiness, and that of our families and friends, when doing so will increase the general happiness, which it almost always will. It is no wonder that those who understand what these utilitarians are saying want to know why they think we have a moral obligation to engage in perpetual self-sacrifice, to neglect our families and those to whom we have conventional duties, and to engage in unrelenting altruism.

The fact that utilitarianism is so out of harmony with conventional morality allows philosophers to generate counterexamples to it at will. The method is simple: find a conflict between what a utilitarian must say about our duty and what our conventional morality says about our duty, and then count this against the utilitarian. The counterexamples come in four traditional styles.

(1) There is some act that maximizes the total good but it is one that we are obligated not to do. Suppose we can maximize the total happiness in the world by publicly torturing a universally hated villain. According to the

utilitarian, this is what we ought to do, but in fact, says the critic of utilitarianism, it is something that we ought not do.

(2) There is some act that maximizes the total good but it is one that we are not obligated to do. If we can relieve much suffering by selling our I-pads and distributing the proceeds to help feed hungry orphans, the utilitarian may have to say that, unless there is some alternative that will produce even more good, we ought to do this. But, the critic of utilitarianism will say, this is not something that we ought to do.

(3) There is some act that fails to maximize the total good, but it is one that we ought to do. Suppose we have made a death-bed promise to bury someone with his unfinished manuscript. According to the utilitarian we ought to break that promise if publishing the manuscript will produce more happiness than not publishing it; but, a critic may insist, we ought to keep that death-bed promise even if doing so will subtract from the world's happiness.

(4) There is some act that fails to maximize the total

good, but it is one that we may do. Almost all of our

normal daily actions will fail to maximize the total good.

We are not maximizing the total good when we take a walk

or a nap, or when we are watching television, eating candy,

or reading books about ethics. Since there are alternatives

to each of these actions that would produce more good,

the utilitarian will be forced to say that we ought to choose

one of them. But if anything is clear, says the critic of

utilitarianism, it is that many of these innocent pleasures

are morally permissible.

Counterexamples of all four types can be (and have been) offered by the dozens. The consistent hedonistic utilitarian appears to be committed to the belief that we ought to give up our own happiness, disregard agreements, lie, steal, kill, and use torture, when doing so increases the total amount of happiness, and the plain fact is that next to nobody believes this.

W. D. Ross said that the “essential defect” of utilitarianism is that “it ignores, or at least does not do full justice to, the highly personal character of duty” (Ross, 22). We think we owe our parents and our children special consideration, but the utilitarian may appear to be saying that we have a duty to maximize the total good without paying attention to the relationships among those involved. But we give money to the people

we know and to the people we owe, not to those who might benefit more from the gift. John Rawls was objecting to its problematic inclusiveness when he counted as one of its defects the fact that utilitarianism “does not take seriously the distinction between persons” (Rawls, 27).

It is, of course, open to the utilitarian with a hedonistic account of value to say that if depriving our family of food, lying to everyone, betraying our country, or anything else at all, promises to yield a net increase of happiness, then we ought to do it. “Yes,” this determined utilitarian can say, “my understanding of morality often puts me at odds with conventional morality, but that doesn’t mean I am wrong; indeed, it is by neglecting utility that conventional morality goes wrong. I can just ‘bite the bullet’ and reject each and every counterexample you offer.”

History gives us at least one clear example of someone who was not bothered by the conflict between his utilitarianism and conventional morality. William Godwin (1756-1836) opposed the use of physical force, thought the best social system was anarchism, and was a dedicated utilitarian who concluded that resources ought to go where they will do the most good. “I am bound,” he said, “to employ my talents, my understanding, my strength and my time, for the production of the greatest quantity of general good. Such are the declarations of justice, so great is the extent of my duty” (Godwin, 175). In a chapter on “Justice” he argued that gratitude is improper because if it will do the most good for you to give me something, you have an obligation to give it, and I to take it. He also accepted the punishment of the innocent and other bitter pills philosophers try to force upon utilitarians, who are usually too conventional to swallow them.

Moral philosophers often distinguish between **objective** and **subjective** versions of consequentialism. The objective version says that we ought to do what will *in fact* result in the best consequences, and the subjective version says that we ought to do what *we believe* will result in the best consequences. Both opinions have their problems. Consider the objective variety, which seems to be the position taken by Godwin. Unless we can restrict what can be counted as a consequence, it is no easier to find out what we should have done after the act than it was before the act. If we allow that the consequences of our actions extend indefinitely after our deaths, we will go to our graves without knowing whether any action of ours was right or wrong.

What is worse, there may not even be such a thing as the (total set of) consequences of an action. Even at judgment-day there may be no way to identify some collection of items (events, things, actions, people, etc.) that make up “all and only” the consequences of what we have done. But even if we could make sense of the idea of “all the consequences of an action,” we would still never know which of our many possible choices *would have* produced the best consequences, because there is no way for a consequentialist, even one with a vivid imagination, say anything useful about the many roads we did not take.

When we move to the subjective form of consequentialism we will no longer be required to compare actual with alternative possible consequences, but we will have departed further from consequentialism than the description of our position may suggest. If our obligation is only to do what we *think* will produce good consequences, we are not morally bound to produce good consequences at all. In fact we can produce

very bad consequences without doing anything wrong because, on this view, an act is not right because it has the best consequences, it is right because the person performing it believes it will. Whatever we call this account of obligation, there is little reason to think we are always morally obliged to do what *we think* will lead to the best consequences, since often our beliefs result from carelessness, prejudice, manipulation, or willful ignorance.

Consequentialists try to remedy the situation by moving to what we might call (but only on this one occasion) “sufficiently reflective subjective consequentialism,” according to which our moral obligation is to do what, after adequate investigation and deliberation, we believe will lead to the best consequences. This might seem to solve the problem that undermined the purely subjective version, but it is still a very demanding requirement, and the notions of “adequate” and “sufficient” will never be explained to everyone’s satisfaction. How much investigation is enough, how is that determined, and by whom?

One more distinction and then we are done with utilitarianism. The **act-utilitarian** says that our actual moral obligation in each case is a function of the actual or expected consequences that result from the particular act being evaluated. By contrast, the **rule-utilitarian** says that what is actually right or wrong in a given case is determined not by the consequences flowing from the act in question, but by whether or not the act is in conformity with a “justified rule.” If “Do not lie” is a justified rule, then even in those instances when lying leads to better consequences than telling the truth, it is still wrong to lie. What justifies a rule is the fact, if it is a fact, that following it (or trying

to follow it) has sufficiently good consequences. We are skipping many details and complications here, but in effect the rule-utilitarian asks not which *actions* have the greatest utility but which *rules* do.

Rule-utilitarianism brings utilitarian morality closer to common sense morality. Sometimes moralists think that they ought to do something even when the consequences will be bad, and the rule-utilitarian leaves room for this. But if it is hard to determine the consequences of any particular action, it is far more difficult to determine the consequences of general adherence to a rule or practice. If you doubt this, consider the difference between trying to find out what might happen if you tell the truth on a particular occasion and trying to find out what would happen if everyone always told the truth. Rule-utilitarianism apparently involves even more fantasy than does act-utilitarianism.

Rule-deontologists and rule-utilitarians both appeal to rules, but rule-utilitarians say the rules are justified by the good that would result from everyone following them. This justification is not available to rule-deontologists, who usually give no defense of their preferred moral rules. But of course neither act-utilitarians nor rule-utilitarians have been able to justify the principle of utility, the fundamental rule they use to justify individual acts and general rules. As we saw in Chapter One, Bentham actually seemed annoyed at the thought that anyone might ask him to defend his beloved principle. He said that it has been “formally contested by those who have not known what they have been meaning.” He added that it is not subject to any direct proof because “that which is used to prove everything else, cannot itself be proved,” and that

to offer a proof of the principle of utility “is as impossible as it is needless.” (Bentham, 4) Impossible, yes; but why needless? We have already seen how out of touch most, if not all, forms of consequentialism are with the everyday moral feelings and beliefs of the average moralist, so why should we give such a radical and demanding principle a free pass?

Deontology. Consequentialists adopt a single standard for right action—our obligation, they say, is to produce the best consequences. **Act-deontologists** reject the idea that there are any firm and general rules about what is right and wrong. They are “particularists” who think that we can know (or see, or intuit) what we ought to do in each particular situation (or at least some particular situations). **Rule-deontologists** say that we have moral obligations to follow rules *other than* or *in addition to* the maximizing rules used by consequentialists. Rule-deontologists can allow that *one* of our duties is to produce good consequences, but this will not be the only duty they recognize. If it were, they would be consequentialists.

Rule-deontologists can say that we have a duty to produce good consequences, but they can also deny this. If they say that our duty is to follow a single rule (Kant’s Categorical Imperative) or a set of rules that say nothing of consequences (the Ten Commandments), they can be called **Pure** rule-deontologists. **Mixed** rule-deontologists believe that our moral duties flow from rules that require us to produce good consequences as well as from rules that do not mention consequences.

Deontologists bring us back to earth by acknowledging the demands of conventional morality. The rule-deontologist accepts rules against torture, duplicity,

unfairness, and property violations as if they were the most natural things in the world, which they are. After all, they reflect our strong natural preferences not to be tortured, deceived, exploited, and invaded. H. A. Prichard, who appeared in Chapter Four as a moral intuitionist, was an act deontologist who argued that all forms of consequentialism fail “to correspond to our actual moral convictions.” He said that after we have examined a case in depth and with imagination, we “apprehend” the rightness or wrongness of some particular action—*this* theft or *this* lie (Prichard, p. 4). For him, the judgment that an action is right does not depend on the consequences of that action, and it is not a derivation from any general rule. It is something we just apprehend.

Prichard was right when he said that consequentialist theories of obligation have their problems, but the failure of consequentialism, or even the failure of *all* rule theories, does not automatically establish the truth of act-deontology. There is always the moral error theory, the rejection of both consequentialist and deontological theories of obligation. But this option was never seriously considered by intuitionists like Prichard, who reckoned that if we can’t prove that some actions are right, we must know it without proof.

Another modern moral intuitionist who was a deontologist, but a rule-deontologist rather than an act-deontologist, was W. D. Ross. At the end of Chapter Four we saw how Ross claimed that we apprehend what he called *prima-facie* duties. Of the duties he mentioned (fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement, and non-maleficence), only the duties of beneficence and non-maleficence would be acknowledged by consequentialists. Ross’ array of *prima-facie* duties reflects our

ordinary morality far better than act-utilitarianism. The mixed rule-deontologist will be able to say that since the duty of self-improvement tempers the duty of beneficence, we are probably not morally required to drop out of college to help sick and hungry strangers. The duty of justice demands a fair distribution of the good and the bad, and the duty of fidelity often requires us to keep promises and pay debts, even if we might be able to produce more good in some other way.

Ross' rule-deontology is intuitively plausible because it is a collection of the sorts of rules we have been pushing on each other for eons. The lessons that impart the duties of fidelity and the rest are taught so thoroughly that the requirements seem to be dictated by nature itself, self-evident, inescapable. By contrast, the hopelessly vague duty to maximize the good is both counterintuitive and forbiddingly demanding. One of the great services of *prima-facie* duties is to put the moral brakes on the quest for utility. For example, we want to be left alone to pursue projects that would be difficult to justify on utilitarian grounds, so we claim to have a duty of self-improvement, or, as we are about to see, a right to pursue harmless activities of our own choosing.

6. Rights. Deontological rules like Ross' duty of self-improvement do manage to shield us from the demands of unbridled consequentialism, but critics of rule theories say that all rules have exceptions, and no one has the slightest idea how to extract an actual duty from a competing host of *prima-facie* ones. These and other difficulties and defects of rule theories sometimes turn rule theorists into rights theorists because when we want to protect our interests from the demands of consequentialists, moral rights

seem at least as useful as moral rules, and they have considerably more rhetorical power.

If we have any moral intuitions at all, they tell us that it is wrong to harvest the organs of one healthy but unwilling individual to save the lives of five who need various organ transplants. Most moralists would even say that it is wrong to kidnap some vagrant and take one of his kidneys in order to save the life of a scientist on the verge of discovering a cure for cancer. It is wrong, many would say, because it violates that vagrant's rights.

Rights are useful because we can appeal to them without making fantastic and unbelievable calculations and projections. Forbidding some people to speak may or may not have good consequences, but we don't have to know the truth about this (if there is a truth) to claim that someone's right to free speech has been violated. But what is this idea of a right? There are, of course, legal and constitutional rights, and these notions are not difficult to explain. We have a legal or constitutional right (or duty) if the law or constitution says that we do. If we belong to some organization with rules, then we have the rights (and duties) given us by the rules. These conventional or "institutional" rights have their complications and difficulties, but compared to the idea of a moral right, they are straightforward and not in the least mysterious.

It is entirely possible that the concept of a moral right borrows what meaning it has from legal, political, and institutional contexts. We naturally think of rights in terms of being granted them. If an earthly sovereign grants us our legal rights, then perhaps a superhuman sovereign grants us our moral rights—as the Declaration of Independence

says. This divine gift theory of moral rights, like the divine command theory of moral obligation, is open to criticism. But so is the alternative, which is that we have rights simply because we are human. This idea is vague, and unless we are content with blatant speciesism, we will have to allow that the same argument appears to give dogs, cats, and bears rights as well—just because they are dogs, cats, and bears. We might rule out the animals by saying that we get our rights by entering into agreements with others like ourselves, but then we are left with a watered-down conventionalist idea of rights that makes it hard to see how they can be binding or inalienable, as they are often thought to be.

Thomas Hobbes said that in a state of nature each person has a right to all things. He called this the **Right of Nature**, and his idea was that people in a state of nature are “permitted,” in the sense that they are not forbidden, to do as they choose. This is often said to be a right in the **weak sense** because it is really no more than the complete absence of restrictions. No one is required or forbidden to do anything by our having this sort of right.

The rights that matter to us are rights in the **strong sense**. If a person has a right in the strong sense, then others are restricted from acting, or required to act, in certain ways. Rights in the strong sense may be either **negative rights**, which require others not to interfere with the right-holder, or **positive rights**, which require others to aid the right-holder. Someone who “takes rights seriously” will concentrate on negative and positive rights in the strong sense.

Locke gave us a stronger concept of a 'right' than the bare liberty acknowledged by Hobbes, though the rights he had in mind seem to be negative rather than positive ones. He said that even in a state of nature each person has a right to life, liberty, and property, with the result that it is wrong, even in a state of nature, to kill others, to enslave them, or to deprive them of property which is theirs. Your rights to life and liberty make it wrong for me to kill or confine you, but Locke did not say that it is wrong for me (or for us) to fail to supply you with what you need in order to stay alive or free, which is what someone would say who believed that the right to life and liberty are positive rights.

In 1789 the French National Assembly proclaimed the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen." Among our "imprescriptable" rights, they included rights to liberty, property, and security, and the right to resist oppression. From then on, there have been determined defenders and critics of such rights. In *Nonsense upon Stilts*, Jeremy Waldron collects attacks on this natural rights tradition by Bentham, Edmund Burke, and Karl Marx—liberal, conservative, and socialist critics of rights. Bentham thought so little of rights that he wrote something he called "No French Nonsense: or A Cross Buttock for the first Declaration of Rights: together with a kick of the A – for the Second . . . by a practitioner of the Old English Art of Self Defense" (Waldron, 32). He thought that the many rights-claims made during the French Revolution were arbitrary and groundless expressions of selfish personal preferences, and he described the claim that people have rights ungrounded by consequences as "nonsense upon stilts."

Mill, who did not follow Bentham on all points, followed him on this one. He declared himself willing to “forego any advantage which could be derived to my argument from the idea of abstract right as a thing independent of utility” (Mill [1], 14). “To have a right,” he said, is “to have something which society ought to defend me in the possession of. If the objector goes on to ask why it ought, I can give him no other reason than general utility” (Mill [2], 52). To this consequentialist derivation of rights, Mill adds an explanation of the “peculiar energy” of the feeling of obligation that goes with the concept of a right. Our passion for rights is inflamed by our need for security, something “no human being can possibly do without” (Mill [2], 53). Since it is a matter of “making safe for us the very groundwork of our existence,” the emotions that gather around our rights tend to be the strongest, and our claim to a right “assumes that character of absoluteness, that apparent infinity and incommensurability with all other considerations which constitute the distinction between the feeling of right and wrong and that of ordinary expediency and in expediency.” (Mill [2], 53)

Every identifiable group speaks of and for its rights, and too many individuals who want something tend to claim it as their right. This was perhaps the thing about rights that bothered Bentham so much:

When a man has a political caprice to gratify, and is determined to gratify it, if possible, at any price, when he feels an ardent desire to see it gratified but can give no reason why it should be gratified, when he finds it necessary to get the multitude to join with him, but either stoops not to enquire

whether they would be the better or the happier for doing so,
or feels himself at a loss to prove it, he sets up a cry for rights
(Bentham, 36).

It is clear, at least to the error theorist, what is going on here. Utilitarians are right when they object to the idea of fundamental moral rights, and deontologists are right when they argue against any utilitarian defense of moral rules or rights. We have learned to claim our rights, and perhaps to believe in them as well, but we should have been made suspicious long ago that our intuitions about what moral rights we have, and even about what moral rights are, depend predictably on our needs, desires, interests, and training.

The ways to moralize are as uncountable as the disagreements among moralists. Those who embrace one theory of obligation will be convinced that proponents of other theories of obligation have failed to see the truth. Utilitarians differ among themselves about how to state utilitarianism, and rights-theorists disagree about which rights are actual, and about the relative stringency of the rights they agree we do have. Each theory mentioned in this chapter has been defended in many books, and attacked in more. All seem to take it for granted that everyone is involved in a search for the truth—the truth about what is really good, or the truth about how a person ought to act. But if there is no truth here, if all the claims of the moralists about what is intrinsically good and morally right and wrong are in error, as the error theorist believes, then the study of normative ethics is of limited “value,” and our time might be spent more productively.

Chapter Six (June 2012)

From Impasse to Abolition

“Morality: The Peculiar Institution”

Bernard Williams

In Chapter One I observed that it would be illuminating and convenient if we could say that just as atheists deny the objective existence of God, amoralists deny the objective existence of moral facts and properties. But I also observed that it might mislead, because recently the term ‘amoralist’ has been used, with increasing frequency, to stand for someone who accepts morality but ignores its requirements and prohibitions. I will hereafter, but rarely, refer to this character as a “contemporary moral philosopher’s amoralist” or as a **CMP-amoralist**. It is important to remember that since CMP-amoralists “judge things right or wrong and yet are completely unmoved,” they are, as far as their beliefs are concerned, just moral realists. Quite a few moral philosophers, because of their faith in the power of moral beliefs to motivate, deny that CMP-amoralism is a genuine option for anyone.

Moral anti-realists, who have stopped believing in the objective existence of moral facts and values, can be divided into **moral error theorists** and **non-cognitivists**. The moral error theorists fall into two bins—one containing those who give up the practice of speaking and thinking in moral terms, the **moral abolitionists**, and one stocked with those who retain that practice, the **moral fictionalists**. The moral abolitionists are not optimistic about the value of the mistaken belief in moral objectivity, and they are unwilling to do what is necessary to participate in the practice. The moral

fictionalists retain the practice—out of habit or courtesy, or because they think we will all be better off if most of us continue to believe in the myth of morality.

1. The Moral Error Theory, its Rivals and its Critics. Gilbert Harman was thinking of the error theory, and probably of moral abolitionism, when he described what he called “extreme nihilism” as the belief that “morality is a delusion, and that moral judgments are to be abandoned the way an atheist abandons religious judgments” (1977, *The Nature of Morality*, pp. 1-12). In Chapter Two we saw how Harman argued that extreme nihilism is “hard to accept” because it implies that “there is nothing wrong with murdering your father, that slavery is not unjust, and that Hitler’s extermination camps were not immoral.” He tried to avoid having to say these things and to separate himself from “extreme nihilism” by adopting a form of subjective moral relativism that allowed him to say that murder, slavery, and genocide, for example, are morally wrong.

Bernard Williams wrote about a person who is “immune to moral considerations” in that he “has no inclination to tell the truth or keep promises if it does not suit him to do so” (1972, *Morality*, p. 3). He referred to this individual as “the amoralist,” conceived of him as a sociopath, and described him as someone who may not even be “recognizably human” (1972, p. 8). We can call this sociopath an **S-amoralist**, but we need to remember that there are different ways of being immune to moral considerations, and that there are different ways to understand what is meant by ‘moral considerations’.

CMP-amoralists, who could turn out to be either sociopaths or saints, believe in morality but are “immune” to it because they are motivated by something other than

their own moral beliefs. “This is morally wrong,” they say, “but so what?” Moral error theorists gain *their* immunity by having abandoned both their moral beliefs and any tendency to take moral considerations seriously. But what are “moral considerations?” In one sense they are thoughts about intrinsic value or about moral obligations or rights. A moralist who was moved by the thought that “it was the right thing to do” was moved by a moral consideration in this first sense. A second use of the phrase ‘moral considerations’ (call it ‘moral considerations*’) is to refer to a vague family of thoughts and feelings that soften our more aggressive impulses and lead us to be cooperative, fair, truthful, and compassionate. Both CMP-amoralists and moral error theorists may be moved by exposure to suffering, that is, by moral considerations*, but not by being told that suffering is intrinsically bad or that others have a moral right to their help. We all worry about people who are unmoved by the suffering of others, and we understand Williams’ concerns about the S-amoralists. But those sociopaths are called sociopaths and even monsters because they don’t care about the suffering of others, not because they “reject morality.” Someone bound only by the dictates of some harsh morality and utterly without affection, sympathy, or kindness would be a monster too—a moral monster.

When we arrive at the point of making a decision, many things other than moral considerations (and moral considerations*) come into play. When morality tells us to do what we want to do, we are happy enough to imagine ourselves to be following its advice, but when it tells us not to do what we want to do, or to do what we do not want to do, we often ignore it or figure out some way to interpret its commands in a more

congenial way. Morality may be less like a compass than a weather vein, which is always subject to the winds of desire.

2. What can be said to the moral error theorist? Error theorists who say that there are no moral facts are often met with baffled (or feigned) astonishment. This has been called the “Argument from the Incredulous Stare.” Defenders of objective morality outdo themselves thinking up repellent or even monstrous acts and then daring the error theorist to deny that these things are morally wrong. How, they ask, can there be nothing wrong with bear-baiting, dwarf bowling, genocide, or pounding nails into live infants, chopping them up, and feeding them to their mothers? That last horror was provided by Russ Shafer-Landau, who claimed that it is an eternally true moral principle that this is something it would be morally wrong to do (*Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?*, p. 88). But this proliferation of horrors is wasted effort because, as anyone who understands the position of the error theorist will realize, no description of some act, however horrendous, is going to convert an alert moral anti-realist to moral realism. A person’s rejection of moral objectivity is not based on ignorance of the world’s cruelty. Nor is a person’s cruelty inevitably caused or amplified by a failure to believe in objective moral values or obligations.

Williams began his book *Morality* by looking for an answer to the S-amoralist, (the sociopath) who cares about no one; but he realized that “the idea of arguing him into morality is surely idiotic” (Williams [1], 8). Accordingly, he turned to a less extreme character—one it is, presumably, not idiotic to try to argue into morality. His example was the stereotype from a gangster movie “who cares about his mother, his child, even

his mistress” (Williams [1], 9). He helps people, but only when he feels like it and he considers the interests of others, but not consistently. Williams says that if “morality can be got off the ground rationally,” we ought to be able to get it off the ground in an argument with him.

Williams’ chances of getting morality off the ground here are pretty good, because it appears that gangsters already do have a moral code. In *The Sopranos*, Tony and his associates occasionally do things they would rather not do; and they often do these things because they acknowledge certain rules and obligations. Is that a morality? It is hard to say that it is not. It is at least an assorted and possibly inconsistent collection of fragments of morality, so it should be easy to offer the average mobster an argument based on something he already believes. It is unlikely that many of them have studied metaethics, embraced the error theory, or even managed to free themselves from many of the moral beliefs they acquired as they were growing up and being made. The moral philosopher who can catch some mobster making a moral judgment might be able to argue that unless that mobster is willing to make similar judgments about relevantly similar cases he will have to add inconsistency to his list of crimes. So, perhaps we can present the mobster with a conclusion that he would logically have to accept; but this will only have an effect if he is as deluded about morality as everyone else. If he understands how moral arguments work, he knows enough to deny that the cases are relevantly similar, to withdraw his moral judgment, or to tell the moralist to get lost.

3. Can we persuade someone who rejects morality to behave? An alert and dedicated sociopath, someone who doesn't care about anyone at all, can't be argued into caring, and any gangster who can be argued into morality will turn out not to have been an error theorist to begin with. Williams suggested that if we cannot argue someone who doesn't care into caring, perhaps we can at least persuade such a person to care. Maybe so. It may not be difficult to persuade attentive, open-minded, and non-defensive people (who are not sociopaths) to treat others with more consideration. We can try to get them to comprehend the real effects of hunger, homelessness, civil strife, ethnic cleansing, a broken prison system, and factory farms.

Merely knowing that there are such things as death squads is very different from "realizing" that there are. To *realize* that there are death squads is to go beyond giving assent to the words "There are death squads." It is to allow our imaginations to supply some details—orphans, widows, grieving parents, ruined lives, agony, despair, and unbearable loss. It is to listen to the stories of the victims, to see their tears, and to look into their hearts. Almost anyone can be persuaded to deal more compassionately with the suffering of someone *if they can be brought to realize what it is like to be the one who is suffering*. The difference between merely knowing and realizing is as great as the difference between being told how many people died in some disaster and actually speaking with some of the parents, spouses, and children who survived.

We eat veal, pork, beef, and poultry without a thought of what happened to the animal on the way to our plates. Because we are so insulated from the effects of what we do and cause to be done, Peter Singer's descriptions and pictures of animals in labs

and factory farms in his book *Animal Liberation* may have done more to persuade people to avoid animal products than all his arguments. But these days one can feast on a bottomless source of heart-breaking images by going to YouTube and entering the words “animal cruelty.”

But just as arguments won’t take hold unless the target of the argument accepts your premises, persuasion only works when we can appeal to present desires or attitudes, to some pity, compassion, or sympathy (to use one of Hume’s terms) that already exists.

There are those who will be unruffled by a picture of chickens packed into tiny cages in a hot, smelly cement-block building, or by a picture of an iron-starved veal calf in a darkened and cramped wooden stall. But others will be moved; and, as a rule, the more we *realize* what we are seeing, the more moved we will be. Fortunately for all living creatures, few humans lack a capacity to be moved by suffering. Unfortunately for all living creatures, many humans have learned to ignore things that might move them if they noticed. The best way to persuade people to deal in a more friendly way with others is to get them to pay more attention to the actual situation of others—to *realize* what it is like to be them. But it is not the moral error theorist who needs to work on this, it is the person who is able to ignore the suffering of others. Compassionate moral error theorists can be as concerned as compassionate moral realists about the welfare and happiness of others. The mere presence or absence of moral beliefs might not have much (or any) influence on what a person ends up feeling or doing.

4. Can someone who rejects morality be controlled by force? Anyone who identifies moral error theorists with S-amoralists may conclude that we have no choice but to threaten them, to isolate them, or even to lock them up. That may be necessary with committed criminals or sociopathic predators, but not with the average moral error theorist, who has as many pacific impulses as the next person, or with the informed and compassionate error theorist, who has more. There is a place in our world for coercion, and while moral error theorists will not believe that laws can be given a moral justification, they are not likely to want to live without them. We can all be glad that there are laws against breaking and entering, rape, and dumping toxic waste in the river.

5. Is the moral error theorist attacking a straw man? The error that the moral error theorist identifies and attacks is the belief in the objectivity of moral values, rights, and obligations. Such things, the error theorist claims, are not discovered in nature, they are the product of our genes, external circumstances, and human invention. This is what it means to say that morality is subjective, and it explains why “*Inventing Right and Wrong*,” the subtitle of Mackie’s book *Ethics*, is so apt. The task of the moral realist, then, seems to be to find some way to defend the claim that morality is not just something we make up. Near the end of Chapter One I suggested that moralists who believe that morality is objective and that moral principles or ways of life can be justified “come forth with explanations of what they mean, and with convincing reasons why we should believe what they say.”

In Chapter Three we saw some of the problems religious moralists face when they try to meet these demands, and in Chapter Four I argued that secular moralists from Plato on have also failed to explain or defend their belief in the allegedly inescapable dictates of morality. These failures suggest that the moral realist's best hope would be to put the burden of proof back on the error theorist. But how? Just citing examples of graphic cruelty is unlikely to convert an error theorist to a belief in morality. But shouldn't the moral error theorist be concerned about the fact that while there is much moral disagreement, there is also extensive agreement that in difficult situations there is a right thing to do. This near universal belief in morality does not count as very strong evidence for moral objectivity, but it is something the moral error theorist can be asked to explain.

As it happens, error theorists are quite willing to undertake this task because they think that their projectivist explanation of the various phenomena of morality is much more plausible than one based on metaphysically puzzling moral properties and mysterious ways to apprehend them. Moral error theorists will insist that however long this argument continues, eventually the burden of explaining how the demands of morality could possibly be both objective and prescriptive will end up where it always does, in the lap of the moral realist.

But maybe not. What if the moral realist can switch to offense by accusing the error theorist of attacking a "straw man," an opponent created for the sole purpose of being easily defeated. The error theorist, it might be said, has convincing arguments, but they are directed at an imaginary enemy. This is the 21st century, and very few

people believe in those queer, magnetic, hypnotic, Platonic moral properties anymore. According to Simon Blackburn, the matter of the correspondence of our moral statements with moral reality can be set aside as something only philosophers take seriously. While the “theorist” may “misinterpret the nature of our judgments, their origins, and the standards that justify them,” he says, “the first-order user of the vocabulary makes no mistake” (“Attitudes and Contents,” in *Essays in Quasi-Realism*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 185). I think that Blackburn may have failed to appreciate how quickly and naturally ordinary people can turn into philosophers. When challenged, which happens often, it doesn’t take “first-order users” of moral language long to become “theorists” and to start making familiar moves, producing ancient arguments, and speaking and acting as if they had absolutely no doubt about the reality of an objective difference between right and wrong.

It is indeed the 21st century, and one might think that no one would still embrace and try to defend a belief in objective values, but to think that would be to ignore the majority of those who actually use moral language. Some years ago, The Gallup Poll News Service released a story with the heading “Majority Considers Sex Before Marriage Morally Okay.” (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/3163/Majority-Considers-Sex-Before-Marriage-Morally-Okay.aspx>) When asked if sex between an unmarried man and woman is “morally acceptable or morally wrong,” 53% said it is morally acceptable, 42% said it is morally wrong, 3% said it depends on the situation, 1% said it isn’t a moral issue, and 1% had no opinion. The 95% who answered “morally acceptable” or “morally wrong” understood that they were not being asked if they disapprove of

unmarried sex, if unmarried sex is forbidden by the standards they embrace, or if “fully rational and informed creatures” would desire that such an act not be performed. They were asked if unmarried sex is morally wrong, and that is the question 95% of them answered.

As we pursued our “War on Terrorism” we became more attached than ever to the distinction between good and evil. Few doubted that the terrorists who planned and executed the plot on 9/11 were evil, or that it was our moral obligation to hunt them down and “bring them to justice.” When emotions are strong, relativistic talk or skeptical doubts about moral objectivity may seem insensitive or even dangerous. But it is as true after 9/11 as it was before, that there is no intelligible, non-mythological explanation of what it means for evil (or good) to be real. An “evil-doer” is, obviously, someone who “does evil,” but as Hobbes said (and as the moral error theorist firmly believes), there is no “common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of objects themselves.” The word ‘evil’ is used to express revulsion and to condemn, but it also carries a strong imputation of objectivity. Evil, people believe, is not something we imagine—it is real! The prevailing opinion seems to be that “the world” *does* contain a “common rule of good and evil” that *is* “taken from the nature of objects themselves.”

So the moral error theorist does have a genuine target. Almost everyone either believes, or is ready to believe, exactly what the error theorist finds to be in error. Moral realists may not subscribe to anything as fanciful as Dworkin’s “moral field” theory, but when it is time to protect their moral beliefs, they will not be at a loss for words. The class of moral realists is not limited to a few philosophy professors, as Blackburn

suggests; it includes everyone who has used moral language and been called upon to back it up, everyone who has projected and then defended the projections—in short, just about everyone.

6. Is the moral error theorist really a moral realist who either doesn't know it or won't admit it? “Very well,” the critic may say, “the world does contain plenty of people who sincerely believe and assert that moral judgments are objectively true, so maybe the real truth is that *everyone* is a moral realist and there are no genuine moral error theorists.” This would be true if, in spite of their claim that moral judgments are never true, error theorists invariably ended up believing and making them. It would also be true if even the explicit denial of a moral judgment, or the rejection of objective morality itself, had to be framed in moral language. Fortunately, it doesn't. The most radical objection to the existence of genuine error theorists would have to be the claim that even moral silence signifies a moral stance in favor of not taking a moral stance. But how would we know it is *moral* silence, and why think it signifies *anything*?

We can begin with the claim that moral error theorists and even moral abolitionists will occasionally find themselves presupposing, asserting, or even believing moral judgments. Moral error theorists, by definition, believe that moral claims are infected by error, but of course this needn't prevent them from experiencing temporary lapses and flashbacks, nor from professing moral judgments as the moral fictionalists do in order to influence others who do believe in morality. So critics of the moral error theory might do better by saying that moral error theorists will not be able to avoid asserting moral judgments *and meaning them in just the way the moral realist means*

them. For example, these critics might insist that George, an out and devout moral error theorist who has been angered and hurt by Martha's deceit, will eventually find himself asserting, if not to others, then at least to himself, that Martha ought not to have deceived him and that she is at best a very bad person. But why should this be? There are many quite nasty things George can say and think without dipping into moralist habits of thought which, we are assuming, he has knowingly forsworn. Atheists rarely find themselves breaking into religious belief and prayer (even, I venture, in foxholes), so why think that moral error theorists (who are not fictionalizing) will be any more likely to succumb to the impulse to moralize?

What moral realists and moral error theorists do share is the human condition—which means that they come to each event with a unique collection of plans, habits, hopes, emotions and desires. The critics of the moral error theory try to use these perfectly normal events and states against the error theorists. When error theorists become annoyed at careless drivers or at stubborn moral realists, it is argued that this proves they are moralists in spite of themselves, since any form of anger is a sure sign of an underlying moral judgment. But dissatisfactions come frequently and in many forms and strengths, and it is hard to believe that each and every little irk triggers its own major or minor moral feeling or thought. An emotion only becomes a *moral* emotion when it is spoken to another or to oneself, and that takes words. In our earliest days as hominids, anger made its appearance on the scene long before we developed language, without which there is no morality.

Other critics of the moral error theory say that since to desire something is to value it, and since to value something is to think it is valuable, no one who admits to desiring anything can deny the reality of value. The error theorist, unimpressed, will point out that desiring a thing may *not* be the same as valuing it, but even if it is, valuing a thing is definitely not the same as thinking that it is valuable. Infants and animals, after all, have and express desires, but they certainly don't think that the things they want are valuable in any way that would satisfy the rhetorical needs of a moral realist.

Still other critics say that when error theorists help someone or tell the truth this shows that they do have moral principles, perhaps without even realizing it. Error theorists who are fair can be accused of believing in justice, and those who help others and tell the truth can be charged with holding moral principles of truthfulness and beneficence. But this is misleading. Non-duplicious moral error theorists may simply have a policy of telling the truth. This can be filed under what I have been calling their ethics. Moral realists might call this policy a moral principle, but error theorists will not think of it in the way moralists think of a duty to tell the truth. They will not see their policy as a response to an "objective demand or requirement," and they will be flexible enough to realize that sometimes it is foolish or even disastrous not to lie. Reflective and open moral error theorists may be willing to try to explain why they have adopted the policies they have, and why they recommend them to others, when they do, but as error theorists, they will see no point in trying to give any of them a moral justification.

What about the claim that the very rejection of a moral judgment, or of morality itself, is a move within morality? It seems a simple matter to deal with this, at least as

long as we understand what external negation is. “Bear baiting is morally wrong” is a positive moral judgment. “Bear baiting is not morally wrong” *can* be understood as a moral judgment if ‘*not-morally-wrong*’ is treated as a moral predicate that means something like ‘*morally permissible*’. But “It is not the case that bear-baiting is morally wrong,” the *external* negation, can easily be seen not as a moral judgment, but as a refusal to make a moral judgment. So I think it is pretty clear that rejecting a moral judgment (or even all of them) does not presuppose morality.

7. Two Alleged Enemies of Morality. We are about to meet two characters (one fictional and one real) who have often been seen as enemies of morality. Callicles and Nietzsche do attack conventional morality, but both turn out to be moralists with what we can call a conventionally immoral morality.

Callicles. In Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*, Callicles defends the view that conventional morality is a system devised by the weak to keep the strong from getting everything they can. Conventions and laws are made

by the weaklings who form the majority of mankind. They establish them and apportion praise and blame with an eye to themselves and their own interests, and in an endeavour to frighten those who are stronger and capable of getting the upper hand they say that ambition is base and wrong, and that wrong-doing consists in trying to gain an advantage over others; being inferior themselves, they are content, no doubt, if they can stand on an equal footing with their betters (Plato [5], 78).

We should not allow this attack on conventional morality to trick us into calling Callicles a moral error theorist. He rejects conventional morality only to claim that nature “demonstrates that it is right that the better man should prevail over the worse and the stronger over the weaker” (78). He holds that strength and political power are good, and that the powerful and strong, being superior to the weak, deserve whatever their strength enables them to take. Callicles looks back with favor on the old aristocratic morality that rejected equality, opposed measures to protect the weak, and found the existence of a class-system proof that some people are better than others.

When Callicles says that this is the kind of view most of us want to discourage, he is right. The point here, however, is that whether or not we can discourage, or even refute, conventionally immoral forms of morality, they are forms of *morality*. Take away the moralism of Callicles and you take away his ability to defend his selfish behavior. What Callicles needs to be told is that strength is only one property among many, and that it is not more worthy than any other feature. Without morality, nobody is in a position to claim to be someone’s “better.”

Nietzsche. Nietzsche is well-known for his desire to take a stand “beyond good and evil,” and for his claim that “there are altogether no moral facts.” It is now time to ask what these words amount to, and whether Nietzsche deserves to be called a moral error theorist. He probably does not, but it is hard to know what to make of some of his remarks.

One knows my demand of philosophers that they place
themselves *beyond* good and evil—that they leave the

illusion of moral judgments *beneath* them. This demand follows from an insight first formulated by me: that *there are no moral facts whatever*. Moral judgment has this in common with religious judgment that it believes in realities which do not exist (Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, Penguin, 55).

This certainly seems to be an endorsement of the moral error theory—at least until we realize that when Nietzsche wrote about going beyond good and *evil* he did not mean going beyond good and *bad*.

Nietzsche is also known for having distinguished between “master morality” and “slave morality.” Slave morality was introduced by the many and the weak to keep the strong and the few from dominating them. Master morality, on the other hand, was Nietzsche’s name for the morality of the strong.

Here is the place for the origin of that famous opposition of “good” and “evil”: into evil one’s feelings project power and dangerousness, a certain terribleness, subtlety, and strength that does not permit contempt to develop.

According to slave morality, those who are “evil” thus inspire fear; according to master morality it is precisely those who are “good” that inspire, and wish to inspire, fear, while the “bad” are felt to be contemptible (Nietzsche [2], 207).

‘Evil’ is the name the weak use to refer to the strong. ‘Bad’ is the name the strong use to refer to the weak and the “base.” ‘Good’ is, naturally, used by the strong and the weak to refer to themselves.

Nietzsche believed that healthy societies have strong rulers who see themselves as *good* and their slaves and subjects as inferior beings—as *bad*. This is the moral distinction he did not want to abandon. Those at the bottom resent their low status and envy the privileges of their masters. Wimps that they are, they band together to praise and promote the virtues of altruism, passivity, and temperance. They call themselves and these virtues (which they would discard in a moment if they had the strength) *good*, and they call their “masters,” those strong and fear-inspiring aristocrats, *evil*.

Nietzsche thought that conventional morality, compassion, pity, and aversion to suffering (one’s own or another’s) are born of weakness and fear. They may provide security and comfort for members of the herd, but in the end they lead in to mediocrity and decline.

Let us articulate that new claim: we need a critique of all moral values; the intrinsic worth of these values must, first of all, be called in question. . . . Nobody, up till now, has doubted that the “good” man [Nietzsche is here using words as the weak would use them, to refer to themselves] represents a higher value than the “evil” [that is, than those the weak would call “evil,” namely, the strong], in terms of promoting and benefiting mankind

generally, even taking the long view. But suppose the exact opposite were true. What if the “good” [the weak] man represents not merely a retrogression but even a danger, a temptation, a narcotic drug enabling the present to live at the expense of the future? More comfortable, less hazardous, perhaps, but also baser, more petty—so that morality itself would be responsible for man, as a species, failing to reach the peak of magnificence of which he is capable? What if morality should turn out to be the danger of dangers? (Nietzsche [1], 155).

Morality may indeed hold us back from something higher, or at least from something different and more satisfying than our present situation. Yet what Nietzsche saw as higher is neither what most people would see as higher, nor is it a state of affairs that a moral error theorist would be especially likely to favor.

Nietzsche opposed conventional morality not because it is morality, but because it values the wrong things, and he urged us to replace it not with any type of moral anti-realism, but with an unconventional morality that promotes strength, competition, aggression and the elimination of compassion, which he identified with weakness.

You want, if possible--and there is no more insane “if possible”—*to abolish suffering*. And we? It really seems that we would rather have it higher and worse than ever. Well-being, as you understand it—that is no

goal, that seems to us an *end*, a state that soon makes man ridiculous and contemptible--that makes his destruction *desirable*. The discipline of suffering, of *great* suffering —do you not know that only *this* discipline has created all the enhancements of man so far? (Nietzsche [2], 153-154).

There is nothing obviously wrong with “well-being,” and when Nietzsche called a contented person ridiculous and contemptible, one is led to wonder not about the contented person, but about Nietzsche.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche’s point deserves to be taken seriously. We must struggle in order to survive and grow, and a serious attempt to master any skill demands dedication, sacrifice, and some suffering. But this is not what Nietzsche was talking about when he said that only “great suffering” brings about the “enhancements of man.” For *those* enhancements we need the suffering of martyrs and heroes, and of the millions of soldiers, slaves, and workers unable to get out of the way of the heroes.

It appears that both Nietzsche and Calicles fail to qualify as moral error theorists. Both hold a theory of value that makes strength a good, and a theory of obligation that permits the strong to do as they please. Nietzsche asks “What is good?” and answers “All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man.” Then he asks “What is bad?” and answers “All that proceeds from weakness” (Nietzsche [3], 125). These values deviate from those of the conventionally moral person, but they are still values. If we say that an *immoralist* is a moralist with a morality that most people

would consider immoral, we can call Callicles and Nietzsche *immoralists*. They do not appear to be moral error theorists.

8. Moral Abolitionism. As Jeremy Bentham grumpily admitted, fundamental moral principles are not open to proof. Nevertheless, moralists still treat them with the kind of respect due to established laws of nature, and use them to justify their own demands. Moral intuitions are mysterious and erratic, but moralists still trust them and are satisfied that they can give us moral knowledge. Arguments about right and wrong are interwoven with ancient dogmas, personal interests, factual errors, sophistry and confusion, but moralists still pursue them as if they might be won, and as if winning them had something to do with arriving at the truth about “the right and the good.” But if Hume and Mackie are right, these moralists, misled by their long tradition, their strong feelings and their projections, have become victims, exploiters and purveyors of the mistaken moral notions that are embedded in our language and that have framed our ways of thinking about how to behave and what to value.

But if morality is really so mistaken, if its statements are never true, its commands never justified, its advice whatever you want it to be, why bother with what Mackie described as the moral overlay? Why not, as Simon Blackburn once asked, abandon moral concepts and ways of thought, or at least replace them “by ones that serve our legitimate needs but avoid the mistake?” (Simon Blackburn, “Errors and the Phenomenology of Value” in *Essays in Quasi-Realism*: New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 149). Indeed, why not move straight on to moral abolitionism? At the beginning of this chapter, we saw that this option was mentioned by Harman (as

“extreme nihilism”) and by Williams (as “amoralism”). Blackburn’s term for it is “revisionist projectivism,” Richard Joyce calls it “moral eliminativism,” and Joshua Greene “moral revisionism.” I shall continue to call it “moral abolitionism,” but when I recommend abolishing morality I am calling for personal acts, not legal ones.

It really only makes sense to recommend abolishing morality to someone who has already developed doubts about moral objectivity. Anyone who maintains a firm belief in the objectivity (or the necessity) of morality will have no sympathy for the error theory and even less for moral abolitionism. But even some who have abandoned moral realism for the error theory, believe that we will all be better off if we continue to pretend that morality is not a fiction. Mackie spent much of his book arguing for the error theory, but he supported the continued use of moral language; and Warnock and Foot, both of whom were sensible enough to reject objective prescriptivity, still wanted to know what sort of a morality we need.

The answer favored by the moral abolitionist is that we do not need any—that we might even be better off without morality. This is far from obvious, but if morality really requires objective prescriptivity and if there is no such thing, then unless we abandon moral thinking and talking, we will end up presupposing, exploiting and defending false beliefs. If we want to maintain the fiction, we will have to resort to evasion, obfuscation and sophistry. It is hard to estimate the damage this can do to our integrity, to our reputation when we are caught, and to the lives of those who trust our words.

That is one kind of danger that looms when we treat morality as a useful fiction, but it is easy to think of considerations that support pretending that some of our moral

beliefs and claims are objectively true.* Mackie himself argued that if we supplement social practices like recognizing property and keeping agreements with the moral overlay, then people will be more likely to leave our possessions alone and to abide by their commitments. He then added another reason for promoting a belief in morality. He said that when people believe in an objective truth about what is right and wrong it is easier to support and rationalize legal decisions and sanctions. If we could not anchor the government's use of force in some claim to a legitimate, objective, and moral ground, that use of force and the useful practices it supports could be more easily challenged (p. 154).

There may be something to this, but these reasons for adopting a moralist approach to life are surprisingly weak. We all want others to respect our property and to keep their agreements, and if we insist that these practices are required by morality some people may be encouraged to observe them more closely than they otherwise would. But it is not true that a practice plus a moral overlay will always be as fully, regularly, or willingly followed as that practice supplemented by some of the many available non-moral devices. We might promote the practice of keeping promises by early and extensive training in empathy, by strict surveillance and strong penalties for promise-breakers, or by massive doses of advertising by celebrities. Since we have access to these and other powerful ways to encourage promise-keeping, the moral

* The next few paragraphs come from "Abolishing Morality," in Joyce and Kirchin, *A World without Values*, 2010, pp. 219-20.

abolitionist can argue that the moral overlay may be set aside in favor of more effective and less peculiar devices, some of which are already operating at full strength.

It is hard to know what role “moral considerations” actually play in our choices because our behavior is a function of so many factors. It is possible that when some of us make decisions, considerations about moral rights and duties are completely idle. But even when moral beliefs do play a role in choices, morality is, as we have seen, flexible enough to support any choice anyone is likely to make, including the choice of government officials to suppress what they choose to call immorality. This throws a different light on the idea that the moral overlay is useful when we want to justify social and legal sanctions, another of the reasons Mackie gave for preserving it.

Mackie was a moral fictionalist, but he acknowledged three things that could be said in support of moral abolitionism: Morality inflames disputes and makes compromise difficult, it preserves unfair arrangements and facilitates the misuse of power, and it makes global war possible. It inflames disputes because moralizing an issue tends to excite and confuse the parties involved. If we hope to resolve conflicts by arriving at a compromise, our task will be easier if moral disagreements are seen as conflicts of interest “without the embroidery of rights and moral justification” (Mackie, *Hume’s Moral Theory*, p. 154). The controversy over abortion would not be nearly as intractable as it has become if the fiction of moral rights had not been appropriated by both sides. If the issue is not moralized, *Roe v. Wade* looks like a sensible compromise between two extreme positions, but when the right to life is set against the right to choose, neither side can yield without violating morality. A human embryo is what it is,

but someone who insists on describing it with morally loaded terms like 'person' or 'innocent human baby' leaves no room for compromise over issues like abortion or embryonic stem cell research. How can anyone compromise with someone they see as wanting to murder babies?

Not only does the moral overlay inflame disputes and make compromise difficult, the lack of an actual truth of the matter means that every possible moral value and argument can be met by an equal and opposing value or argument. The moral overlay adds an entire level of controversy to a dispute, and introduces unanswerable questions that usurp the original question, which is always some practical question about what to do or support. This "moral turn" guarantees that the participants will be distracted from the real issue, and that genuine disagreements will be subverted by rhetoric, confusion, or metaethics. The dangers of the moral overlay are far worse than Mackie thought.

These considerations have been amplified by Ian Hinckfuss, who stressed the dangers that infect what he called a "moral society," that is, a society in which almost everyone accepts the literal truth of many moral judgments. In this society, which is *our* society, we regularly make moral assertions, but, as Hinckfuss insisted, they are all false. He acknowledged that false moral beliefs may have some benefits, but argued that any moral society will come with a number of disagreeable features that are essential to its propagation and preservation, features like "elitism, authoritarianism, guilt complexes, ego competition, economic inequality and war" (p. v). Moral societies, he added, are intellectually dishonest, "inefficient in maximizing human happiness, satisfaction, or self-esteem," and "because of the threat of war with other societies,

physically dangerous.” The moral overlay actually hinders the resolution of conflicts and fosters the exploitation of the “poor and the weak by the rich and powerful” (20 – 21).

In a moral society children will be raised in “an environment of continual moral injunctions.” They will be conditioned to want to be good, and trained to respect the moral authorities of their society. When they reach this point they are “in a position to be morally propagandized by those whom they regard as their ‘betters’, that is, those who they feel know more about what is right and what is wrong than they do” (p. 23). Ordinary members of a moral society will not be able to discover the moral truth for themselves (because there is none), but they will have learned to believe in moral truth, and to rely on the members of a moral “elite,” who take themselves to be superior in knowledge, virtue, and worth. When one is an honored member of a moral elite “it is easy to believe that what one wishes for oneself is morally permissible, and how one wants others to behave is morally obligatory” (p. 27).

Hinckfuss was more emphatic than Mackie about the tendency of those with strong moral beliefs to go to war. After mentioning several of the world’s bloodiest conflicts, he asks us to

think of how the situation would have been if, by a miracle, moral thought could have been eradicated from the minds of all the agents involved. I, for one, find it difficult to conceive of how the conflicts would have proceeded. There would be no sense of duty, no sense of loyalty, no patriotism, no feeling morally obliged to fight

for a cause, no sense that the people one is trying to kill or subjugate are less worthy of survival or freedom than oneself or anyone else (pp. 45-46).

Getting rid of morality will not solve all the world's problems, and no moral abolitionist is likely to claim that it would. But if we free ourselves from the distracting moral overlay we will be better able to see conflicts of interest for what they are and other people for who they are, and that by itself will eat away at demagoguery, intolerance and fanaticism. If Hinckfuss is even partially right about what it takes to institute and enforce it, morality may be a far more dangerous institution than its defenders realize.

Mackie considered the option of abolishing the moral overlay, but he was unable to find an answer to the question of what we might use in its place. This question will not be hard to answer if it turns out that morality does less than we think it does, or if we discover that compassion, or kindness, or something else can be called on to fill any motivational deficiency brought on by the disappearance of moral belief. Moralists will argue that morality beats compassion and kindness, which, being feelings, come and go. But morality only beats compassion and kindness if it does its job better than compassion and kindness do its job; and it can be argued that morality is not as reliable as those feelings when it comes to influencing behavior and moderating the force of selfishness. Compassion, after all, is a direct motivator, and it doesn't have to be justified. It is a way of looking, and a disposition to help. If you care about somebody, if you want them to be happy, there is nothing to prove and no problem about motivation.

If you merely think it is your duty to help them, but desire not to do so, then it will always be possible to dig up some excuse for doing nothing.

But compassion and kindness are just two items in our tool kit. The reality is that we have a large and varied collection of other resources—habits, strategies, and ways of doing things that have nothing to do with morality. We will be exploring some of these as we go forward from here. In Chapter Seven, as we listen to the advice of some historic sages about how to live, we may be surprised at how much they can say without even mentioning anything like intrinsic value or moral obligation. Then, in Chapter Eight, we will look at some factors other than morality that are effective in shaping our dispositions and regulating our actions, and we will pay special attention to the business of making decisions.

Chapter Seven (June 2012)

Desires and Emotions

You can't always get what you want.

There are moral error theorists who would agree with Nietzsche's remark that morality may be "responsible for man, as a species, failing to reach that peak of magnificence of which he is capable," but they might have a very different vision of what life at the peak would look like. Nietzsche hated morality because it kept the "good" (i.e., the strong) down; but it is also possible to be dissatisfied with morality because it does *not* keep them down. Morality may be the "danger of dangers" because it gives "the strong" a way to rationalize their aggression, and because it allows selfishness and cold-heartedness to wear the respectable moralist garments of rights, duties, and claims. It may be the danger of dangers because it can be used to defend war, revenge, terrorism, lies, theft, monogamy, polygamy, and the status quo.

Moralists try to help us achieve their ideals by offering us moral reasons for doing things, and by pointing to the goodness of the things they want us to choose and the badness of the things they want us to avoid. They understand that much suffering can result from desires and emotions that are too numerous or too intense and, since they are moralists with an affinity for the concepts of good and evil, they manage to see the desires and emotions they blame for our unhappiness (or *their* unhappiness) as evil. Since many of the desires and emotions that have been frowned upon over the

centuries are natural and harmless, branding them as “evil” has itself been a great source of suffering. Even if a desire or an emotion is harmful, if we call it “evil” we will drive it underground by blaming and stigmatizing those who have it. When we see a desire as evil we will be less disposed to try to understand it in terms of its causes and effects, and more inclined to punish its owner.

In the last few decades we have learned much about desires and emotions from moral psychology, evolutionary theory, neuroscience, and other disciplines that study our brains and our behavior. Given so much new technology, so many new approaches, and such unprecedented interdisciplinary activity, it might be wise to place a moratorium on moralizing about how evil (or good) our desires and emotions are until we have assimilated a 21st century understanding of them. In the past, a depressing number of desires have been branded as evil—desires for sex (of every kind), attention, profit, control, comfort, pleasure, revenge, music, beer, and dancing, to mention a few. Calling on morality every time we want to discourage some harmless, inconvenient, or even dangerous desire usually disguises our real motivation, and it always throws up a cloud of dust by inviting everyone to an argument that can’t be resolved.

Moralizing about emotions is also pointless. Since we know how natural and useful fear and anger can be, what could it mean to say that either is evil? There may be moralists who hope that morality will help us overcome emotions they think can destroy us, but calling anger “evil” is only likely to aggravate the anger-prone. If we really want to conquer anger (our own or that of others) we need to understand its role in our survival as a species and in our successes and failures as individuals. So while

moralists may mean well by moralizing about desires and emotions, moral abolitionists have no use for the claim that desires are evil and no need to call obviously harmful emotions “bad.”

1. Desires and Emotions—Extreme Solutions. Since our resources are finite and our desires are without number, many desires are destined to remain unsatisfied. The result is often suffering, not from the lack of the items desired, but from the painful and distracting nagging of the unsatisfied desires. Emotions too can be relentless and overwhelming, so if we are smart we will look for some way to keep from being incapacitated by unlimited desires and all-consuming emotions. This is not a new thought, and history tells us that almost every possible solution has been tried. Some embrace and defend their emotions, or set out to satisfy as many of their desires as possible. Others struggle to eliminate, reduce, ignore, or control their desires and emotions, either all of them, or at least the ones they find unwelcome.

Antisthenes, the founder of the Greek school of **Cynics**, and his disciple **Diogenes** characterized ordinary comfort as luxury, and rejected the conventions and values of their contemporaries. The name of the Cynics happened to be the same as the word for ‘doglike’, and this mirrored and reinforced the general opinion that the Cynics lived like dogs. It was said that they would eat when they were hungry, sleep when they were tired, and even have sex in public, if that is what they felt like doing. They wanted to be independent of circumstance, and it seemed to them that the way to achieve this was to reject the comforts and the conventions of society and to “follow nature.” They aimed to eliminate desires for the things most people wanted, but they

seem to have had nothing against desires as such, and they do not appear to have been interested in eliminating or even calming emotions like pride, anger, or annoyance.

To find someone willing to promote the elimination of all desires we must look to India, and to the gentle asceticism of **Vardhamana Mahavira** (599-527 B.C.). Like the Buddha, Mahavira was raised as a prince and eventually left his comfortable life. After twelve years of self-denial, self-mortification, and rigid asceticism, he attained a kind of enlightenment, and then spent the rest of his life teaching others the Jain path of self-denial and *ahimsa*, which is the resolve (or “duty”) to refrain from causing harm to any living being.

Like the Cynics, the **Jains** abandoned the comforts and conventions of society (one sect was “sky clad”), but they went further and rejected even moderate and natural desires. They claimed that we can only attain the ultimate goal of absolute peace and eternal independent bliss if we can eliminate all desires, and thereby all action—and by ‘all’, they meant *all*. Everything we do results in karma, which leads to future rebirths and new opportunities to suffer. They saw persons as individual centers of consciousness encrusted by karma, and they believed that we can regain our purity and win liberation only if we stop accumulating karma and somehow destroy what we have already acquired. This can be achieved, they said, but only by the complete cessation of all action. Most Jains do not even try for “sallakhana” or death by voluntary self-starvation. Legend says that Mahavira’s parents achieved this, but that goal may be more of an ideal, and freedom from much suffering can result if we keep moving in the direction of the ideal—even if we never arrive.

If some philosopher says “A,” we can always find another who says “Not-A.” Such is the case here. In India, the Jain ideal of extreme renunciation was countered by the advice of the **Carvakins**, atheistic materialists who thought that the soul is physical and that death is the end of consciousness. One standard summary of their system describes them as holding the following beliefs:

There is no world other than this; there is no heaven and
no hell; the realm of Siva and like religions are invented
by stupid impostors of other schools of thought.

The enjoyment of heaven lies in eating delicious food,
keeping company of young women, using fine
clothes, perfumes, garlands, sandal paste, etc.

The pain of hell lies in the troubles that arise from enemies,
weapons, diseases; while liberation (*moksa*) is death
which is the cessation of life-breath.

Chastity and other such ordinances are laid down by
clever weaklings (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 235).

It is easy to see why Carvaka was never popular—its atheism, naturalism, hedonism, and disbelief in chastity would have outraged priests, alienated devout believers, and terrified simple people committed to conventional morality and traditional religion.

Meanwhile in Greece, the **Cyrenaic** school was founded by **Aristippus** of Cyrene over a hundred years after the death of Socrates, which occurred in 399 B.C. Like the Carvakins, the Cyrenaics recommended giving in to all our desires, and

especially to those for the pleasure of the moment. The Cynic Antisthenes once remarked that he would rather go mad than feel pleasure. Aristippus replied for the Cyrenaics that we do not control pleasure by staying away from it, but by learning how to enjoy it without being carried away. That sounds reasonable, but some Cyrenaics were apparently not content to seek their pleasure in moderation, and as a result they have been characterized (no doubt by their disapproving critics) as recommending the unrestrained pursuit of all the pleasures all the time.

These extreme positions leave one with a sense of unreality. It is hard to believe that anyone ever seriously recommended giving up every desire we have, or yielding to each one as it arises. It is not even clear what would count as following these recommendations. Since most of us are not iron-willed ascetics or abandoned libertines, it makes more sense to aim at having fewer and less intense desires. As for emotions, before trying to destroy our capacity to feel them, let us remember that most of them have earned their place in our repertoire of responses to the world. But things do change, and it is likely that some of our emotional responses have outlived their usefulness. If some once-useful emotion, like jealousy, fear, or anger, is causing trouble for us, then we would be wise to examine the role it is playing in our life and to consider making some adjustments.

2. Desires and Emotions—Some Middle Ways. Since the sages we will be consulting most often speak of *desires*, I will focus on the goal of having fewer and milder desires, but occasionally I will touch on the related task of dealing with excessive emotions. If we can, for the moment, agree that we *can* eliminate or modify *some* of our

desires, we will find that there are some fairly impressive reasons in favor of doing so. Desires cause pain when they are not satisfied, and the more we have, the more we will leave unsatisfied, and the more pain we will feel. But even when we *do* satisfy some of them, we often regret having done so. We might not like the result, or we might learn that they weren't worth the effort, or that they have been foisted on us by others for *their* benefit and profit. Finally, desires lead us to distort our own perceptions because when we desire something we pay attention primarily, if not exclusively, to what seems likely to help us get it. Consequently the more desires we have, and the stronger they are, the less clearly we will see the world.

For these reasons, and there are others as well, it may be in our interest to modify our relationship to our desires, if we can figure out how to do so. Perhaps Laozi was right when he said "The sage desires to have no desires," and perhaps he was just playing with us. In another passage he is perfectly clear and straightforward: "Reduce selfishness; have few desires."

In our folk psychology, desires are persisting or recurring mental states. Some are semi-permanent (a desire for a red convertible) and some are occasion-specific (a desire for a Big Mac); some are burning and others are mild; some are selfish and others are altruistic. All of this makes perfect sense as long as we are not forced to think more carefully. But when we start thinking that it might be a good idea to eliminate or weaken some of them, we cannot avoid looking more deeply into the question of what desires are, and what kind of control, if any, we have over their role in our decisions.

Desires are not discrete mental episodes of various durations that we can inventory, label, and snip off like troublesome hangnails. To have a desire for anything from a new toy to a new life is to have a complex of ever-changing thoughts, feelings, and impulses. Our desires enter into our motivation because the components that constitute them do. To desire a new i-Pad is to express thoughts of longing to ourselves (and often to anyone else who will listen), to feel sad when thinking about not having one, to drop in on Apple stores, to check prices and reviews on the internet, and to obsess about the strain the purchase would put on our budget.

Sometimes we do not go all-out to achieve what we say we want. Does that mean that we didn't want it? No, it means that some motivational kick turned up absent at a moment of action. We want the new BMW, take the test-drive, negotiate a deal, get approval for a loan, and then "get cold feet" and walk away. It is not that we didn't want the car. We were just unable to neutralize some decisive defeater. What might that have been? Often we will never know—it could have been a rise in the price of gas, a nagging worry about the payments, or a casual remark from a friend about Thorstein Veblen's views on conspicuous consumption. Even if we believe and say we want something, and even if we have the opportunity, the means and the intention to acquire it, we still may not close the deal when the moment of decision arrives. On some of those occasions, like everyone else, we can only wonder what happened.

A desire for anything is a complex of thoughts, plans, feelings and impulses, so in order to modify some desire, we have to modify some of those thoughts, plans, feelings and impulses. After we have learned to observe them as they arise, the next

step is to gain some distance from them. We can start thinking of them as invaders, or as the mere effects of outside conditions, rather than as emanating from our core. But desires come in a full range of strengths, and can be fixed on anything in the known universe, so things get complicated. The word the Buddha used was *tanha*, and it is translated variously as ‘desire’, ‘craving’, or ‘thirst’. The *intense* desires, the cravings, or the desires for what is harmful or unattainable are the ones that leave suffering in their wakes. Learning how to deal with troublesome desires, and learning which ones are the troublesome ones, is one of the major achievements of the sages of antiquity. It is to their advice and suggestions we now turn.

The Epicureans. It is ironic that the word ‘epicurean’ suggests feasts, rich food and fine wine. This was not the original Epicurean’s idea of a good time. **Epicurus** and his friends spent their time discussing philosophy and cultivating a life of simplicity and moderation. His secret to happiness depended on distinguishing among desires.

We must consider that of desires some are natural,
others vain, and of the natural some are necessary
and others merely natural; and of the necessary some
are necessary for happiness, others for the repose of
the body, and others for very life (Epicurus [2], 31).

Desires for food, water, and shelter are natural and necessary for life itself, and the desire for sex is natural but, according to Epicurus, not necessary. “Sexual intercourse,” he said, “has never done a man good, and he is lucky if it has not harmed

him” (Epicurus [1], 45). Desires for wealth, power, and fame, he added, are neither natural nor necessary.

We may want to pause and rethink that last point. The three desires just mentioned don’t seem necessary for happiness, repose, or life itself, but there is some evidence that they may be more closely related to our nature than we once thought. In any case, Epicurus wisely, and without a hint of moralism, advised us to satisfy the necessary desires and eliminate as many of the others as we can. “In so far as you are in difficulties,” he said, “it is because you forget nature; for you create for yourself unlimited fear and desires” (Epicurus [1], 49). He was content with bread, cheese, cheap wine, and good conversation. “All that is natural is easy to be obtained, but that which is superfluous is hard” (Epicurus [2], 32).

Epicurus aimed to solve the problem of desires by replacing expensive and elaborate desires with easily satisfied ones. He did not abandon desires, he just stopped desiring some things and started desiring others. He did not learn to want whatever he happened to get, as some more timid or passive sages advised, he learned to want only what “is easy to be obtained.”

The Stoics. The Cynics deliberately flouted the customs and conventions of society. They called themselves “citizens of the world,” and refused to give allegiance to conventional organizations like the state. Stoicism was a socialized development of Cynicism, it was Cynicism with religion and a social conscience. Like the Cynics, the Stoics adopted the maxim “Live according to Nature,” but when Cynics talked about living according to nature they were talking about sitting nude in the dirt, cohabitation

without marriage, and deferring to nobody. Stoics, on the other hand, understood “Nature” to be the source of the natural and moral laws of the universe.

Like the Epicureans, the Stoics understood that the secret of happiness is to deal wisely with our desires—the Epicureans did so by limiting them to what was easily attained, and the Stoics by accepting what Nature offers, and by learning to be unmoved by both failure and success. The Stoic **Epictetus** (50 - 138 A.D.) was born a slave, sent to Rome, given his freedom, and ended his days teaching philosophy. He lived in a simple house with a mat, a bed, and a lamp. His attitude about desires will not surprise us:

Remember that desire demands the attainment of that of which you are desirous; and aversion demands the avoidance of that to which you are averse; that he who fails of the object of his desires is disappointed; and he who incurs the object of his aversion is wretched. If, then, you shun only those undesirable things which you can control, you will never incur anything which you shun; but if you shun sickness, or death, or poverty, you will run the risk of wretchedness. Remove [the habit of] aversion, then, from all things that are not within our power, and apply it to things undesirable, which are in our power (Epictetus, Vol. II, 216-217).

Epictetus is not telling us to stifle all our aversions, he is advising us to bow to the inevitable and not to waste our efforts or negative emotions on things that are not within our power to influence. This is wise and useful, but it does leave it up to us to determine what the limits of our power in any given situation are, a factor we often misestimate due to arrogance, timidity, or ignorance.

Epictetus was a slave. **Marcus Aurelius** (121-180 AD), another Roman Stoic, was an emperor, a sincere, modest, and gentle man who did his best to keep the Empire together and the barbarians at bay. His diary contains reflections on his feelings, expressions of his Stoicism, self-criticism, and reminders to himself. The Latin title of his book translates as “To Myself,” but the title it is known by in English is *Meditations*.

Marcus thought he saw design in the orderly yet ceaseless change that occurs in the world. He had many names for the source or author of this plan—Reason, Nature, Mind, Zeus, and God. The belief that the world resulted from a deliberate plan distinguished the Stoics from the Epicureans, who saw the universe as an accidental assortment of careening atoms. Marcus can be seen as an early proponent of the theory of intelligent design, but he separated himself from 21st Century fans of that theory by adding that our individual minds are minute fragments of this great Mind, and that our reason is “that portion of Zeus that is in us all.” Given the vastness of the plan and the evident superiority of the mind that designed it, Marcus concluded that grumbling about how things are is foolish, even a kind of illness, and a sure sign that one is out of synch with Nature.

For a human soul, the greatest of self-inflicted wrongs is to make itself . . . a kind of tumour or abscess on the universe; for the quarrel with circumstances is always a rebellion against Nature—and Nature includes the nature of each individual part (50).

. . .

Your part [recall that Marcus is talking to himself] is to be serene, to be simple. Is someone doing wrong? The wrong lies with himself. Has something befallen you? Good; then it was your portion of the universal lot, assigned to you when time began; a strand woven into your particular web, like all else that happens (69).

Those who see the world in this way find dissatisfaction and discontent out of place, and when things do not go according to their plans they take that to show that there was something wrong with their plans. Others, who are not so stoical, allow themselves to be disturbed, annoyed, or even angered when the world does not cooperate. Our standard reaction to “bad” weather illustrates this well enough, but we are also seriously bothered when our relatives and associates are as unreliable as the weather. The Stoic, who welcomes whatever Nature dishes out, deals with unpleasant weather and unpleasant relatives with equal equanimity, and without grumbling.

O world, I am in tune with every note of thy great harmony. For me nothing is early, nothing late, if it be

timely for thee. O Nature, all that thy seasons yield is
fruit for me (68).

If we allow ourselves to be troubled by extreme or even inconvenient weather we suffer twice—first from the weather itself, and then from our reaction to it. Stoics prefer to suffer only once—so they welcome, or at least graciously accept, what comes and refuse to assess it as evil. Marcus’s simple advice to himself is: “Silence your assessor.”

For you, evil comes not from the mind of another; nor
yet from any of the phases and changes of your own
bodily frame. Then whence? From that part of yourself
which acts as your assessor of what is evil. Refuse its
assessment, and all is well. Though the poor body, so
closely neighbouring it, be gashed or burned, fester or
mortify, let the voice of this assessor remain silent (72).

The Stoics were not the only ones aware of the benefits of silencing our assessor. We can hear the same suggestion from the other side of the world in the words of the Zen Master Huihai (720 – 814), who recommended that we learn “to behold men, women and all the various sorts of appearances while remaining as free from love or aversion as if they were actually not seen at all” (Blofeld [2], 48). He urged his students not to think in terms of good and evil, and he denied that “our own nature” contains either good or evil (Blofeld [2], 50 and 119). When he was asked “Then what should we do to be right?” he answered: “There is nothing to do and nothing which can

be called right” (Blofeld [2], 119). If there had been an ancient Chinese term for a moral abolitionist, it would surely have applied to Huihai.

People criticize the Stoic and the Buddhist for this passive attitude of acceptance. They say that if no one is angered or disturbed by injustice, poverty, war, inequality, political oppression, and crime, then nothing will be done about them. Accepting one’s “portion of the universal lot” has meant accepting slavery, corruption, exploitation, illness, and early death for millions. There is some truth in this, but it is hard to know how much. Anger often gives rise to violence, which is usually met with more anger and violence, and so on, and on. We all have to accept things we would not have chosen for ourselves. Some of us deal with this better than others, and Stoics, apparently, deal with it best of all. But no actual Stoic is going to accept absolutely everything that comes along. Recall that Epictetus advised us not to waste our aversion on things that are “not within our power,” but to apply it where it might make a difference. We do not have to be moralists to have desires and aversions, and we do not have to assess something as “evil” in order to want to change it. Marcus, who advised us to silence our assessor, was known for his mildness, and yet he ruled all of Rome. Anger at a person, or at some situation, supplies energy for action and change, but it is not essential for either and, as we have all experienced, it often makes things worse by everyone’s reckoning. Stoics don’t abandon preferences, but they do urge us to see and accept things as they are and to skip the pointless emotion and useless resentment. If our perceptions are warped by anger, sadness, grumpiness, or some other distracting

emotion, then our actions will be inept because of our distorted and incomplete view of the circumstances confronting us. How can that help?

Greek and Roman Techniques. The gulf between theory and practice can be wide. It is one thing to see your painful or difficult situation as part of a great plan, but that thought will not necessarily diminish the pain, or generate a solution. Still, the advice that it elicited from Marcus is priceless--whether one buys into the intelligent design option or not:

Is your cucumber bitter? Throw it away. Are there briars in your path? Turn aside. That is enough. Do not go on to say, 'Why were things of this sort ever brought into the world?' (132).

The Stoics and the Epicureans offered their suggestions and maxims to help people find happiness. The word that shows up in the passage below is 'pleasure', but Epicurus was completely clear about what he meant:

When, therefore, we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality, as is supposed by some who are either ignorant or disagree with us or do not understand, but freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind (Epicurus [2], 32).

Since he believed that much of our fear and consequent "trouble in the mind" comes from false beliefs about the supernatural, Epicurus hoped to relieve that suffering by

encouraging a naturalistic understanding of the world. He insisted, for example, that the happenings attributed to ghosts were all natural occurrences.

A man cannot dispel his fear about the most important matters if he does not know what is the nature of the universe but suspects the truth of some mythical story.

So that without natural science it is not possible to attain our pleasures unalloyed (Epicurus [3], 36).

But Epicurus did not rely exclusively on natural science and helpful maxims. He also created the material conditions for happiness by dropping out of ordinary society and joining a community of like-minded companions. The Stoics did not take this option, nor did they resort to “natural science” to allay their worries about an afterlife. They got some comfort from their belief that things and events are the result of “intelligent design,” not of the random collisions of mindless atoms. This belief served as the basis for many of the helpful sayings and slogans they brought out as circumstances put a strain on their Stoicism. Marcus did mention meditation, and he said that “nowhere can man find a quieter or more untroubled retreat than in his own soul.” But this seemed to involve little more than calming down and remembering his maxims and rules of life—“recurrence to them will then suffice to remove all vexation, and send you back without fretting to the duties to which you must return” (63). Maybe so, but it is fairly clear that these maxims and rules, wise as they were, offered only temporary relief from his recurring vexations.

Buddhism. By the time Marcus became emperor, Buddhists had spent over 500 years developing meditation. They had learned that it takes more than recalling maxims to escape the vexation and fretting that comes when things go awry. Buddhism traces its origin to **Siddhartha Gautama**, the Buddha, or “the awakened one” (560 – 480), who discovered what he claimed to be the origin of suffering and the path to its elimination. His fundamentally secular approach involved mental discipline, introspection and self-effacement, but as Buddhism migrated and evolved it took many forms, most of which were religious. Even so, Buddhists never neglect the insights announced in what they call the “Four Noble Truths.” Here is an inexact but perhaps realistic statement of them: (1) There is far more suffering in the world than we have allowed ourselves to admit. (2) Much of this suffering is brought about by desires. (3) If this is so, then by cutting back on our desires we can cut back on our suffering. (4) What we can do that will lead to this result is to follow what the Buddha called the “Noble Eightfold Path.” This not a series of steps so much as it is a set of reminders about what we can do to eliminate, or at least diminish, our suffering.

The word often translated as ‘suffering’ is *dukkha*, and it refers to modes of discomfort from mild worry to physical pain, and much in between. When the Buddha spoke of ending suffering he was not referring to physical pain, but to mental suffering that often accompanies or follows our ills, and sometimes precedes them in anticipation. This *dukkha*, he said, can be minimized or even conquered if we pursue the Eightfold Path, the elements of which are right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. At this

point I need to reassure any moral error theorists made uneasy by the wanton use of the word 'right' that in this context that word need not be understood moralistically. In fact it makes good Buddhist sense to understand the word as we do the 'right' in 'the right stuff' (to be an astronaut) or the 'the right medicine' (to cure a condition).

Right understanding refers to understanding and accepting the Buddha's teachings on impermanence, causality, selflessness, and the doctrines of karma and reincarnation. Again, we are in no way morally required to think like a Buddhist, but Buddhists would say that if we ignore these teachings we are likely to pay a price in suffering. **Right intention** (or thought) has to do with meaning well and intending to follow the Buddhist way. **Right action** includes refraining from harming other creatures, from stealing, and from "sexual misconduct." **Right speech** includes most of what we would expect—abstention from lying, slandering, and divisive speech, from "harsh, rude, impolite, malicious and abusive language, and from idle, useless and foolish babble and gossip" (Rahula, 47). Once again, a Buddhist need not claim that any of these deviations from "right speech" is morally wrong—but they are all things from which Buddhists, and similarly disposed others, are likely to abstain. **Right livelihood** means taking up an occupation that does not force us to injure others. The call for **Right effort** is based on the belief that hard and appropriate work will bring results. Finally, **Right mindfulness** and **Right concentration** both have to do meditation.

Even if the elements of the Eightfold Path are not given a moral spin, Buddhists often come across as moralists, either because they *are* moralists, or because, like moral fictionalists, they see morality as useful in promoting their goal of reducing

suffering. What is often described as “Buddhist morality” can be summarized in “The Five Precepts,” but most presentations of them do not state them as moral principles but as vows, or resolutions, or “undertakings.”

I undertake to abstain from harming living beings.

I undertake to abstain from taking what is not given.

I undertake to abstain from sexual misconduct.

I undertake to abstain from false speech.

I undertake to abstain from intoxicating drugs or drink.

Buddhists believe that meditation gives us the mental strength and clarity we need to keep these vows. Buddhist meditation is not a solitary withdrawal into oneself, or an attempt to make contact with some supersensible realm, but a demanding discipline designed to strengthen the mind and illuminate its operation from within. There is as much reason to think that this works as there is to think that physical exercise strengthens the body. Many of the things Buddhists do that do not look like meditation turn out to be meditation in disguise. Buddhists will chant some powerful mantra, or pray to some bodhisattva for help, but whether or not the mantra works its magic, or the prayer reaches any divine ears, the practice itself teaches the chanting or meditating person to concentrate on one thing. Sometimes Buddhists meditate by closely observing (and perhaps counting) their breaths as they come in and go out. They have discovered that this simple exercise can help them develop the skill needed to attend to things more complex and interesting than breaths—things such as their emotions, thoughts, feelings, and impulses.

Earlier I said that our desire for anything is an unstable complex of thoughts, plans, feelings and impulses. Our desire for that BMW is a mélange of positive thoughts about the car, excitement when we see one, a tendency to imagine how much better life would be if we had such a car, a new-found interest in car ads, and unreasonable annoyance at our old Volvo. As these thoughts and feelings intensify, conditions may arise that lead us to cross some line and take the plunge. We might get a new job or a raise. Or perhaps on one of our test drives Otto, an astute BMW salesman, will find exactly the right words to reel us in.

But if the right conditions haven't arisen, and if it begins to appear that they never will, we may consider abandoning our craving for a new car and moving on. But that is not so simple. We can't just urge someone who has caught a case of new-car fever just to "let it go," especially if we are that someone. Our desire will continue to trouble us until we acknowledge its down-side, which is much easier to do if we have spent some time watching it in action. Seeing ourselves as passion's puppet can result in a desire to free ourselves. We might begin to think of the old thoughts, feelings and impulses that constitute the unwanted desire as unwelcome intruders. This may lead us to take them less seriously, or even to ridicule them, since many of our more urgent desires are truly silly and unrealistic. It will also help if we occasionally remind ourselves of the lengths to which we have gone to satisfy some desire that we now see as ill-advised at best.

When it is clear to us how our desire-complexes have resulted in our own suffering, then we can begin to figure out what we have to do if we want to reduce their

influence or their number. But how do we do this? Well, if we were advising a friend whose desires were causing him or her trouble, we might offer up some helpful platitudes and reminders that have worked for us, or that we picked up by reading Marcus Aurelius or watching Dr. Phil. We might also work with our friend to clarify the actual situation, and to explore some options. None of that might help, but we know that every day friends help each other deal with problems caused by desires. Like Otto, the successful BMW salesman, someone trying to help us adjust our attitude and our behavior only has to hit on the right words, and say them at the right time.

This gives us reason to hope that we might hear some wise suggestions when we sit down with ourselves to consider our own desires and the trouble they have caused or are about to cause. Marcus made it his practice to recal his maxims, and we can do that too. After all, if our words and advice (or that of some ancient sage) can have an influence on the decisions of our friends just by showing up in their brains, why can't they perform the same service in our own case? Have you not said these very words to yourself: "Don't be an idiot; let it go"? Our advice to ourselves is even more likely to be successful if we have learned to introspect well enough to spot and then neutralize some of our defensiveness, rationalization, and "motivated reasoning."

Of course there are those who still value their desires and feel that without desires, or *those* desires, or even with a weakened or diminished set of desires, they would be able to accomplish little or nothing. The Stoics and Epicureans managed to address these worries in their own ways; and, as we are about to see, according to a

popular form of Hinduism and one interpretation of Daoism, we can manage very well with far fewer and weaker desires than most of us enjoy.

Karma Yoga. According to the traditions of Hinduism, the last two quarters of a man's life are to be spent in seclusion, meditation, and a search for liberation. There is little doubt that detachment from public business and personal affairs, quiet meditation, and a vegetarian diet can produce a rich harvest of tranquility. But not everyone, not even every *man*, can renounce the world and move to the mountains or monasteries. 'Yoga' means *discipline* and 'karma' means (among other things) *action*, so *karma yoga* is a discipline or practice for the workers and warriors who must act.

In Chapter Two of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna, a god who has come to earth to serve the warrior Arjuna as his chariot driver and mentor, reveals the secret of karma yoga that will allow a person to act in the world without error or guilt:

(47) On action alone be thy interest,
Never on its fruits;
Let not the fruits of action be thy motive,
Nor be thy attachment to inaction. (Edgerton, 14)

Hinduism teaches that everyone has a station in life, a caste that is determined by their karma and earned by deeds in former lives. Each caste was thought to have certain obligations. Arjuna was a warrior, so his duty was to fight, but the *Gita* shows him having second thoughts on the very brink of a war against his old friends and relatives. Krishna urged him, sometimes with extremely bad arguments, to pick up his weapons and start the battle. He told Arjuna that the consequences (the fruits of action) are not

really the concern of the warrior. Just as a doctor doesn't ask who the patient is or how he or she will behave when cured, a warrior fights even if his opponent is his beloved teacher or best friend. That is karma yoga. It says, "This is your duty, so just do it." Compassion, affection, and traditional moral considerations led Arjuna to resist Krishna's urgings for some time, but the god answered each of the warrior's reservations, and eventually revealed himself as an Infinite Being. That was enough to convince Arjuna to return to his role and to the battle—which, as he anticipated, turned out to be a bloodbath.

Some are horrified by the idea of a dehumanized warrior mowing down the enemy with no regard for anything but the combat, but others read the *Gita* as a metaphor for inner struggle, not as a celebration of (literally) mindless violence. That is charitable, but the text has enough ambiguity and inconsistency to support almost any interpretation, even a literalist one. The message that is relevant here is that we can act without a concern for the consequences—the "fruits of action." Sometimes this is described as spontaneous action, sometimes as rashness, and sometimes as madness. Nevertheless, since we do not always deliberate about future outcomes, an obvious question arises: "When we act spontaneously, with no thought of the fruits of our action, what does motivate us?" Krishna's answer was that if we abandon our will, desires, ends, purposes, and goals, then we can invite him to possess us and to work through us. Some Krishnavites say that for this to happen we need only love Krishna, chant his name, sing his praises, and let go. When we reach the proper state of devotion, the

god will take over, and then it will be impossible for us to make a mistake or to store up bad karma even if we wipe out a city or slaughter all our cousins in a bloody battle.

If someone really does repeat some mantra with intensity and devotion, then his or her conscious mind will be occupied by those “holy” words, and there will be little mental space or energy for deliberation, calculation, worry, or regret. This is true no matter what words we occupy our conscious minds with, because the whole game is to get us to stop “thinking,” that is, to put our conscious reasoning and calculating on hold long enough for our natural and well-practiced abilities to step up and do their work. In this state of mind we may be aware of our interests, hopes, plans, likes and dislikes, but they will be inert, neutralized, and unable to take charge and drive our actions as they often do. But even in this unusual “detached” state of mind, we can still act, and often do so with success and skill. It is not surprising that people appeal to divine possession, or at least divine assistance, to explain some of their more remarkable accomplishments, but there are now newer and more plausible explanations for this, and talk of genes, hormones, instincts, intuitions and programs have replaced talk of gods, miracles, and muses.

This ability to deal with things without figuring out all (or any) of the angles, is called on in countless everyday situations. As we move through our days, if we can manage to observe the way situations emerge, and if we can trust our fact-based spontaneous intuitions about what to do and when to do it, we may find ourselves moving as gracefully as if we were being guided by a friendly angel. For the Krishnavite, the confidence that Krishna is in charge may be what makes it possible to

let go; for the Christian, it may be the belief that somehow God is at the controls. But there are other fortunate actors who need no belief in supernatural beings or in unquestionable moral principles and rights to guide them, or to free them to trust the spontaneous decisions that emerge when needed.

Wu-wei. There are similarities between karma yoga and what the Daoists call “*wu-wei*.” *Wu* is a word used for negation, and *wei* means action, so it is not wrong to translate *wu wei* as ‘non-action’, but we shouldn’t take the phrase literally. As one commentator on Daoism said long ago, when some people hear of *wu wei*, they think they are being told that lying down is better than walking. But the proponent of *wu wei* does not urge us to lie down, or to sit as still as a stone, or to meet all stimuli with empty-headed motionlessness. Some say that it involves acting without straining. Others allow straining, but say that it still involves applying no more effort than is needed for a task. It is true that Daoists rarely strain and certainly prefer less force to more, but something deeper and more interesting is involved.

Joseph Needham characterized *wu wei* as refraining from “going against the grain of things, from trying to make materials perform functions for which they are unsuitable, from exerting force in human affairs when the man of insight could see that it would be doomed to failure, and that subtler methods of persuasion, or simply letting things alone to take their own course, would bring about the desired result” (68). The following verse from the Daodejing expresses this insight:

What remains still is easy to hold.

What is not yet manifest is easy to plan for.

What is brittle is easy to crack.

What is minute is easy to scatter.

Deal with things before they appear.

Put things in order before disorder arises.

A tree as big as a man's embrace grows from a tiny shoot.

A tower of nine storeys begins with a heap of earth.

The journey of a thousand *li* starts from where one stands.

He who takes action fails.

He who grasps things loses them.

For this reason the sage takes no action and therefore does not fail.

He grasps nothing and therefore he does not lose anything (Chan #64).

The first part of this verse does not say to do nothing, only to “deal with things” while it is still easy to do so, and to remember that the only thing that must be accomplished is the next step. The last four lines, however, remind us that there are times when the best next step to take is no step

The Daoist can be seen as giving advice that applies in every area of human activity, but especially in matters that concern war and the regulation of the state. One remark, aimed at rulers, says that ruling a big country is like cooking a small fish, presumably because if we keep fussing with either one, it will fall apart. (60) The best rulers are said to be those no one even knows about, and the worst regulate everything and discipline the people with force. By contrast, the ideal Daoist ruler is wise and

skillful enough to step aside and allow (or perhaps nudge) the people to act on their own. This is ruling by *wu wei*.

Confucians, looking for an easy way to criticize the Daoists, focused on the most senseless interpretations of *wu wei* and on bizarre practitioners of literal inactivity. A more sensible interpretation is defended by David Loy, who identifies “non-action” (*wu wei*) as spontaneous action with no thought of the “fruits,” and relates it to both karma yoga and Zen Buddhism (Loy, 73-86). In Barbara Stoller Miller’s rendition of the *Bhagavad-gita* there is a passage that, as she translates it, could easily have come straight from the *Daodejing*. Krishna is explaining karma yoga and says:

Abandoning attachment to fruits of action, always content, independent,
He does nothing at all even when he engages in action (4:20).

The Moral Fool—A Surprising Convergence. In *The Moral Fool: A Case for Amoralism*, Hans-Georg Moeller notes that there are forms of both Daoism and Zen Buddhism that steer clear of religion and metaphysics, pursue skillful and spontaneous action without deliberation, and come out strongly in support of moral abolitionism. The Daoist sage, he says, “is neither moral nor immoral but tries to rid herself of moral conceptions” (Moeller, p. 35). He cites the Zen teacher Huihai’s advice to make no response to events and to refrain from thinking in terms of good and evil, which, as I noted above, is similar to the advice from Marcus Aurelius to silence our assessor of good and evil. (See VII-14). The point is that one will be better able to deal with events as they occur if one “simply refrains from attaching substantial value judgments to one’s

perceptions, and a prime value judgment is obviously a moral judgment” (Moeller, p. 58). Even the moral psychologists I have occasionally mentioned emphasize the contribution of our unconscious processing to our decisions, and the importance of giving our “dog” (our emotions and “instincts”) his due, and getting straight about the true subservient role of the “tail” (our reasoning and arguing).

The “moral fool” appears to be a moral abolitionist who is convinced that it is a dangerous mistake to think and talk about the world in ethical terms (p. 3). Moeller says that ethics, which he does not distinguish from morality, can lead to pathological states and to one-sided self-righteousness. When we add in the fact that moral arguments can go on forever we can understand how ethics can “pose a serious threat to the harmonious coexistence of that which is distinct” (Moeller, p. 34). Why should good compromise with evil, or right with wrong? The understanding that ethics (that is, what I am here calling “morality” divides us and intensifies our conflicts is what leads Moeller, Zhuangzi, certain Zen Buddhists, the practitioners of karma yoga, the followers of Krishna, and moral abolitionists to urge us to pursue our affairs by “minimizing the use of ethics” (Moeller, p. 3).

To the traditional objection that moral abolitionists, unbound by the chains of morality, would do horrible things, Moeller replies that morality may have less effect on what we do than we think, and that its effect is often to make things worse and to set us at odds. He observes that we already have other ways to do the jobs morality seems unable to handle. He mentions love and law, which have long been working to produce

a more harmonious society, and which, unlike religion and morality, do not depend on us believing things that are not true, or pretending to do so.

Moeller's Daoist (especially Zhuangzi) would agree with the Sophists and the moral psychologists that "moral language is combative and it serves to justify one's self, condemn others, or both." He adds that "morality is not so much an inner conviction that prevents people from doing bad things as a rhetorical device that helps them justify their actions before and after they act" (Moeller, pp. 35-36).

3. Conclusion. The Daoist's appreciation of the Dao, Marcus's attempt to harmonize with Reason, the *Bhagavad Gita's* advice to hand over control to Krishna, the Christian's talk of possession by the Spirit, and even Nike's advice to "just do it" are birds of a feather. In each case we relinquish control to Something (or Someone). In some versions this Something, unlike the finite and confused self we know and love, understands (indeed devised) the Master Plan, and does not make mistakes. Those who see themselves as "instruments" of some god, or as filling a preordained role, have a path out of guilt and a permit to act without trying to figure out all the angles.

But even if there is no Master Plan and no one to tell us what to do, if we are alert to the way (the dao) of things, if we are relatively free of self-deception, and if we follow Epicurus' advice not to fall for "some mythical story," we can act spontaneously, and remain free of much worry, guilt, pointless deliberation. We can, after thinking about the details of our situation, just invite ourselves to decide what to do. The question is not "What is the right thing to do?" or "What would some imaginary, all-

knowing, impartial, being want me to do, it is “What shall I do?” and it is better answered by a decision or a deed than by a declarative.

We have seen how our emotions and desires (or their components) emerge from a matrix of conscious and unconscious influences. If we want to have any control over how things turn out we need to know what those influences are, how they work, and what we can do about them. The task of the next chapter will be to look into this matter by asking in more detail about the arising of decisions and about the methods we have devised for giving ourselves and others reasons to do things.

Chapter Eight (June 2012)

Decisions and Socialization

**When you come to a fork in the
road, take it.**

Yogi Berra

Some desires and emotions are both natural and necessary, but not all of them are, and not the ones that threaten to take over our lives and make us act like fools. When anger, fear, and greed no longer distort our perceptions, our choices will be more informed and we will probably be happy with the results. That this is not a modern discovery became clear as we surveyed the advice given by sages from other times and places. After rejecting some extreme suggestions, we turned to the recommendations of the Epicureans, Stoics, and Buddhists. The Greeks and Romans came up with some useful ideas about how to deal with vexation, but the Buddhists dedicated themselves to *solving* the problem of suffering. To do this they developed older yogic practices into forms of meditation designed to enhance their concentration and their ability to observe and modify their own mental behavior. At the end of the chapter, I mentioned that the followers of Krishna and the Daoists also worked out ways to act effectively without getting bogged down by worries about the results—the Krishnavites by turning things over to Krishna, and the Daoists by relying on spontaneous action based on an intuitive understanding of the ways of Nature, or the Dao.

If the concept of a desire is vague, ambiguous and variable, the notion of a decision is equally ragged. Making a decision is a complicated and never fully understood process in which many factors are at work. When we are asked why we did

something, sometimes we offer a moral justification, sometimes we come up with an explanation, and sometimes we try to make our answer serve both purposes. Often our primary aim is to satisfy our inquisitor so we can go about our business. Since my concern here is to support the practicality of life without morality, I will focus on answers to the “why question” (“Why did you do it?”) that offer explanations, not justifications. Decisions can only be given a partial causal explanation, but, if the moral error theorist is right, they can never be given a moral justification that does not beg the question.

On some occasions a person will answer the “why question” with the minimal and very unsatisfactory answer: “Because I wanted to.” This is, of course, a pure evasion, and it would be absurd to take it as a serious but incomplete attempt to provide either an explanation or a justification. If I tell you that something happened because the conditions were right for it to happen, I have told you nothing. You will have no clue why the thing happened until you hear more about those conditions. Similarly, you will have no answer to the “why question” until you hear about why I wanted to do the thing I wanted to do. If *all* I can say is “Because I wanted to”, then I myself don’t know why I did what I did. This, by the way, is neither rare nor debilitating, but sometimes it would be useful to come up with an answer to that “why question” that falls between “I wanted to do it” and the full causal story.

In Chapter Seven I claimed that a desire is not a simple mental state that comes and goes. It is better thought of as a complex of impulses, feelings, and thoughts that persist, recur, and waver in intensity, and that together influence our decisions in ways we never completely understand. This means that we are never privy to more than a part of the natural history of our decisions. But we are capable of thinking about, and

even observing, many of the things that happen on the way from the arising of a mild desire to an act aimed at satisfying it. What the Buddhists understand is that the skill to introspect, to watch what are often called the movements of the mind, is the very skill we need if we hope to minimize our own suffering. It is also where we need to start if we hope to ameliorate the human condition by helping to reduce the great mass of suffering we usually ignore.

1. Making Decisions. Two tendencies can undermine our self-knowledge and stunt our growth by keeping us clueless about why we act as we do. The first is the tendency to think that when we act it is always and only to satisfy some selfish desire, and the second is the tendency to overestimate the role that conscious deliberation plays in the making of our actual decisions.

We know from first hand experience that we sometimes act selfishly, satisfying our own desires and interests at some cost to others. Some of us are more selfish than others, and some of us are very selfish, but no one is completely and self-consciously selfish. This, however, is not the way Thomas Hobbes saw it. In his *Leviathan* he declared that “no man giveth but with intention of good to himself, because gift is voluntary; and of all voluntary acts, the object is to every man his own good” (*Leviathan*, Chapter 15). Joseph Butler, who devised the classical argument against psychological egoism, the belief that we are always motivated by self-interest, said that our problem is not that we think of our welfare too much, but that we don’t think of it more often. Whether or not that is right, we certainly don’t think of it *all of the time*. (See above, Chapter 4, pp. 2-3.) We all have desires and try to satisfy them, but even if we were clear about our ends (which we aren’t), we rarely have enough time, information, or

imagination to determine which of our options would best serve those ends.

Introspection tells us that we don't always try to maximize the good for ourselves, and common sense tells us that it would be counter-productive (or insane) to make this the goal of each of our actions.

When Hobbes wrote of the "intention of good" to ourselves he may not have meant "conscious" intention. We can get a different kind of egoism by giving up the belief in all-out *conscious* deliberation. Perhaps we have an unconscious mechanism that is dedicated to maximizing our interests, a powerful program that overrides impulses to altruism and sacrifice, and that even deceives us about our own motivations. If the pursuit of selfish ends is automatic and inevitable, then any belief in our own unselfishness must be dismissed as the result of self-deception and rationalization. So, of course, must our belief that we are free to choose what to do, not that Hobbes would have a problem with that.

Why are we tempted by this belief that, contrary to all appearances, we are robotically selfish? Perhaps because it is fun to be cynical, and because it is easy to put a selfish spin on everything from taking the smaller piece of cake to throwing ourselves onto a grenade. But anecdotal postulations of selfish motivations for apparent sacrifice prove nothing beyond the cleverness of their inventors. Common sense and research into brains and behavior tell us that our unconscious springs of action are at least as varied as our conscious ones, and that we have far more on our minds than our own welfare.

If we can abandon both deliberate and unconscious forms of psychological egoism, we can move on to the second factor that prevents us from a superior

understanding of why we do what we do. Of course we look after our own interests, but we often factor in the interests of others, or we consult some moral principle, personal policy, or bit of friendly advice. Fans of rationality say that the way to make decisions is to use all these factors to derive a reasoned conclusion about what we ought to do. But when we are faced with a need to act, the only relevant “conclusion” would be a decision, and decisions do not show up as conclusions of arguments. The best that a moralist can hope for from an argument is a (question-begging) conclusion of the form “I ought to do A,” and that thought is a long way from a decision to do A, which means that a belief that we ought to do something will never be more than a part of the explanation of why we did it.

Not only are we not going to get decisions from syllogisms, any episode of argument-construction is but one of many factors that can influence what we do. What is worse (at least for those who value their arguments) is that our reasoning itself is conditioned in ways we are only beginning to understand. We tend to recognize facts that support what we already believe or already want to do, and we instinctively avoid or rebut those that point in the other direction. Names for this nearly automatic practice of tipping the scales in our favor are “confirmation bias,” and “motivated reasoning.” In Chapter One we saw how this is “ubiquitous in the moral domain,” but the same tricks and moves show up wherever there is disagreement. Our skill in gathering and recognizing evidence is constantly subverted by our need to prove we are right.

2. Our Decider. When we come to a fork in the road, our desires, goals, impulses, reservations, prejudices, and beliefs are fed, like various tracks of music, into a device, the output of which is a decision. This device, which I hereby dub “our

decider,” has an input for selfish advice and another for moral principles, one that reminds us of resolutions and promises we have made, one inputting our beliefs and thoughts, and plenty of others. Selfish (and unselfish) impulses, beliefs about the world, slogans and conventional moral platitudes can all influence what we do, but their contributions are shaped by, and blended with, elements of radically different kinds—chemical and hormonal pressures, the genetic contribution, fears, biases, unconscious habits, pain, hunger, and fatigue. We can discover how some of these elements have moved us, but there are others that are not only beyond our control, they are beyond our capacity even to detect.

Does this mean that we must resign ourselves to having no real understanding of or control over what we do? Well, if the sufficient causes for an outburst of anger are present, it will happen, and there is nothing we can do but ride it out. But after the storm we can, *if we wish*, reflect on our performance and try to figure out how to prevent or minimize future outbursts.

If we pursue the mixing device metaphor, we can imagine there are knobs and levers that control many, but not all, of the inputs. We can learn how to turn down some desires, mute our dangerous emotions, tune out some of our foolish beliefs, dampen our impatience, delay our responses, and open the listening channel to allow some sounds (the words of others) to come in more clearly. We can’t observe the actual process of resolving all those factors, but we can discover what happens when we fiddle with some of the knobs, and especially when we finally learn how to deliver some simple instructions to our decider. We *can* take control of our lives and change the way we do things, but only by participating in the causal matrix, not by trying to transcend it.

3. Snap Decisions. Some of our best moves are spontaneous ones—unrehearsed, unplanned, and free of deliberation. When we find ourselves acting with unconscious grace, or when we feel that our creativity has surpassed our ability, we may look for the source of our success outside ourselves, in our muse, or in some other supernatural coach or backer. But there are other explanations. The ability to make instinctive, rapid, and healthy decisions is a valuable one for a predator in a world of predators. We have been rewarded for trusting our sense of danger and opportunity and for acting without reflection or deliberation; and the rewards are even greater for those who know when not to trust their hunches. The predators are mostly gone, but our physical and social environments have become so complex and challenging that if we did not outsource some work to our automatic systems, we would be drowned in details. So, like our ancestors, we make snap judgments and jump to conclusions, and sometimes (but not always) that saves us.

In his book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell explores our ability to act without reflection, and argues that the success of “snap” judgments has a perfectly natural explanation. He says that we have developed an unconscious skill called “thin slicing,” which occurs when we rapidly and without thought or awareness react to patterns we have not consciously noticed. Gladwell describes our “unconscious” as a kind of “mental valet” that “keeps tabs” on what is going on, and on what needs attention. The “ventromedial area” of the brain, he says, “works out contingencies and relationships and sorts through the mountain of information we get from the outside world, prioritizing it and putting flags on things that demand our immediate attention” (p. 59). When this area is damaged, we are forced to work things

out consciously, and our decision making is impaired beyond belief. We pile up useless information and displace natural common sense with pointless calculations.

Snap decisions are not just useful, they are indispensable. But there are many ways they can lead us astray. In a section called “The Dark Side of Thin-slicing,” Gladwell refers to what he calls the “Warren Harding Error.” Warren G. Harding was the picture of a great leader, tall, dignified, and commanding, but apparently he lacked both the intellect and the character to match his looks. Voters, misled by appearances, elected him, which was a bad mistake because he may have been one of the worst presidents in the history of his country. Those who commit the Warren Harding Error form an impression on the basis of one item (physical appearance, race, gender, pedigree, etc.), and they let that “first impression drown out every other piece of information they manage to gather in that first instant” (p. 91). Gladwell’s point is that there is much information to be gained from even a very brief encounter, but not if we glom onto one item and ignore everything else. Someone under the influence of this blunder can generate a cascade of projections and misapprehensions. Many of the things they subsequently see and hear are likely to be misinterpreted in the light of that first mistaken impression, and, so interpreted, they will appear as further evidence for the error.

Gladwell calls the ability to figure out what others are up to from their expressions and body language “mind-reading.” Everyone does it, and some people are very good at it, but it is an ability that abandons us when we have strong preconceptions, or when we are incapacitated by fear or stress, or are seriously pressed for time. Under those circumstances we can become “mind-blind,” which is a state of “temporary autism” in

which we are incapable of understanding even the obvious things about others that we usually pick up just from looking and listening. Gladwell suggests that mind blindness may explain how, in 1999, four officers of the “Street Crime Unit” of the NYPD shot the unarmed Amadou Diallo in the hall of his apartment in the Bronx. The police were looking for criminal activity and so were primed to interpret what they saw in that way. They saw a black man, and when they approached him he ran into a building. Perhaps he realized they were police, for he reached for his wallet. They thought he was reaching for a gun and shot him 41 times. The whole incident took seven seconds.

We may sometimes need to act quickly, but never before spending a few microseconds taking in the situation. “Our powers of thin-slicing and snap judgments are extraordinary,” Gladwell says, but “even the giant computer in our unconscious needs a moment to do its work.” When it is working well we can only back off in amazement at what it, what *we*, can do. Gladwell tells of art historians who can recognize fakes at a glance, psychologists who are adept at predicting marital difficulties after a few seconds of observation, and skillful food tasters, warriors, athletes, salesmen, and ornithologists. Similar, if less spectacular, feats of thin slicing are performed countless times every day in our own lives.

4. Mindfulness. There can be no doubt that undistorted information and dedicated practice can work miracles on our snap judgments. More information is usually better, and with practice we learn which information matters, and we learn when to forget about information and just jump. But we won't be very good at this if we don't learn to minimize distractions and pay close attention to the here and now. Buddhists call this ability "mindfulness," and it is the skill they are practicing when they are concentrating on their breathing and the movement of their minds.

Some say that the philosophy of the Buddha can be boiled down to his views about causality. (See David Kalupahana, *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*.) To understand causality is not to have looked into the hidden depths of the universe and found the cause of it all, but simply to comprehend, in more detail than people normally do, the progress of the events that make up our world, including that part of the world we call our mind. To understand causality is to understand how events unfold. In the words of the Buddha, it is to know:

When this is present, that comes to be;

From the arising of this, that arises.

When this is absent, that does not come to be;

On the cessation of this, that ceases. (Kalupahana [1], 90)

If, for example, we want to diminish our tendency to experience anger, we need to admit to ourselves (and inform our decider) that that is what we want to do. Then, when we have learned to observe our anger coming and going, we can study its growth from a tiny seed of discomfort or annoyance. Was it spawned by a misunderstanding, a petty grudge, or by someone's idle remark? When we have learned to spot some of the

situations and events that summon anger, we will be ready to do something about them. We can encourage ourselves to oppose our impending annoyance or anger with thoughts of compassion for its potential target, memories of past woes caused by giving in to anger, and repetitions of our favorite insights, slogans, and resolutions. In this way we may actually manage to prevent some outbursts and to keep a lid on some others.

When we have learned to notice and then to anticipate anger arising, and have developed methods to defuse it before it takes us over, we can pat ourselves on the back. But we are not home free because the anger, under control as it may be, is still there. So there remains a final stage when the uncomfortable physical feelings and the thoughts and impulses that make up anger no longer occur. But can we, can *anybody*, really reach that stage? Maybe not perfectly, but that is no excuse for doing nothing. We can *move away* from anger, but it will take a conscious commitment to do so, an appreciation of causality in the Buddhist sense, enough calmness and self-awareness to make the conscientious monitoring of our mental and physical states possible, and last but not least, what the Buddhist referred to as “right effort.”

Suppose that, having observed our impatience with some of our friends, we decide to soften our attitude. How might we do this? We can keep reminding ourselves that this is one of our projects. When we walk through the office door in the morning we can repeat words like “Give John a break—he’s having a bad year.” This private reminder may be ineffective, but sometimes it will help because changes in behavior happen when the causes of different behavior are present. Our words to ourselves will join with all the other data flowing into our decider. Sometimes they will make a difference, but, as we are about to see, they have a lot of help and a lot of competition.

5. Socialization. Life is complicated, and the antecedents of our actions are everywhere. If we ignore the complexity by subscribing to stripped down images of what we are—selfish computers, altruistic hominids, rational paragons, or lumbering gene machines—we will miss far more than we will see. It would be better to say that we are all four, and more, if only to indicate that selfishness, altruism, reasoning, genetic factors, and who knows what else, contribute to who we are and to what we do. We may never learn all that goes into any of our decisions, but we can often identify some of the factors that came together to result in what we did. What follows are some remarks about some of the elements we ourselves introduce into the causal stream—ways we have of influencing both our own decisions and the decisions of others.

Punishment and Reward. The word ‘punishment’ is one of those words that refuses to hold still. Not every deliberate hurt or slight is a punishment, but paranoia or guilt can make us see things as punishments that were never intended in that way. What makes some negative episode a punishment is not the quantity of hurt inflicted, for punishments can be mild, but some combination of intention and convention. What is important is that the punishment be an unwelcome response to some act that, according to some rule, custom, policy or decree, merits it. Like most concepts, *punishment* has clear cases, metaphoric extensions, and fuzzy boundaries.

When the Chinese philosopher Han Feizi told his emperor to grasp the “two handles of control,” he was talking about punishment and reward, but primarily punishment. Threats of punishment are used by parents, friends, enemies, bullies, nations, and the legal systems of all societies. We do many things because we believe we will be made to suffer if we fail to comply with the wishes of those who can harm us.

Physical punishment is one effective thing to threaten because almost nobody wants to be hurt, but there are as many possible threats as there are desires and aversions. We can take property or liberty away from people (if they have it), or eject them from our clan, club, or country. At the personal level, when people fail to conform to our requirements, we can withdraw our attention, support, or affection. This is no small thing because many would rather be punished physically than ignored.

Plenty of threats are backed by implausible mythical stories, but threats that come from the criminal justice system are genuine. I will have more to say in Chapter Eleven about the criminal justice system (which is really a justice system that is itself criminal), so here I will just say that the cruel and painful punishments we inflict on criminals are usually defended by an appeal to the popular idea that the point of incarceration and punishment is to make the offender pay for the crime. Whatever other rationalizations are offered, the practice of punishing “wrongdoers” is based on the moralistic idea that “justice requires” a hurt that is appropriate to (that “fits”) the offence. That sounds reasonable and it is very neat, but when we try to go beyond “an eye for an eye” or “a life for a life,” the math gets difficult. Justice understood in this way sounds like some grumpy accountant’s revenge fantasy. There is, of course, no objective measure of how much or what kind of pain a person deserves for annoying others, or damaging them or their interests, but we can be sure that few of the offenders ever think that their punishment was fair, and few of their victims ever think that it was sufficient.

Because we are a society of punishers, our first impulse is often to lash out with some negative word, frown, or blow at those who displease or disobey us. We habitually use negative reinforcement to discipline and control animals, children, co-

workers, spouses, and even strangers on the street. It is natural to lash out in anger when things do not go our way, but if we become aware of how anger works we may seek more enlightened ways to deal with those who have hurt or disappointed us than by causing them to suffer. Critics of punishment remind us of the harmful psychological effects a policy of punishment can have on a society, or on a person who relies on it.

There are legitimate and difficult questions about how well negative reinforcement works and about its costs and its side effects. But maybe the real question is not whether rewards or punishments are more expensive, or even more effective, it is whether we really want to promote a society in which people are routinely motivated by the fear of punishment and the hope of reward. Wouldn't we prefer our friends and neighbors to be motivated by something other than the fear of what we might do to them or the hope of what we might do for them?

Alleged Natural Consequences. Since our decisions often depend on our beliefs about the future, an efficient way to influence people is to convince them that if they do things *our* way the result will be something *they* want. The discovery of the power of prognostication was a milestone in the history of behavior modification. If I give you a physical threat, I have to have the ability to carry it out. If I threaten you with disapproval, I will fail utterly if you don't care what I think. But if I tell you that certain actions will kill you, result in great sorrow for those you love, or make your hair fall out, then, if you believe me, you will have a strong reason to avoid those actions. Leaders always emphasize the glorious results to be expected from the wars they have decided to launch. The anticipated results have to be glorious to outweigh the anticipated sacrifices, which the same leaders always minimize.

Over the millennia we have developed techniques for figuring out what is likely to happen and what is not, but we sometimes trick ourselves into not bringing our A-game to the inquiry. We can make good decisions without knowing what is going to happen in the future, but not without recalling and reflecting on what has happened in the past, and not without knowing what is happening in the present. Of course this is not a simple project because it is always possible to find disagreement about the possible consequences of an event before the event happens, or about the actual consequences of that event after it happened, and it is even possible to disagree about what is going on as the event is happening before our eyes. We are humans and we are strongly, sometimes fatally, disposed to see the world not as it is, but as we would like it to be. But the situation isn't hopeless because there are down-to-earth truths about who paid whom, when, how much and about where the bodies are buried. We are making great progress in uncovering (but also in hiding) information, but it not easy to hide a truth if people really want to find it. And now we have good reason to hope that the development of social media will help us uncover and share many truths that might otherwise remain hidden forever. It is no longer fashionable to deprecate those who consult the web for information (at least as long as they do so judiciously).

Supernatural Involvement. We have to admire those “doomsayers” who sit up with their flocks waiting for God to put an end to the world at the moment they have predicted. So far they have all been disappointed, but at least they were not afraid to go out on a limb. If we threaten or promise the end of the world, or fire from the sky at midnight, we had better have some trick up our sleeve, or we will be discredited when nothing happens at the appointed time. It makes more sense to promise rewards and

punishments at unexpected times or, better yet, after death.

We have already discussed this sort of inducement in Chapter Three, where we saw how widespread and varied the belief in divine reward and punishment has been, and apparently still is. And yet it is hard to say how much credit these threats and promises should get for the peace and order we enjoy. Is it really only a fear of divine punishment that keeps our fundamentalist friends from stealing our spare change? We hope not. But even if the threat of divine retribution keeps some people under control, we might wonder why it doesn't do a better job than it does. How can people bring themselves to do things they sincerely believe will earn them an eternity of torture that is worse than anything ever experienced on earth? Maybe they just believe that they believe.

The idea that punishment is doled out by supernatural beings and in other mysterious ways taps into so many beliefs and fears it is difficult for any reformer to neglect it. In the *Republic* Plato eventually encouraged the use of fictions after proving to his own satisfaction that justice is its own reward. The gods, he said,

favor the just and hate the unjust. And the favorite of
heaven may expect, in the fullest measure, all the
blessings that heaven can give, save perhaps for some
suffering entailed by offences in a former life. (Cornford (tr.), p. 347)

In Albert Camus' novel, *The Plague*, the town priest delivers a sermon early in the book, before experiencing the full horror of the disaster. At this stage, like contemporary fundamentalists reacting to 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina, the priest is content to see the plague as God's punishment.

Calamity has come on you, my brethren, and, my brethren,
you deserved it. . . . If today the plague is in your midst,
that is because the hour has struck for taking thought. The
just man need have no fear, but the evildoer has good cause
to tremble. For plague is the flail of God and the world his
threshing floor, and implacably he will thresh out his harvest
until the wheat is separated from the chaff.” (Camus [1], 81-82)

Later, after months of suffering racked the people of his city, he developed doubts about this sort of punishment, and about the kind of being willing to administer it. And so should we. Those who try to control us by warning us about the wrath of God or Satan’s torture chambers rarely balance any security that results from this method of control against the ignorance, superstition, and fear its use requires and promotes.

Lies and Deception. Many who appeal to the commands of a divine being actually believe in such a being; others do not. In matters of religion, as in the affairs of everyday life, a simple and cost-effective way to control people is to deceive them about the facts. Often our deception will not be discovered, and even when it is, we can try to justify it by pointing out the good we expected it to do.

Deception can be involved in any of the forms of control we have already mentioned or are about to mention, but it need not be. We may intend to carry out our threats and to dole out the rewards we have promised, we may believe in divine justice, and accept the world-views, slogans, and moral principles we promote—or we may not. When we do not believe the story we are telling we join those who try to control people with noble (and ignoble) lies and convenient fictions. This reaches its nadir in China,

North Korea, and other countries where only “information” sanctioned by the government is allowed to circulate freely.

Controlling others by manipulating their picture of the world is not uniquely human—many animals have their own forms of camouflage and deception—but we have raised the practice to an art, and to consciousness. Our systems of linguistic and non-linguistic conventions give us an almost unlimited capacity to improve our situation by managing the beliefs of others. As effective as straightforward lies may be, we have many other ways to generate false beliefs. We can speak the truth with omissions, or with a certain tone that misleads. Or we can act in ways that deceive others, a procedure Kant called “pretence,” and declared morally unproblematic. We can even mislead by telling the truth to someone we know will not believe us. We are very clever.

World-views. When Marcus Aurelius told himself that the world was designed by a great and superior mind, or when he thought of himself as a mere fragment of that all-pervading mind, he was pushing himself into a fundamental gestalt that promotes cooperation, acceptance, and self-effacing responsibility. (“O world, I am in tune with every note of thy great harmony!”) Stoic and Hindu pantheists, Christians who believe in innumerable souls, and atomists who believe only in matter and the void, see things with very different eyes. Even when their actions are similar, and this is more often than one might expect, their justifications, rationalizations, and explanations differ predictably. We all live in the same world, but we tell wildly different stories about it, or at least about the parts of it that no one can check.

Thanks to a world-view that includes reincarnation, Hindus and Buddhists have an almost air-tight explanation of human misery and an impressive reason to behave

themselves in this cycle on earth. But given the way we actually behave, it is hard to believe that Christians always act with one eye on their Eternal Reward, or that Buddhists and Hindus are careful counters of karma. It is likely that belief in heavens and hells, with or without the added complication of reincarnation, probably plays a less central role in our day to day decisions than we imagine. Witness both the many gentle and well-behaved skeptics and atheists and the shocking sins of the holy.

It may be that only a plain world-view that combines naturalism in science, atheism in religion, and moral abolitionism is free of the need to distort itself to make room for one or another revered bit of ancient folly. Because no moral error theorist will be tempted by any world-view built on an opposition between good and evil, the error theory emerges as a relatively tolerant way of thinking about the beliefs and acts of others. Moral error theorists might dislike you, dislike what you have done, or think that your opinions are naïve or even absurd, but they will not judge you to be evil for having fallen into moral error. This actually makes quite a difference because when we can brand a person, or all the members of some race, sect, or country as evil, we have a ready-made set of reasons we can use to justify exploiting and abusing them.

Slogans and aphorisms. It takes a considerable investment of time and energy to promote a general view of reality. It is far easier, and sometimes just as effective, to produce a memorable slogan. Great changes have been brought about, and countless people have been inspired and moved to action by, powerful maxims, slogans, and sayings such as: “Love your neighbor,” “No man is an island,” “Sí, se puede,” “You deserve a break today,” and “Just do it!.” Wikipedia nicely defines a slogan as “a memorable motto or phrase used in political, commercial, religious, and other contexts

as a repetitive expression of an idea or purpose.” We are also treated there to a list of hundreds of memorable slogans and to the news that “the word ‘slogan’ comes from sluagh-ghairm (pronounced slogorm), which is Gaelic for ‘battle-cry’.” See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slogan>.

If short and apt sayings are repeated often enough they become part of our public and personal dogma—“not that there’s anything wrong with that.” These memes influence our decisions by floating about in our semi-consciousness and rising at appropriate times to nudge our decider in one direction or another. Some promote harmony and kindness, but others (“It’s a dog eat dog world” or “All’s fair in love and war”) encourage competition and strife. A political advisor in India once formulated “the law of the fishes,” which is this: “The big ones eat the little ones.” We have been told that “God helps those who help themselves,” advised to “Look out for number one,” and have heard a judgment that no moral abolitionist would make: “Greed is good.” If people repeat and applaud these sayings they will become more aggressive, and they will be more successful whenever ruthlessness brings success. Such sayings erase guilt and can be flung at scruples and critics to rationalize neglect and exploitation.

In Maoist China slogans could be found on every wall. Some promoted communist ideals and the joy of serving the people, and others, like “Chairman Mao is the red sun in our hearts,” promoted Chairman Mao. Today, no respectable rally in any country would lack slogan-sporting signs. Political campaigns with effective slogans thrive, and a good slogan is likely to have a greater effect than a thoughtful editorial.

It is disturbing to realize how many slogans and jingles we are exposed to every day. Phrases like “good to the last drop,” “Yo quiero Taco Bell,” “do the Dew,” or “Got

milk?” capture our attention and show up, unbidden, at moments of decision. The biggest problem with slogans is that they work too well. They bypass reflection and deliberation, and sometimes almost single-handedly generate decisions. They have no place in arguments, nor even in calm discussions about what to do or support, but still we may be moved to vote primarily because our decider has been awed by an effective slogan like “No new taxes,” or “Its time for a change.” Slogans are indeed battle cries, and it might be important and empowering to chant them with the throng in the public square, but when we are trying to make up our minds what to think, or to do, or to support, perhaps our slogan should be: “Down with slogans!”

Guilt and Shame. One kind of guilt is legal. To be guilty is to be judged guilty after an official hearing. More often, guilt is personal, an uncomfortable responsibility we feel when we believe we have done what we think we ought not to have done, or when we have neglected to do what we think we ought to have done. This is often called “moral guilt.” Error theorists can also regret what they have done, but that regret will not have the same flavor as guilt of the moral kind.

The desire to avoid the complex of feelings and thoughts we call guilt can be a very powerful motivation. If I get tired enough of the way I feel when I look at my unanswered emails, I may be moved to do something about them. One way to avoid feeling guilty for letting someone down is not to let them down, so the capacity to feel guilt is not necessarily harmful, and neither is the tendency to act in order to avoid feeling it. There is nothing wrong with refraining from saying something cruel because you know *you* would feel guilty about hurting the target of your remark—but there are other motivations for the same restraint that might be more friendly and welcome. For

example, we may refrain from a cruel remark because we know it will hurt someone's feelings and we don't want to do that, or, best of all, because such remarks don't even occur to us.

Guilt is usually contrasted with shame, and one way to oversimplify the discussion is to say that we feel guilt for letting someone else down and shame for letting ourselves down. If we take our ethical principles and standards seriously, then we don't have to be moralists to feel shame when we don't live up to them. But if we take them too seriously, we can drive ourselves insane by worrying about setbacks and lapses others would consider insignificant. Both guilt and shame are used as forms of control, and both cause psychological damage if over-used. Obviously there is no simple or single answer to the question of when use turns into overuse. We all need to find a comfortable place somewhere between blaming ourselves for some disaster and refusing all responsibility. From there we may have a chance to construct a relatively accurate version of the antecedents of the events, including a relatively accurate assessment of our own contribution.

The problem with both shame and guilt as motivators is that they work by engaging our desire to avoid experiencing a feeling. If you write me a friendly letter, I would rather your motivation not be the desire to avoid feeling guilt for not writing. If you deal fairly with me, I hope it is not just to avoid feeling bad for having defrauded me. If that is your motive, I'll take it, but I would worry about doing business with you. Someone who has been conditioned to act in order to avoid shame or guilt is working with a blinkered decider that has been taught to jump through one hoop and to ignore the many other places and ways to travel.

Ritual. Confucius (551– 479 BC) lived in a society deranged by war, greed, and corruption, and he developed his ideas about government and society in the hope of setting things right. He saw the distant past as a Golden Age in which conduct was regulated by the “rules of propriety” (the *li*), so he urged contemporary rulers and their subjects to follow these “ways of the ancient kings,” which included conventions of behavior, speech, and even dress that were thought to have been honored in antiquity.

One of Confucius’s ideas was that names should be “rectified.” This is explained by one of his slogans, which was “Let a father be a father, a son be a son, and a wife be a wife.” This means that fathers, sons, and wives, should, without complaint or deviation, conform to their traditional roles and respect the chain of command, which places the king at the head of state and the father at the head of the household. He urged rulers to deal with their people formally, as if they were officiating at a great religious ritual, and he promoted deference and decorous behavior.

The Chinese historian Fung Yu Lan characterized the *li* as “all the rules for everything pertaining to human conduct.” After the death of Confucius, scholars codified the *li*, but the rules they attributed to their ancient kings are in no way unusual:

A son, when he is going abroad, must inform (his parents
where he is going); when he returns, he must present
himself before them.

When two men are sitting or standing together, do not join
them as a third. When two are standing together,
another should not pass between them (*The Book
of Rites*, in Legge [2], Vol I, 67-68 and 77).

The prescriptions in the *Book of Rites* were not put forward as moral requirements, but as ancient practices that, if followed, would save society. Confucius always hoped to find a ruler with the authority and the will to promote the courteous but authoritarian system he favored. He never found one, but his students were more successful and his “way” has dominated the East for millennia.

We in the West probably underestimate the extent of rituals in our lives. We indulge in rituals when we meet or part, when we wink, bow, wave, or do any of a thousand things that have become too automatic to notice. Whether it is a high mass or a high five, rituals bind individuals to groups and to one another. Complex hand signals help identify the members of secret organizations, and rituals of passage have helped millions of people get through both difficult and joyous times. The topic is vast, and I haven’t even mentioned the roots of ritual in the behavior of even the most primitive of animals. But, sticking with humans, our behavior toward others depends, to a greater extent than we realize, on a wide and evolving set of rituals. This usually works quite well, but we need to be careful not to allow ourselves to displace authentic human performances with empty gestures, and we need to remember that as behavior becomes ritualized there can be a loss of spontaneity, and with it a loss of creativity and innovation. We can’t do without rituals, but them, but we can understand how they work, and decide how to incorporate them into our communications.

Moral Fiction. “Moral fiction” is the name sometimes given to fiction intended to send a moral message by providing moving examples of virtues and vices in action. The category includes fables, stories, novels, plays, and films. Children’s books have

always been crafted to teach moral lessons and it would be hard to find a drama or a sit-com on TV that doesn't have some discernable pro-moral slant.

It would be a mistake to presume that many of the great and influential writers have been moralists. Their tales may have "morals," as did Aesop's fables, but the morals are not always moral—sometimes they are just lessons about life. What we learn from "The Hare and the Tortoise" is that "slow and steady wins the race," and from "The Boy who cried Wolf" is that "even when liars tell the truth, they are never believed." Another meaning for 'moral fiction', then, is *fiction with a moral*.

Homer's *Iliad* is the story of how greed and insensitivity led Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks, to deprive Achilles of a prize he had been given as his share of the spoils, and of how the anger or "wrath" of Achilles played out to no one's advantage. The Trojan War itself was set in motion when Paris, a Trojan, in another act of irresponsible passion, kidnapped Helen, the wife of the King of Sparta, and took her to Troy, an act that launched the thousand ships and led to the fall of that impregnable city. Aeschylus, in the three plays that make up the *Oresteia*, describes how Agamemnon, upon returning from Troy, was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra, who could not forgive him for sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia to secure fair winds for the raid on Troy. The trilogy continues when Orestes murders Clytemnestra, his mother, for killing Agamemnon, his father. For this crime Orestes is pursued relentlessly by the furies of guilt, but the play ends hopefully when Athena introduces the option of putting on a trial as an alternative to an endless chain of acts of retribution.

The epics, histories, and plays these Greeks wrote show us, again and again, how decisions made in the face of the conflicting forces of tradition and personal

passions are capable of destroying our lives, and the lives of those we love. These lessons are not necessarily *moral* lessons, and the message of the *Oresteia* is not that revenge killings are morally wrong, but that sometimes the demands that tradition and our own wishes place on us create agonizing difficulties and tragic outcomes.

Fiction shows us how events can unfold by helping us understand the inner lives of complicated individuals and the mysterious workings of cause and effect. It shows us how others might think, and it strengthens our imagination. Truths gained from fiction can have an immense influence on how we live our lives, but fiction with a moral does not always promote behavior a moralist would call moral. Perhaps we should call fiction that tries to do that “moralistic fiction.”

Humor. Fiction with a moral may show us how greed, stupidity, or anger often bring disaster, or how “what goes around comes around.” We enjoy seeing the villains “get what they deserve,” and if we see it happen enough on TV and in movies we might start to believe in it, and our decider might be inclined to factor in the possible “wages of sin.” This could keep us out of some trouble.

On a lighter note, we are also deterred from various ill-advised ventures by the great comedians who have mocked and satirized our vices (and our virtues) since antiquity. Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Molière, Voltaire, Swift, Mark Twain, and the social and political cartoonists Goya, Daumier, Nast, and Herblock illustrated our foolishness and made us better citizens. In the early 20th Century, humor on the radio was gentle, naïve, and formulaic, and the same was the case with early TV. In this century, however, that has changed. Humor with bite finally showed up on late-night and pay TV, and now, on Comedy Central, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*

make it clear that (if we ignore the absurd bleeping of “dirty words”) we might be living in a Golden Age of political satire, and if we want the dirty words, we can flip to HBO.

Some of the best comedies (on stage, screen, or TV) show us how absurd we might actually appear if we go just a little further along some path of misapprehension, anger, or greed that we are already traveling. Most of us do not identify with, or want to be identified with, Moliere’s miser or hypochondriac, Inspector Jacques Clouseau from the “The Pink Panther,” or the George Costanza character of “Seinfeld.” Seeing their antics and the results, we may be led to temper our greed, whining, avarice, duplicity, self-importance, or insensitivity. How can we watch these characters behaving so foolishly and not resolve not to imitate them?

Music. Music elicits, shapes, mirrors, and intensifies emotions, and it fortifies beliefs by enabling us to repeat them with emphasis, enthusiasm, rhythm, and resolve. Protest songs, fight songs, work songs, love songs, anthems, hymns, and jingles can be unforgettable and infectious. Music can get stuck in our heads, or played on our iPods, where it can function as an energizer or a relaxant, a teacher or a companion. But the influence of music is not, in itself, moral. It can be as abstract as a single black line on a canvass, or it can amplify and celebrate feelings of love and hate, courage and fear, joy and sorrow. Any subject can be sung about and any policy can be supported by a song. Both sides in a war have their “battle hymns.”

Music has evolved to illuminate our thoughts about life, death, love and loss, and to express the various modes of adoration, praise, and triumph found in religions. Even an atheist can be moved by the great choruses of Bach and Handel. Secular music also deals with our deepest thoughts and feelings, and the great songs of the last 100

years have seen us through love and loss, war and strife, and momentous social changes. Now that boom boxes have evolved into Walkmen, and Walkmen into iPods and smart phones, we can expect the music to continue, but with far greater fidelity, variety, and convenience.

Now, at any time and in any place we happen to be, we can call on the power of music. When feeling sad we can either change our mood by listening to upbeat music, or we can inhabit our sadness by listening to the blues. Plato was so impressed by the power of music that he believed the state should use music to control the behavior of its citizens, and we know that malls and stores treat their customers to music calculated to stimulate their impulses to buy. Musicians are sometimes disturbed by the uses made of their songs, and adults have always been worried about the influence music seems to have on younger fans. But wouldn't it be far more disturbing if music suddenly lost its power to move us, to inspire us, to unite us, and to compel us to be still and listen?

Morality and Language. Morality itself must, of course, be included in the list of devices we use to influence each other. In the world according to the moralist, some things are objectively good and some ways of acting are forbidden by whatever moral authority there might be. We now know that it is an open question how much sense moral objectivity makes. Emotivists thought it made none, and error theorists think it makes enough sense for us to be able to deny it. We also know that it is not clear how much effect the belief in objective values actually has on conduct. It does not literally compel us, because we often manage to do things we believe to be morally wrong. Moral beliefs may not be empty of motivational power, but any power they do have is

subject to exploitation by those who think (or pretend to think) that they know what is really valuable and what our true moral duties are.

Many of the methods of control we have been discussing would be impossible without language, and morality itself, false though it may be, is built into our very words and woven out of powerful systems of metaphor. Marketing moguls and their psychologists are at work around the clock figuring out how words can be found that will lead us to desire, even to crave, what they hope to sell us. What can we possibly do to protect ourselves? We really can't just stop listening, even if that seems to be the policy of far too many speakers. We are stuck with language in a world of speakers, so we will just have to remember how easily words can be used to control us, and how difficult it can be to for us to see this as it is happening.

Language is a tool, and we don't like to think about our tools, we like to use them. But the time to think is upon us. By using language, and especially moral language, in less than straightforward ways, skillful manipulators have learned how to make us disapprove of harmless behavior, buy their products, applaud their errors, and vote against our own interests. The possibility of saving ourselves by attending carefully to the uses and abuses of our words is important enough to deserve its own chapter.

Chapter Nine (June 2012)

Language and a Clear View

First, words are our tools, and at a minimum, we should use clean tools: we should know what we mean and what we do not, and we must forearm ourselves against the traps that language sets us.

John L. Austin

1. Language. In Chapter Eight we surveyed some of the techniques we use to promote the traits and behavior we prefer. They work their magic in different ways, but when that happens it is a good bet that language was involved. Language conveys information that is relevant to our choices and it is used to express commands, demands, and reprimands. Threats are intensified by the ability to describe undesirable situations, and no consequence can be predicted unless it can first be described. Words make possible our belief in gods and in morality, and without them we would have an impoverished version of our place in the natural world, and no social life to speak of.

Linguistic philosophers and philosophers of language have taught us how marvelous and powerful language is, and also how easy it is to get things wrong when we are careless with our words and mistaken about how they work. Ludwig Wittgenstein went so far as to say that philosophy is “a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (*Philosophical Investigations*, I ¶109). The naïve idea that a word is meaningful only if it “denotes” something

bewitched G. E. Moore into writing that if 'good' doesn't denote something simple, it either denotes something complex, or else "means nothing at all, and there is no such subject as Ethics" (*Principia Ethics*, p. 15). Other philosophers, also misled by simplistic accounts of meaning, set out to discover what "meanings" are. A slate of traditional candidates (objects, ideas, concepts, classes, thoughts, propositions, properties) was brought forth, but none of them won the votes of a majority of philosophers of language.

Wittgenstein, who had helped philosophers get into this quandary, pointed the way out. He advised us to turn our attention from questions about meaning and meanings to questions about use. "A main source of our failure to understand," he said, "is that we do not command a clear view of the use of our words" (P. I., I ¶122). The hope that we can command a clear, or at least a clearer, view of the use of our words is shared by some of the students of language we are about to consider, and especially by those who have attempted to help us forearm ourselves against some of those traps Austin mentioned.

Jacob Bronowski said that because we have language "we have built a world of outside objects, a world which does not exist for animals" (*The Origin of Knowledge and Imagination*, p. 38). Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin agreed, and added that "it makes good biological sense to see language as a rather useful by-product of an ever sharpening pressure to understand and manipulate the components of the environment." Because we use names and form concepts, they said, we create "a more sharply delineated world" inside our heads (*Origins*, p. 204). With language we can preserve lessons from the past, make plans about the future,

and fix past, present and future in a narrative starring us. With language we can clarify, transmit, and promote rules, and we can find out what other people think.

The effect of language on the way we navigate the social world may be even more profound than its effect on the way we navigate the physical one. The problems of finding food and shelter are simple compared to the difficulties we encounter trying to deal with other people, and with their attempts to deal with us. We needed a keener consciousness, a linguistic consciousness, Roger Lewin suggested, “so that we could understand—and perhaps manipulate—others better” (*In the Age of Mankind*, p. 174).

Our use of language to structure reality and to communicate and manipulate relies to a surprising extent on implication, metaphor, and other non-literal devices. In their book *Metaphors we Live By*, the linguist George Lakoff and the philosopher Mark Johnson write at length about the role of metaphors in our perception of, interaction with, and thought about, the world. Metaphors are not mere matters of style and decoration, rather “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (p. 3). Metaphors form systems that enable us to comprehend one thing in terms of another. In this way we emphasize some features of a thing and obscure others. If we “live by” the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR, we will argue differently from someone who favors ARGUMENT IS CONVERSATION, or ARGUMENT IS DANCE. The ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor gives rise to countless ordinary expressions:

Your claims are *indefensible*.

He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.

His criticisms were *right on target*.

I *demolished* his argument.

I've never *won* an argument with him.

You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*

If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*.

He *shot down* all of my arguments (p. 4).

After considering a variety of metaphorical systems, Lakoff and Johnson conclude that “in all aspects of life, not just in politics or in love, we define our reality in terms of metaphor, and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphor” (“Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language,” 322). Consider the metaphor of bondage so popular with moralists, who seem to believe that moral principles exert an objective but surmountable force, a “moral gravity” pulling everyone in the right direction. (See Mackie’s *Ethics* pp. 74 – 75 for a short discussion of some metaphors used to explain moral bondage or obligation.)

Many other metaphors serve the moralist cause—morality as a guide, a quest, a set of laws, a compass; or a “good will” as something that, “like a jewel, shines by its own light.” Thinking of value as a “substance” or a “property” easily leads to thinking of it as present in things, as quantifiable, objective, and detectable. This objectification of value was at the heart of Moore’s intuitionism, and it stares at us from his remark, just quoted, that if ‘good’ does not denote something, then it is a meaningless term.

The news about language is mixed. Words and concepts help us make sense of what is happening, but they also lead us to ignore or distort characteristics

of the people, things, and events we use them to describe. If we think of someone as good, bad, busy, angry, evil, or dumb, we will expect a certain kind of behavior, and we may see it even when it isn't there. Our projections can create new evidence for our categorizations even as our categorizations govern our projections. As a result, we overlook complexity and change; and seeing only what we expect to see, we respond in inappropriate, self-defeating, or disastrous ways.

And there is more bad news: words and concepts make explanations possible, which is great, but at the same time they make it easy to generate absurdly simple explanations for complex events:

He is angry with me because I didn't come to his party.

She quit her job and moved to Montana because she loved him.

He became a terrorist because he wanted to go to Heaven.

They voted for him because they are old.

These minimalist explanations at best single out one relevant factor, but they are often wrong and they are always too simple. Even when they are not completely mistaken, they tempt us to stop asking questions long before we have learned what we may need to know.

The more closely we look at our simple explanations, and at the vague and loaded concepts we use in constructing them, the clearer it becomes that language is not an infallible instrument for making sense of the world. It may create "a more sharply delineated world inside our heads," but it also makes it easy for us to neglect important details, and to be satisfied with generalizations, easy answers, stereotypes, and slogans. If we are not careful, we will become victims of this

“useful tool,” befuddled and manipulated by words and by those who use them to control what we feel, think, and do.

But does this mean that we should stop verbalizing our reality and abandon words and explanations? Incredibly enough, this seems to be the advice of the Ninth Century Chinese Chan (Zen) Master Huangbo:

Let there be a silent understanding and no more. Away
with all thinking and explaining (John Blofeld,
The Zen Teachings of Huang Po, p. 34).

Do not deceive yourselves with conceptual thinking,
and do not look anywhere for the truth, for all that
is needed is to refrain from allowing concepts
to arise (Blofeld, p, 75).

Huangbo urged us to work for a silent understanding because he knew that words can blind us to what is before our eyes, or bind us to our habitual roles and responses. This is true, but any “silent understanding” a fluent speaker manages to attain will flow from a comprehensive appreciation of a world that has already been structured by language. Our silent understanding will not take place in ignorance of what can be said. What, then, is it to “refrain from allowing concepts to arise?” And what are concepts? It may be enough to say that when we master a *concept* we master the uses of a network of associated words. Huangbo is certainly not telling us to unlearn our concepts, or to forget how to use the words that express them. We need our linguistic abilities to be able to understand what others are saying and to communicate with them—even cryptically. So what *is* he telling us?

We can put this question to his student, Huihai, who also promoted the idea of a silent understanding. He said that “right thinking” occurs when we are not thinking in terms of good and evil, sorrow and joy, beginning and end, acceptance and rejection, likes and dislikes, aversion and love. Right thinking, he said, means letting our understanding of a situation develop without short-circuiting our intelligence by immediately resorting to confused and overused concepts.

You should know that setting forth the principle
of deliverance in its entirety amounts only to
this—WHEN THINGS HAPPEN, MAKE NO
RESPONSE: keep your minds from dwelling on
anything whatsoever: keep them for ever still as
the void and utterly pure (without stain): and thereby
spontaneously attain deliverance. (Blofeld, p. 94)

When someone offers us “the principle of deliverance in its entirety,” it may pay to lend an ear. The advice to “make no response” when “things happen” is not advice to stand motionless as a statue, or to enter a state of pure consciousness. Remember that for the Daoist, *wu-wei* (non-action) was not about immobility, it was about spontaneous action (or non-action) unmediated by conscious and wordy deliberation. This is also what Huihai and his teacher were talking about. They were telling us not to make a string of words our first response to everything that happens, but to keep a quiet and steady mind and to restrict both the verbal and emotional static that we ourselves generate. To “make no response” is to refrain from categorizing, emoting, and judging. It is to give ourselves the microseconds we

need to “intuit” what is really going on. The undistorted data we can gather in this brief episode of quiet attention is the best present we could give our decider, and it is a gift that will be rewarded with a harvest of sensible decisions.

2. Cleaning our Tools. What are some of the features and uses of language that can lead us astray, and how can we protect ourselves? Most of our words are vague, or ambiguous, or both. Usually the context clears things up, but not always, and not if one party is being devious, or if both of them are. Still other errors result from the fact that almost any word can be loaded with positive or negative connotations and used to praise or smear by implication. Other problems arise from our uses of language to oversimplify, blame, and fret. As it turns out, there are quite a few things we need to learn not to say to others, or even to ourselves.

(a) Vagueness. Though we usually have no trouble with them, even stolid words like ‘book’ and ‘chair’ are vague in that they shade off gradually into magazines, journals, couches and stools. Words like ‘happy’, or ‘tired’, or ‘love’ do not have (and can not be given) precise boundaries, and one’s use or interpretation of any of them on an occasion will depend on too many things to list. The vagueness of the word ‘person’ undermines the viability of debates about abortion and stem-cell research. The question of when a fertilized human ovum becomes a “person” is not an empirical question, a question about biology, or a linguistic question that calls for a dictionary definition. It is, for most “persons,” a question of rhetoric: “Given my views about abortion or stem-cell research, how must I understand the word ‘person’ if I want to support my position?” We will never reach agreement about the morality of abortion by arriving at some consensus about how

to interpret the word 'person' because our beliefs about the meaning of that word will defer to our more intense feelings and beliefs about our moral obligations (or the lack of them) to the unborn.

Sometimes the effort to help the poor can be derailed by the vagueness of words like 'poor', 'hungry', or 'needy'. The "stingy" might argue for a (re)definition of 'poverty' that leaves out many we would now consider poor, but this would only be a semantic ploy designed to rationalize their own lack of charity. The real-world problem (for a person, a group, or a nation) is neither to determine that there is a moral duty to help the poor, nor to come up with some crisp distinction between those who are poor and those who are not, but to *decide* whether to give, how much to give, who gets it, and how it is to be distributed. Generosity inspired by empathy and compassion will always take us further than morality, which can never demand as much as people seem to need. It is easy to tell when someone needs help, but difficult (or if the moral error theorist is right it is impossible) to prove that someone *deserves* our help, or that we are morally obliged to supply it.

(b) Ambiguity. Words are ambiguous when they have two or more meanings. A familiar example is the word 'bank'. When the context fails to clear things up, we can ask whether someone means the river bank or The First National. Opponents in an argument about morality frequently (by design or by accident) mean completely different things by 'good' or 'right', or 'a right'. Do we have a right to health care? Our understanding of this question and our answer to it will depend on whether we are talking about a moral, constitutional, legal, inalienable, natural,

positive, or negative right. Our answer will also depend on what is meant on that occasion by 'health', 'care', 'have' and 'we'.

Natural ambiguity is trouble enough, but, because of their passion for definitions, philosophers have muddied the waters by minting a milling gaggle of new ones. Recall how Smith argued that moral wrongness is not "queer" (in the way Mackie thought it was) if it is "defined" in terms of what some group of people want to forbid. And if pigs are defined as robins, then pigs can fly.

There are so many interpretations of our controversial words that it is a good idea to keep a lookout for any attempt to strengthen some position or argument by giving special meanings to common words. Suppose the topic is God. God knows what anyone really means by 'god', but if we are discussing religion we had better ask. Is God conscious, capable of human emotions, omniscient, and all the rest? Or is God something more abstract like "love" or "a higher power." If you think of God as a "force," like gravity or love, there is no need for atheists to take issue with your "belief in God," but they will need to remember, and to keep reminding you, that when you use the word 'god' you do not intend to be referring to God.

Two people can only *communicate* about their religious beliefs if they agree on what they mean by 'god', or at least if they discover what each other means by that word. Many who launch into discussions of religion just start talking or writing without giving a thought to how, or even whether, anyone is likely to understand them. But serious communicators, ones who care about being understood, will be aware of what their audience might think they mean by the words they use, and they will be careful to avoid ambiguities that could lead to confusion.

(c) Emotive meaning. In *Ethics and Language*, C. L. Stevenson introduced a distinction between “descriptive meaning” and “emotive meaning.” He characterized the descriptive meaning of a word as its “disposition to affect cognition,” and its emotive meaning in terms of its use to express emotions and to influence the attitudes and emotions of others. We often do feel strong emotions when we argue, but Stevenson was concerned with emotive language itself, not the temper of its users.

Words develop, and sometimes lose, the power to influence how people feel about things, and it is this emotive meaning that makes them such valuable prizes in the meaning-wars. When the word ‘liberal’, which is both vague and ambiguous, is used to describe someone, it can be meant positively, negatively, or neutrally. For many people the term is completely pejorative, but this was not always so; and now, even the word ‘moderate’ can be hurled at someone as an insult.

Among socialists, ‘socialism’ has a positive emotive meaning, but not among capitalists and people who don’t know what socialism is. The same person or thing can be called by many names and phrases, some positive and some negative. Is he a jihadist or a terrorist? Is it love or infatuation? Is it a single payer health care system or socialized medicine? Bertrand Russell wrote somewhere of the “conjugation of adjectives,” an example of which is: “I am firm. You are stubborn. He is a pig headed fool.” A more contemporary example might be: “I am flexible. You keep changing your mind. He is a flip-flopper.”

Vagueness, ambiguity, and the emotional power of words have always been used to evade criticism, cloud issues, win arguments, and manipulate others. Those

who fail to see through these tricks can be so dazzled by the rhetoric that they end up giving away the store, or sacrificing everything for nothing. So let us strive to know what is meant by the words streaming out of our mouths and into our ears.

(d) Grumbling and Muttering. Language can indeed function as a tool to influence and manipulate others, but it also functions internally, when we “say things to ourselves,” or narrate our way through our day. This is usually benign, but if we make a practice of mentally rehearsing our grievances, we might eventually start believing our own one-sided and bitter version of events. The *Dhammapada*, an early Buddhist book on ethics, urges us to avoid thoughts like: “They insulted me; they hurt me; they defeated me; they cheated me” because such thoughts foster hatred and further our own suffering. If this habit gets out of control, we end up muttering to ourselves on the streets and subways, which is a pretty clear sign of the intensity of the suffering we are putting ourselves through.

The very same advice shows up in Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*. “Put from you the belief that ‘I have been wronged’, and with it will go the feeling. Reject your sense of injury, and the injury itself disappears” (4:7). This is not, of course, literally true, but what almost certainly *will* disappear is that additional part of the injury that is self-inflicted. Ill-humored thoughts that we repeat obsessively will nurture our grudges and they can dominate our decider. When this happens, other more nuanced thoughts and observations have no way to gain a hearing, and the result is often suffering for all concerned.

(e) Catastrophizing. Another form of suffering that language enables, and that Marcus Aurelius also mentioned, results from worry about all the ways

things could turn out badly. If we could not resort to words we could not dwell on any of our “worst case scenarios.” Here is what Marcus told himself about that:

Never go beyond the sense of your original impressions. They tell you that such-and-such a person is speaking ill of you; that was their message; they did not go on to say it has done you any harm. I see my child is ill; my eyes tell me that, but they do not suggest that his life is in danger. Always, then, keep to the original impressions; supply no additions of your own, and you are safe. (*Meditations*, 132)

When he wrote of keeping to the “the original impressions” Marcus may have come up with his own version of Huihai’s advice, which was, “when things happen, make no response.” Marcus had a number of maxims he used to remind himself not to panic and not to invent things to worry about. Like Marcus, we all have our favorite sayings and tricks that can sometimes help us abort our fear and fretting, if we can remember to call on them before it is too late.

3. Searching for the Cure. Sextus Empiricus, the Buddha, and many Buddhist philosophers would agree with Wittgenstein’s idea that “the philosopher’s treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness” (P. I., I ¶255). Sextus actually *was* a physician, and the followers of the Buddha referred to their leader as “the great physician” and said that he had discovered a cure for suffering. The popularity of this medical metaphor is easy to understand. We can be infected by an

error, a question, an answer, or a dogma; we can transmit that infection to others; and fortunate survivors can build up immunity to similar strains of the disease.

We have learned many things by asking questions, but we have not learned to take “no answer” for an answer. Our generous assumption that any question that can be formulated deserves an answer has led us to waste much time and thought on red herrings and wild geese. By taking the standard “ultimate questions” seriously, we have condemned generations of scholars to lifetimes of clever but ultimately futile disputation. We ask what happens after we die, and whether there is some purpose to so much suffering. We want to know why there is something rather than nothing, or what our role in the “big picture” is supposed to be. Moralists want to discover the nature of true goodness, or to find some rule that will clarify the distinction between right and wrong. Metaphysicians claim to be in pursuit of an understanding of “Being Itself.”

The question that I would like to see answered, or at least studied, is “Why do we still torture ourselves with these discredited classical conundrums?” It is tempting to blame our dogged perseverance on some combination of fear and arrogance. We fear the unknown and we are arrogant enough to suppose that we can find an answer to any question that can be asked.

If we want to free ourselves from these traditional but hopeless “big” questions and from the self-serving and fantastic answers advanced over the millennia, then we need to find some way to let them go. This may be what Wittgenstein was talking about when he said that his aim was to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle, and added that “The discovery I am looking for is the one

that will enable me to stop doing philosophy” (P. I., I ¶133). As it happened, Sextus Empiricus, the best known of the ancient skeptics, may have seen himself as having made that very discovery.

(a) Sextus Empiricus. Sextus is famous for having walked away from the standard questions of the philosophers. He said that no one “disputes that the underlying object has this or that appearance; the point in dispute is whether the object is in reality as it appears to be” (Sextus, p. 22). This “point in dispute” is the exact kind of metaphysical question he decided to abandon. By putting aside questions like “Is untasted honey really sweet?” (which apparently had caused him some anxiety), he found that “there followed, by chance, mental tranquility in matters of opinion.” But apparently it is not easy to turn our backs on problems that have puzzled us for years and baffled philosophers for centuries. Sextus needed to come up with some thought or insight to dampen his metaphysical curiosity, but it had to be something other than the self-defeating claim that we can have no knowledge about the reality behind appearances. That position had already been taken by the Academic Skeptics, and had been criticized by Sextus himself for being hopelessly dogmatic.

What Sextus claimed to have finally understood was that any dogmatic claim to know how things really are can be treated with a cocktail of several standard skeptical arguments based on our all too human tendency to get things wrong. What we think, and think we see, can be distorted by our mental or physical condition, by the lighting, or even by our cultural expectations. And, he added, “many lovers who have ugly mistresses think them most beautiful.” Like the

physician he was, he kept a supply of these skeptical arguments (or “tropes”) ready to be administered at the first symptoms of an episode of dogmatism. In his “tenth trope” which, unlike the others, was based on variations in customs and morality rather than on variations in perceptions, Sextus used a version of an argument we have already criticized when it was called “The Argument from Disagreement.” He argued that there is so much disagreement about morality, customs, conduct, and laws, that “we shall not be able to state” which of the laws and customs are the truly correct ones, or which things are good or evil by nature.

In Chapter Two we saw Sextus claiming that someone “who entertains the opinion that anything is by nature good or bad is continually disturbed,” and that when a person suspends that opinion the disturbance disappears. He did not suspend his belief in objective value in order to attain quietude—the quietude came about “by chance,” as a byproduct of the suspension. What finally led him to abandon his moral and metaphysical curiosity was that when he considered the arguments on both sides of any dispute about whether “things are in reality as they appear to be,” he “found himself involved in contradictions of equal weight, and being unable to decide between them suspended judgment.” But the fact that Sextus always found equally weighty arguments on both sides of any controversy does not guarantee that this will continue indefinitely, and the *belief* that counterbalancing arguments will always be found is both dogmatic (and hence unavailable to Sextus) and extremely unlikely.

Sextus was right to doubt the moralist’s ability to defend the opinion that things are by nature good or evil, but since he was unwilling to subscribe to a

moral error theory, he adopted and recommended a “fictionalist” policy of conforming to tradition, “whereby we regard piety in the conduct of life as good, but impiety as evil.” The dangers of this policy become immediately apparent when we reflect on the vagueness and ambiguity of the word ‘piety’, and on the popular belief that evil-doers ought to be punished. It is one thing to go along with our standard words for ordinary things, but when we come to words like ‘good’ and ‘evil’, or words with a heavy negative charge (like ‘traitor’ or ‘tyrant’ or ‘terrorist’), linguistic compliance is not without consequences.

Sextus must have realized that some of the metaphysical and moral beliefs of his fellows were ridiculous, but his skeptical stance would not allow him to express even this reasonable bit of dogmatism. He wanted to speak with the moralists, but to feel the freedom from bondage and the genuine quietude that is only available to someone who believes (dogmatically) that nothing is good or evil by nature.

If my remarks about decisions in Chapter Eight are on target, then we have to admit that the metaphor used by Sextus, DELIBERATING IS WEIGHING, is based on a false picture of how we arrive at beliefs and decisions. We speak of weighty arguments and of balancing opposing considerations, and we often claim that the cost of some act or policy will outweigh its benefits, or vice versa. But weighing considerations is not like weighing beans, and in any case, all the scales are fixed. The genesis of a decision, like the genesis of anything, is an inscrutably complicated function of causes and conditions. Beliefs and conclusions about our moral obligations may carry some weight with our decider, or they may not. But when we are chronically unable to agree with someone who holds a different opinion about

morality, it will not be because there are equally good reasons on both sides of the matter, it will be because we are equally stubborn, equally talented, primed for different biases by our heredity and our training, and willing to keep talking until someone sends us home.

(b) Ludwig Wittgenstein. Like Sextus, Wittgenstein was also in the business of providing cures for various kinds of dogmatism and confusion. Some philosophers who were influenced by Wittgenstein came to be called “therapeutic positivists.” They were called *positivists* because they did not concern themselves with the metaphysical or the supernatural, and they were called *therapeutic* because their goal was not to solve philosophical problems but to eliminate them by treating them as symptoms of an underlying illness. This illness was diagnosed as a deep confusion about language.

Wittgenstein said that he was aiming for “*complete* clarity,” but, he added, “this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear” (P. I., I, ¶133). The metaphors at work here are: PHILOSOPHY IS THERAPY and PHILOSOPHY IS DISEASE. The philosopher (as therapist) cures the philosopher (as patient) from philosophy (the disease). We suffer from the disease when we are consumed by some stupid question that only exists because of some quirk of language. To be cured is to see through the quirk in a way that enables us to abandon the question.

Even in his youthful *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein was aiming at complete clarity and the elimination of philosophical problems. The clarity was to be attained by “translating” ordinary sentences into ones whose structure shows

exactly how their elements are related. Details aside, we get clarity by replacing our ordinary imprecise language with an “ideal” one in which “philosophical” propositions can’t even be asserted. The ideal method in philosophy, he said, would be to show anyone who wanted to say something metaphysical “that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions” (TLP, 6.53).

For Wittgenstein, “metaphysics” included religion, morality, and aesthetics. He said that morality (which he referred to as “Ethics”) “cannot be put into words” (6.421). In places he seems almost ready to subscribe to moral anti-realism, as when he wrote that talk about “absolute value” is “nonsense.” The problem is that when he referred to talk about absolute value, he probably wanted to include the denial, as well as the assertion, that there is such a thing. That would certainly link him with Sextus, who was also unwilling to commit to moral anti-realism.

When we say things about ethics (or religion), Wittgenstein said in his 1929 “Lecture on Ethics,” we try to “go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language.” He added that the tendency of anyone who ever

tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run up

against the boundaries of language. This running against

the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless.

Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something

about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the

absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says

does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a

document of a tendency in the human mind which I

personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not
for my life ridicule it (Lecture on Ethics).

Obviously Wittgenstein would have had reservations about moral abolitionism. Perhaps he thought that belief in (or at least fascination with) ultimate meaning and absolute good is useful or ennobling. But how did he fail to grasp how much trouble this “tendency of the human mind” can get us into?

In his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein still identified language as both the problem and the solution. But he came to think that the clear view we need can be attained not by replacing our ordinary imprecise language with an improved one, as he had once believed, but by paying close attention to the one we actually speak. Because we do not often think about our natural and spontaneous uses of language, we fail to notice when someone stretches a word, shifts a meaning, or replaces an ordinary understanding of a question with an extraordinary one. “Who made it?” is usually a reasonable question when applied to human artifacts, but we need to think twice when someone extends the question to natural objects, the earth, and even the universe. “Why are you here?” is a sensible question when asked of a person who has joined you, but not when it is meant as “Why do you exist at all?” If we continue to “deeply respect” talk we do not understand, and questions no one could answer, then we ourselves are likely to come down with a severe case of philosophy (the disease!). We will be like the lobster in the lobster pot, and before we realize it, we will find ourselves in hot philosophical water being blistered by unanswerable questions about God, ultimate meaning, free will, and The Good.

Wittgenstein's mature insights about language apply across the board, but his attention was often fixed on philosophical problems involving language and thought, and on correcting his earlier mistakes about language. Starting with Plato, thousands of philosopher-hours have been expended trying to figure out what is common to things we call by the same name. Almost everyone had an answer, but when he wasn't rejecting the question, Wittgenstein answered it by saying that we do not call things by the same name because they share an essence or a property, but because they are similar in ways that matter to us.

One of Wittgenstein's most important examples of this is the concept of language itself. He insisted that the activities we see as language have no one "thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all 'language'" (P.I., I, ¶ 65). The same can be said about "the proceedings we call 'games'" (P.I., I, ¶ 66). After listing several kinds of game, he admonished us not to think they all have something in common, "or they would not be called 'games'." Don't think, he said, but look. "For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all" (P.I., I, ¶¶ 66-67). Games are like family-members—they share what he called "family resemblances."

What we take away from this insight is the idea that rather than searching for the essence of *goodness*, or trying to guess what *meanings* are, we need to study the uses of the words 'good' and 'meaning'—not the uses (and misuses) of philosophers trying to impose their idiosyncratic definitions on us, but the familiar and intricately related everyday uses. In Wittgenstein's famous words:

When philosophers use a word—“knowledge”, “being”, “object”, “I”, “proposition”, “name”—and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?—What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use (PI, I, ¶116)

Wittgenstein’s “therapy” has actually cured (or at least stabilized) a good number of philosophers, but it has also infuriated many others who have no wish to have their definitions disputed and their questions dissolved. Nevertheless, because of his work, many philosophers now appreciate the organic flexibility of language and have freed themselves from deep-rooted and superficial ways of thinking about words. But, like Sextus, Wittgenstein may have given our conventional moral beliefs and ways of talking a free pass. He never did come out as a moral error theorist and he was not in favor of abolishing morality. He said that as long as language does not “take a holiday” from its normal everyday use, everything is in order. But that may not be so. Many of the questionable things we do and say are enabled by our uncritical acceptance of conventional moral beliefs, and some of our confusions may arise not because we misuse moral language, but because we use it in the way it was meant to be used—to defend ourselves from criticism and to control others..

While Sextus and Wittgenstein understood that time spent on certain questions was time wasted, they did not mistrust language as such, only some of the things we seem compelled to do with it. But there are students of language who

have worried that language itself may be a deceiver. We know that it is important to watch for ambiguities and vagueness, to beware of emotive language and metaphor-abuse, to avoid self-serving definitions and lazy explanations, to stop talking to ourselves in ways that foster resentment and fears, and to give up idle questions. But even all that may not be enough to protect us. There may be other things we need to understand about language, its role in our lives, and its place in our world.

(c) Buddha and the Buddhists. Walking away from some questions (the ones with no answers) is probably a good idea, but since some very hard questions do have answers, we had better remind ourselves that it is a mistake to give up too soon. There are, however, questions that have been failing to get satisfactory answers for thousands of years, and it is those questions that sometimes fascinate us. Like Sextus and Wittgenstein, the Buddha was known for dismissing what he considered to be unanswerable questions. In one *sutra*, he was asked if the world is eternal or not, if the soul is the same as the body or not, and if a Buddha exists after death or not. He replied that he never promised to answer these questions, and that a person who insists on answers is like a man who, shot by a poison arrow, will not consent to have it removed until he has been given detailed information about the arrow, the physician, and his assailant. That person would die, said the Buddha, without knowing all this. (Hamilton, 54-55) Elsewhere, he described each of a number of philosophical opinions and its denial as “a jungle, a wilderness, a puppet-show, a writhing, and a fetter” that is “coupled with misery, ruin, despair, and agony” (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 289-290).

While the Buddha never offered an answer to any of these ultimate questions, he believed that there are other important questions to which he did have an answer. His “Four Noble Truths” and “Eightfold Path”, mentioned in Chapter Seven, tell us things he thought we need to know if we are interested in diminishing suffering. Another important teaching of the Buddha and of all Buddhists is that everything in our world is “impermanent.” Everything had a beginning, will come to an end, and undergoes constant change on the way from the one to the other. Some things may appear stable and permanent, but if we study them carefully we learn that they are neither. Buddhists believe that our unwillingness to accept this gracefully is an important cause of our suffering.

After the death of the Buddha, many of his followers were not able to step away from their more traditional questions and habits of reflection, and they did not really think of the quest for “The Real” as “a jungle, a wilderness, a puppet-show, a writhing, and a fetter.” A considerable number of monks, ignoring the Buddha’s advice and his practice, plunged back into the lobster pot. They believed that the world of changing and interacting objects (tables and chairs) is not the “real” world, and then they embraced Sextus’ abandoned dream of finding out something about that hidden reality behind the appearances.

These early Buddhist philosophers were not mystics. They developed an “atomic theory” of both the physical and the mental worlds, and they employed their meditation-fueled introspection to watch the bits and pieces into which they had analyzed the world flow by. They called feelings, impulses, thought-fragments, patches of color, and bits of sound “*dharmas*,” and they claimed that the “things” of

our world (tables, chairs, and even mental events such as episodes of fear and anger) are ever-changing combinations of those *dharma*s sweeping by in a multi-layered stream of consciousness. They believed that out of these fragments, and with the help of language, we construct a (representation of a) world of conventional things that, as Bronowski said, “does not exist for animals.” When early twentieth century analytic philosophers adopted a similar view, they expressed it by saying that tables are “logical constructions out of sense-data.”

For a time these introspective Buddhists believed that they had discovered that the reality behind our world of tables and chairs is a cascade of streaming *dharma*s, the independently real material and mental atoms out of which everything else, both physical and mental, is constituted. But that belief was soon criticized on the grounds that *dharma*s are every bit as conventional and impermanent as the objects they were said to constitute. The Buddhists who accepted this criticism ended up with the belief that since nothing is eternal and nothing creates itself, everything that exists owes its fleeting and unstable existence to factors beyond itself, and its character to convention. They found no eternal creator at the top, no minute permanent building blocks at the bottom, and only conventional objects in the middle.

Madhyamika Buddhists express this thought by saying that everything is **empty**. Their term for what everything is empty of is ‘**self-existence**’ (or ‘**own-being**’ or ‘**essence**’). To *have* own-being is to exist *on one’s own*, that is, to be independent of everything else. To *lack* own-being is to depend on another and, according to these Buddhist philosophers, everything lacks own-being.

The claim that everything is empty does not mean that things do not exist, it means that things do not exist in the independent way they seem to. Working under the influence of the mistaken belief that meaningful words are names of independent objects, we tend to treat things, places, and events as if they were more solid, more sharply defined, more enduring, than the temporary mind-dependent constructions they are. We treat people as if they were well-formed and stable individuals, we think of emotions and feelings as separate and identifiable events, and we think and speak as if actions have their own beginnings, middles, and ends. We divide the world into causes and effects, things and properties, comings and goings, and we never consider that these items only exist “from our side,” and that they take on significance because we have cut them out from the flow of experience by using the categories we develop as we learn to speak. The Buddhists call this process ***prapança***, which they define as “the meaningful conceptualization of the world through the use of language.” (Donald Mitchell, *Buddhism*, p. 140) The pre-conceptual “thing-in-itself” may be “there,” and if so, it is what it is, but we have no words for it, and so here is another place where a silent understanding may be all we could ever hope for, if even that.

If and when our intellectual journey leads us to this point, we will be faced with a choice. Since any reality that can not be tamed by our concepts is unknowable and indescribable, we will have to find some other way to approach and experience this reality, or we will have to stick with the familiar one and with the conventional truths about it, as Sextus, Wittgenstein and the Buddha urged us to do.

Within that conventional world there is an intelligible and discoverable distinction between appearance and reality, and impermanence is a fact of life. But that world is not world enough for the mystics who have chosen to seek a way to visit the “real” real world—the one unstructured by language. Some hope that yoga, meditation, or even divine grace will allow them to part the veil that separates us from “true reality” by providing us with some mode of awareness that bypasses our senses and our words and lets us experience the Indescribable. There is no doubt that some of these seekers have experienced extraordinary and dramatic states of consciousness. However, these events are not quite so impressive now that we understand how adept the brain is at generating altered states of consciousness in those who know how to trigger them. As William James pointed out over 100 years ago, mystical states “carry authority” for those who experience them, but no one else can be faulted for doubting that the mystic’s visions provide knowledge of some “other” reality (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1902).

There might be some “other reality” beyond the reach of language, but as the young Wittgenstein said at the close of his *Tractatus*, “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (TLP, 7). Let us do that and turn to the question of how we might proceed once we have decided to restrict our attention to the world we can speak about. Sextus and Wittgenstein seem to think that we will not suffer too many language-born infections if we avoid philosophical questions, confine our conversation to every-day matters, pay careful attention to what we and others are saying, and follow convention. But if, as the Buddhists insist, everything is empty,

and if the world that appears to us has been structured by our concepts, then we may want to think differently about the “things” we experience.

The world remains independent of our will, but not quite as independent as we might have thought. When we ask what things are *really* like, or what is *really* happening, we can intend these questions in a down-to-earth way, a way that can be answered, though not always with a few words. ‘Real’ and ‘really’ are, after all, familiar words that have a place in our everyday discourse, as when we ask: “Is the chair real or just a stage prop?” or “Are you really a Buddhist or just someone who likes to meditate?”

We must live in and act on the everyday world, but it helps to remain aware that, to some undeterminable extent, that world is one of our own construction. This means that it cannot be taken perfectly seriously, but it also means that it has to be taken seriously enough. Getting this right is a constant challenge even for those who understand the problem, and who struggle to achieve a “clear view of the use of our words.”

4. Tools for Clarity and Health. In Chapter Eight, we explored some techniques we use to influence the behavior of others and ourselves, and in this chapter we have seen how language can facilitate both our bondage and our freedom. Each of our three “physicians” identified a disease, a therapy, and the state of someone who has been returned to health. When we have been treated by Sextus, questions about ultimate reality and the true nature of things no longer cry out for answers. After Wittgenstein has operated on us, not only have our metaphysical, religious, and ethical questions been excised, we also realize that the

underlying cause of those questions (which were only symptoms) is a deeply rooted and defective understanding of the uses of our words. Finally, when we have taken the Buddha's medicine, we begin to look at the world without being addled by emotions, desires, or erroneous beliefs about moral objectivity. Instead, we just pay close attention to the world we have built with the aid of prapañca, and to the fact that we have built it. This world is the one we wake up to in the morning, and it is filled with our things and with other people very much like ourselves, or so we suppose.

Sages of all ages realize that language is too powerful a tool to ignore, whether we are using it, or are being used by others who are using it. Here I will review a few of their sagely suggestions that we might want to keep in mind if we hope to avoid some of those "traps that language sets us."

- (1) Be aware of the metaphorical systems that frame the ways people understand situations.
- (2) Do not be content with simplistic explanations from others, or from yourself. Things are more complicated than you think.
- (3) When things happen, make no immediate conceptual response, or at least silence your assessor for a few milliseconds.
- (4) Neither exploit nor fall victim to vagueness.
- (5) Avoid ambiguity and when it seems likely to result in misunderstanding, act to clear it up.

- (6) Understand emotive language and do not be
overcome by it or use it to manipulate others.
- (7) Stop complaining about what others have done.
- (8) Do not dwell on worst case scenarios.
- (9) Forget about the “big” questions.”
- (10) In reflecting on daily events, factor in an awareness of
three Buddhist ideas: emptiness, causality, and
prapañca.

When we are clear about the way language works, we will be able to see through efforts to control our thoughts and behavior by those whose goals are different from ours, but we will also be in a position to use the immense power of language to influence or even control the decisions of others. Which way shall we go? Did we free ourselves from linguistic confusion and manipulation only to be able to dominate others? Our answer will depend on the metaphors we use to frame our relationships. Do we see others as partners in a cooperative enterprise or as workers who need our supervision—as companions or as tools? Are our interactions dominated by an effort to achieve control or an effort to achieve harmony? In the next chapter we will explore these two alternatives and I will annoy proponents of control by suggesting that we try to harmonize them.

Chapter Ten (June 2012)

The Way of Harmony

**But we could say: The happy life
seems to be in some sense more harmonious
than the unhappy.**

But in what sense?

Ludwig Wittgenstein

1. Reprise. In Chapters One and Two I explored the unhappy state of moral argumentation and looked at some of the ways moral philosophers have managed to back away from what Mackie called “the moral overlay.” The most extreme of these retreats is neither tolerant moral relativism nor baffled skepticism, but moral anti-realism, the complete denial of objective moral facts and values. Moral anti-realism comes in two flavors, non-cognitivism and the moral error theory. I have opted for the error theory because I believe that non-cognitivism is wrong about what we are doing when we make moral judgments. In Chapter Three I discussed and dismissed the idea of a religious foundation for morality, and in Chapter Four secular attempts to defend objective values and obligation fared no better. This left us with the error theory and the opportunity to make a choice between moral fictionalism and moral abolitionism.

To clarify the choice, I offered, in Chapter Five, an inventory of some of the things we lose if we abolish morality. We lose the idea that there really is a morally right thing to do and, with it, all the theories that promise to tell us what that is—theories like

egoism, utilitarianism, and the deontologies. We also give up theories of value such as hedonism, the idea that pleasure is objectively good. Every one of these “isms” is based on some insight, but the mistake that moralists make is to inflate these insights into theories. We do act selfishly, but the ethical egoist moves from that fact to the theory that we all have a right, or more strangely, an obligation, to be selfish.

Utilitarians are concerned about how our actions affect others and they value human happiness or satisfaction. Who could object to that? But from this promising start utilitarian moralists have arrived at conclusions no sensible person could ratify.

Utilitarianism has been disputed, defended and amended for centuries—so things do get complicated; but the baroque complications only distract us from the fundamental defects of the basic idea. I hope that what I was able to say in Chapter Five was sufficient to make it clear why any moral abolitionist would be more than happy to get beyond utilitarianism in particular, and, more generally, beyond all the other theories of moral obligation and objective value.

Abolishing morality is a most unusual idea. Until it is explained, no one can be expected to take it, or any person who is proposing it, seriously. Even the less radical idea that there are no objective values or obligations alarms and angers people. As a result, moralists reject, and many moral philosophers feel an obligation to refute, the various skeptical challenges to morality. In Chapter Six, I examined some of the ways moralistically inclined moral philosophers try to meet the challenges of error theorists

and moral abolitionists. After replying to several poorly aimed and unimpressive criticisms of the error theory, I briefly discussed two well-known friends of nihilism, Callicles and Nietzsche. I classified them not as error theorists or moral abolitionists, but as “immoralists” who challenge conventional morality, not morality itself. I ended the chapter by assembling some considerations that seem to recommend moral abolitionism, and I explained my reasons for preferring that to moral fictionalism.

Abolishing morality may not be a realistic goal for our society now, or even in the near future. Most people are unreflective moralists who have never even considered the possibility that the moral overlay is a human invention; and of those who realize that it is, many are moral fictionalists who choose to proceed as if it is not. Moral fictionalists think that if we did not share an admittedly mistaken belief in objective values and obligations, life would be a nightmare. Moral abolitionists, on the other hand, suspect that morality itself is at least as much a cause of as a cure for the problems we have getting along with each other. Unfortunately, this is not a dispute anyone knows how to resolve, but after thinking about how we have dealt with our disputes up till now, it is clear that morality is far from blameless.

Anyone who finds himself or herself in a post-moralist state of mind will still need to deal with the usual challenges of life, so if moral values and obligations are to be abolished, what, it will be asked, can be brought in to take their place? This is a tricky question because it is not clear what their place is or was, and because we can't be

sure that we need to bring in anything to take it. Perhaps morality is a fifth wheel, the 101st leg of the centipede, more a problem than a solution, an invitation to an endless argument. That is the conclusion of the moral abolitionist, indeed, my conclusion; so the goal of the final six chapters, Chapters Seven through Twelve, is to offer some considerations to show that morality plays a smaller, and a less constructive, role in our lives than we think. If, as I believe, there really are no objective moral truths, then morality becomes a weapon in the hands of anyone who knows how to claim the moral high ground.

In Chapter Seven I reviewed a few morality-free suggestions about how to deal with desires and emotions. Some extreme sages recommended their complete elimination; others favored indulging them to the greatest extent possible. More sensible sages supported limiting both their number and their intensity. This involves calming our minds, rooting out factual errors and misconceptions, and remaining aware of what, who, and where we are. The Buddhists aimed to achieve this with meditation and mindfulness, and Marcus Aurelius recommended silencing our assessor and doing our best to concentrate on what is going on before our eyes, not in our imaginations.

Desires and emotions will always play a role in our decisions, but their influence can be shaped if we can learn to adjust the many kinds of input that flow into what I called, in Chapter Eight, “our decider.” Since our interests and values often clash, we have developed many methods to influence one another, and to raise new and

misbehaving members of our groups to an acceptable level of civility. We resort to rewards and punishments, lies, promises, sermons, stories, myths, humor, rituals, and even music. Most of the ways we have of exerting pressure on both our friends and our foes involve language, so in Chapter Nine I emphasized both the importance and the power of words, and I offered some warnings about how easy it is to be enslaved by concepts, metaphors, simplistic explanations, and other verbal tricks and bad habits. We saw how Sextus Empiricus, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the Buddha proposed various therapies designed to help us free ourselves from idle metaphysical curiosity, from philosophical problems spawned by misunderstandings about the use of language, and from much of our needless and self-inflicted suffering.

Now in Chapter Ten, fortified with a better understanding of the methods we use to influence others, we are ready to ask whether and how often we want to do that. Shall we try to exercise more or less control? How can we resist the control others try to exercise over us? How manipulative, how didactic, how demanding shall we be? It is possible that many of us would say that we need more control over our friends and family, or that society needs clear and simple rules and certain punishment for those who break them. But even the least observant among us knows that many of our efforts to increase our control over others have been tragically counterproductive. This Daoist lesson has been learned by strict parents, domineering spouses, binge dieters, and

countries trying to institute planned economies or to bring about regime change by force.

2. Control and Harmony. We can, at some risk of oversimplification, identify two strategies for confronting situations. One says “Make a plan and follow it,” and the other says “Show up and see what happens.” Moralists, who often believe that they know how things “ought to go,” are likely to favor the exercise of control, and sometimes they resist seeking harmony because they fear that it may only be achieved by tolerating evil.

It is true that sometimes our only sensible option is to take control, but it is easy to be wrong about this. We are fully aware of our own plan, which is likely to strike us as reasonable if not inspired, but we cannot see, and so cannot trust, the plans of others—if they even have plans. We exploit metaphors like: LIVING IS CONSTRUCTING A BUILDING, and we see ourselves as the architect whose job is to encourage the others to follow our “blueprint for a better life.”

The emphasis we place on morality is one indication of our fondness for control. Not only do we want to have it *our way*, morality tells us that our way is the right way. So why wouldn’t we use all the techniques there are to get people to see and do things properly? Because of this confidence (if that is the right word), most of us are already deeply committed to planning, morality, and the use of various kinds and degrees of force. This means that if we hope to arrive at a decent blend of our active and passive

tendencies, we will need to devote a little more attention to a different strategy, one that, as the Daoist might say, accomplishes more by doing less.

We can call one of these two strategies “The Way of Control” and the other “The Way of Harmony.” Since most of us are well-versed in the way of control, the larger part of this chapter deals with the way of harmony. I will discuss ways of incorporating more harmony into our lives, and then I will offer some exercises for anyone who wants to sample the joys of harmony.

With this done, I will turn, in Chapters Eleven and Twelve, to some issues that attract the attention of moral philosophers, moralists, and moral abolitionists. We will see how moralists can be distracted by unanswerable philosophical questions and ultimately left in deadlock and confusion about everything from the lunch menu to the death penalty. We will also see how moral abolitionists, unencumbered by error, superstition, and the need to pretend, can approach traditional problems with an open mind and an intellectually clear conscience.

3. The Way of Control. Unless we live alone on an island, what we do and say influences others in ways we will never fully comprehend. As we have seen, we have accumulated an arsenal of strategies for dealing with our friends and associates, who seem never to do or be exactly what we would like them to do or be; and what is worse, often the harder we try to make people go along with our plans, the further they deviate from the program. What should we do? Everyone knows that we often fail for trying too

hard, or for caring too much about success. On the other hand, we sometimes fail for not trying or caring enough. We need a balance, a middle way between an active and a passive style of dealing with events. Those attracted to a passive style are hesitant to apply force, and prefer cooperation and compromise. Those who favor the active approach prefer to do things their way, and want others to harmonize with them. The moralist appears to be committed to an active style by the very nature of morality. What is the point of ranking things and going on about moral obligations if not to influence what people do? So moralists are inherently into control, but one can indulge in the most extreme forms of domination without the moralism. We find this in the first of three examples of the way of control.

(a) *The Legalists*. The Chinese philosopher Han Feizi (d. 233 B.C.) is known for having held that “awe-inspiring power can prohibit violence” and that “virtue and kindness are insufficient to end disorder.” As I observed in Chapter Eight, he urged the emperor to grasp the “two handles” of control—punishment and reward. “The severe household,” he said, “has no fierce slaves, but it is the affectionate mother who has spoiled sons” (Chan [1], 253). What one wants to say about this is: “Well, yes and no.” The unification of China in 221 BC was accomplished by “The First Emperor of Chin” who, following Han Feizi’s advice, ended a civil war, established order, standardized writing and axle sizes, and smashed feudalism. This philosophy has been called “Legalism” because it favored many laws, strict enforcement, and clearly defined

(if brutal) penalties for disobedience. But the Chin dynasty lasted only a dozen years, and when the emperor died, his heir was murdered and the members of his household were at each others' throats. They could have all used a little virtue and kindness.

The Chin Dynasty is often mentioned as the first truly totalitarian system of rule, but the emperor's subjects took some comfort from the fact that "the mountains are high, and the emperor is far away." Now in China, and elsewhere, the mountains have shrunk and the "the emperor" has a listening post right down the street. Our technology can be used to support forms of totalitarianism that only a religion with an all-knowing, all-powerful, and vindictive god might have hoped to institute. "Big Brother" is finding it increasingly easy to watch us, but there is hope in the fact that he is also finding it increasingly difficult to hide his actions. Not only is the pen mightier than the sword, as we are learning from recent protests and revolutions, the internet is turning out to be so as well.

(b) The Confucians. Confucians had less confidence in the effectiveness of "the two handles" than the Legalists did, but they were still very interested in control. They wanted the people to obey the *li*, the rules of propriety that mandated ritualistically polite behavior and many details of daily interactions, and they promoted a collection of what they considered to be virtues. They understood that laws and punishment are not sufficient to promote those virtues, but they thought that people could be "educated" to embrace them as if they were second nature. Their methods, which involved a lot of

reading, seem non-coercive and flexible when compared with those of the Legalists, but they were as concerned as were the Legalists to shape society.

Was Confucius a moralist? Scholars disagree, but there can be little doubt that Mencius, his intellectual heir, was. Mencius is known for his claim that human nature is “good,” by which he meant that if we stand back and allow people to develop naturally, they will end up with the important virtues that Confucius encouraged—often referred to by the terms ‘humanity’, ‘righteousness’, ‘propriety’, and ‘wisdom’. He believed that everyone’s intrinsically good heart contains “seeds” of these virtues, and that these seeds only need to be nourished. This is as mild and non-coercive a form of moralism as we are likely to find, but it is still a form of moralism. There seems to have been no doubt in Mencius’ mind that there is an objectively right and proper way to be, that virtuous behavior is both good and good for one, and that it ought to be encouraged.

(c) Plato. Plato, who was neither as cold-blooded as the Legalists, nor as optimistic as Mencius, is notorious for the amount of control he wanted to give to his rulers. In *The Republic* he proposed a plan to educate a class of philosopher-kings who were wise enough to be trusted to employ “the medicine of the lie” when they judged it was needed. For example, in matters of marriage and child-bearing, the Rulers were called upon to “administer a large dose of that medicine we spoke of earlier” (*Republic*, p. 158). Plato has Socrates prescribe a mating festival with a lottery rigged to guarantee that “there should be as many unions of the best of both sexes, and as few of

the inferior, as possible.” Only the Rulers (the philosopher kings) are to know of this ruse; “otherwise,” he says, “our herd of Guardians may become rebellious” (*Republic*, p. 159). Socrates adds that while both true and fictitious stories are to be used in education, “we shall begin our education with the fictitious kind” (*Republic*, p. 68). Other deceptive practices occur in the testing of young Guardians, and wherever the Rulers think their use is indicated.

Someone who hopes to control the behavior of others by manipulating their information is just as surely following the Way of Control as is someone who uses awe-inspiring power, psychology, or automatic weapons. Their tools are different, but not their aim of causing others to do things they might not choose to do if they were free and informed. In his old age, Plato seems to have totally fallen for the way of control, as is indicated in the following disturbing passage from *The Laws*:

The greatest principle of all is that nobody, whether male or female, should be without a leader. Nor should the mind of anybody be habituated to letting him do anything at all on his own initiative; neither out of zeal, nor even playfully. But in war and in the midst of peace—to his leader he shall direct his eye and follow him faithfully. And even in the smallest matter he should stand under leadership. For example, he should get up, or move, or wash, or take his meals . . . only

if he has been told to do so. In a word, he should teach his soul, by long habit, never to dream of acting independently, and to become utterly incapable of it (Plato, quoted by Popper, in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, p. 7).

4. The Way of Harmony. We like being in control and telling others what to do and how to do it. But others enjoy controlling things as much as we do, so when there are too many fans of control at work, conflict is inevitable and harmony is the last thing on anyone's mind. But just as it is foolish to try for too much control, it is also a mistake to drift like a cloud. Daoists, who speak of getting things done by *wu wei*, are not talking about mindless, unstructured wandering or complete inaction. They advise us to deal with problems while they are small, or even before they arise, and to work in harmony with the forces already in motion.

An advocate of the way of harmony knows that there are times to take control and times to yield, and that the best way to find out which is which is to understand the way things work and to get a deep appreciation of the details of whatever situation we are dealing with. When others are involved, and they usually are, appreciating a situation includes understanding how they understand it, and how they feel about it. This information might come after a process of collecting data and reflecting on it, or it might come in a "blink," as Gladwell puts it.

The Zen teacher and scholar D. T. Suzuki illustrated one of the differences between what he understood to be Eastern and Western approaches to nature by comparing two poems—one a poem by the Seventeenth Century Japanese poet Basho, and the other a verse from the Nineteenth Century British poet Alfred Tennyson (Suzuki, 1-3). Basho's poem is a 17 syllable *haiku*:

When I look carefully
I see the nazuna blooming
By the hedge!

Tennyson's verse also deals with a flower:

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies;
Hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower—but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

Basho looks, Tennyson plucks. Tennyson tries to understand, Basho experiences. Suzuki says that Basho “lets an exclamation point say everything he wishes to say” (Suzuki, 3). Tennyson not only wants to understand the flower, he kills it in order to satisfy his epistemological lust to understand everything else, even God and man.

Suzuki says that Tennyson exemplifies the Western mind, which is analytical, discriminating, objective, scientific, conceptual, organizing, individualistic, power-wielding, and disposed to impose its will on others. Basho, on the other hand, represents the Eastern mind which, says Suzuki, is synthetic, nondiscriminating, subjective, non-systematic, intuitive, non-discursive, and interested in harmonious solutions to problems. While Suzuki's generalizations are accurate about some Westerners and some Easterners, and are well-illustrated by the two poems, the differences between Eastern and Western "minds" are disappearing as our planet continues to shrink. It is not East or West that determines whether people respond to flora like Basho or Tennyson, but the habits and traits they acquire as they are educated and socialized, and those are changing faster than they ever have.

(a) Hemispheric Specialization, Dominance, and Imperialism. Forty years of research on split brains has provided strong support for the hypothesis of **hemispheric specialization**. This is the idea that the two hemispheres of the brain deal with "vastly different aspects of thought and action." ("The Split Brain Revisited; The Hidden Mind," *Special Editions; The Scientific American*, by Michael S. Gazzaniga, 1998, 2002) The left-hemisphere is said to be logical, linear, and linguistic, the home of verbalized thought. The right hemisphere is characterized as intuitive, holistic, and good at solving spatial and relational problems. When researchers believed that all the important work in the brain was done by the left hemisphere, they spoke of left

hemisphere *dominance*. Since the left hemisphere usually controls the right side of the body, a physical manifestation of left-hemisphere dominance is right-handedness (and one of right-hemisphere dominance is left-handedness).

The idea of a “split brain” has been adopted, popularized and exploited by uncountable enthusiastic authors, but a serious investigation of what goes on in the brain when we think continues, and with ever more sophisticated methods and tools. The use of brain imaging techniques has led us to realize that the brain is more flexible than we knew, and that the division of labor is not as simple as we once believed. But the meme of the split brain is still useful. Whatever parts of the brain reason, logic and language light up, they are different from those that deal with emotion and intuition.

Left-hemisphere dominance may be the price we pay for our linguistic and logical abilities, and as a strategy for coping, it has advantages. But when discussions turn into arguments and arguments into debates, when we insist on explicit definitions rather than overall clarity, when we become compulsive talkers, planners, and categorizers, then left-hemisphere dominance has metamorphosed into left-hemisphere *imperialism*. When that happens, our speech centers start working overtime, and we crank out chains of reasoning as if everything depended on arriving at exactly the right conclusion. Other ways of understanding are ignored, and spontaneity is kept in check. We become narrow and rigid victims of our own rules and words.

The fact that we find the first efforts to control excessive conceptualization and

verbalization in India and China should warn us against saying that the “Eastern Mind” is inherently less dependent on words and concepts than the “Western Mind.” If the Indians and Chinese had not started off with “monkey-minds” filled with randomly leaping thoughts and needless verbalizations, they would not have needed to invent yoga and meditation, or to have attacked conceptualization.

(b) *Smashing Hemispheric Imperialism.* Imperialism of the left hemisphere can lock us into rigid and confining social structures, and it is particularly hard on personal relationships, which require flexibility and much non-verbal understanding. If rigid concepts, simplistic explanations, and too much talk keep us from seeing clearly, then the remedy is to adjust our concepts, deepen our explanations, and talk less. But how do we do that? The Hindus, Buddhists, and Daoists solved this problem by developing various forms of meditation aimed at silencing our verbalization and hyper-rationalism. In Chapter Seven, I mentioned the form of Buddhist meditation called “*zazen*.” When we “do” *zazen* we sit quietly and watch and count our breaths. When we begin this practice, we will (sooner rather than later) lose count and turn our attention to almost anything else. When that happens our task is to notice that it is happening and then gently turn our attention back to our breathing and counting.

Meditation can, of course, also be called on to combat imperialism of the right hemisphere. If our decisions are strongly influenced by anger, fear, or by intuitions and impulses that scorn our hard-won linguistic knowledge, then we need to learn to detach

ourselves from those troublemakers. If they are not to have their way with us we will have to learn how to watch and neutralize their power over us. In fact the best way to neutralize those fears and emotions is to make a point of observing them closely. If we start to feel anger, lust, or anything else we might not want to feel, we can focus on the phenomenology of that feeling. When we engage in this kind of mindfulness meditation we step back from some string of runaway thoughts and feelings to observe them, as we might have learned to do when observing our breath while practicing *zazen*.

(c) *Reprogramming for Harmony.* When we smash imperialism of either hemisphere, we give the other hemisphere its job back, and, at the same time we free the previously imperialistic hemisphere to focus on what it does best. Ultimately we need to learn to restrain both the noisy verbal chatter and the uninformed intuiting and unrestrained emoting. When it is time for logic we want logic, and when it is time for intuition we want intuition. If a fear is groundless, we want that to matter, but if it is the result of some correct insight, we want to be open enough to realize it. This means that neither reason nor emotion can go to sleep because their unique talents might be required at a moment's notice. Just as the brain resolves the two distinct images presented by our eyes into a three-dimensional representation, something analogous happens when our linguistic and our non-linguistic understanding coalesce into a comprehensive vision beyond, but not without, words.

Even a little progress in quieting our minds can help us get started on the road to a harmonious and, if Wittgenstein is right, a happy life. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna told his devotees that by calling on him by name they could secure his presence in their lives and his help. This offer provides believers with an inducement to practice a powerful meditative technique—one that produces results whether Krishna actually exists or not. Not everyone can find or afford a decent therapist, sit in meditation for seven years, or even for twenty minutes, but anyone can repeat a name or some short phrase or prayer over and over again. The surprising thing is that if we focus on and repeat Krishna's name, or a powerful mantra, or actually any sound at all, we will be practicing concentration, and as we do we will be distracted from some of our nagging thoughts and worries.

If we don't feel comfortable chanting, or employing some technique that seems religious or Asian, we can still aim at a more harmonious life, but we have to learn some pretty basic skills and develop some helpful habits. And we need to be motivated to do this. Change only takes place in response to some irritation, some dissatisfaction, some sense that something is out of balance. If it somehow occurs to us, or is brought to our attention, that our behavior or appearance deviates from what might normally be expected from someone in our position (as employee, spouse, parent, or friend), we may decide to try to remedy the situation. Perhaps we talk too much (or too little), or

fail to give quality attention to what others are doing, saying or feeling. Maybe we are too often driven by our prejudices, desires, fears, or emotions.

If we accept the criticism and manage to single out some foolish desire or unwelcome habit that seems ripe for change, the usual (and perhaps the only) way to get started is to take some kind of pledge. Here we can “sign up” by admitting in clear and unequivocal words, if only to ourselves, that we *are* out of balance, and that we want to banish our foolish desire or break our unwelcome habit. In this way we plant a mental flag on the desire or habit as something to be watched when it arises.

Our project is to consider how to put ourselves in a more harmonious relationship with the rest of reality. But we can’t harmonize with reality if we don’t know where it is, or what it is doing, or if we are out of harmony with ourselves. We don’t have to look to the East to be told that progress in mental growth depends on our ability to calm down and pay attention. That is just common sense, but it is also the cornerstone of the Way of Harmony. Marcus Aurelius often reminds himself to work on it:

Do away with all fancies. Cease to be passion’s puppet.

Limit time to the present. Learn to recognize every experience for what it is, whether it be your own or another’s. . . . Fix your thought closely on what is being said, and let your mind enter fully into what is

being done, and into what is doing it (Meditations, 110).

Huangbo, whose advice about concepts we have already considered, offered a Buddhist version of the same suggestion when he used a vivid image to encourage us not to lose control of ourselves by allowing ourselves to go beyond our original impression:

Observe things as they are and don't pay attention to other people. There are some people just like mad dogs barking at everything that moves, even barking when the wind stirs among the grass and leaves (Blofeld [1], 54).

Here Huangbo is telling us to hold the barking and just look carefully at what is transpiring in front of us. When anger arises, don't bark but just quietly observe it, its causes, how it feels, how it sends streams of angry words into our mental ear, and how it makes us do foolish things we later regret. If we can keep our anger under observation and at arms length, it will almost certainly weaken and lose focus. Seen clearly, our episode of anger might even begin to appear a bit absurd, as anger often does. As Robert Burns wrote, if we had the power "to see ourselves as others see us, it would from many a blunder free us."

When we have learned to see the world more calmly and clearly, and to see our anger as the optional manipulative tantrum it so often is, the next thing to do is to bring ourselves to *accept* the workings of the "great world-order by which all things are

brought to pass.” Suppose we have prepared for a picnic and it rains. We can either accept the storm without grumbling and adapt to the new situation, or we can come to think that not only our plans, but our *day*, has been spoiled. But it is our own unreasonable desire that the world follow our plan, not the rain, that has spoiled our day. One who understands the Way of Harmony doesn’t worry about spoiled plans, and rarely has a spoiled day.

So far we have only been talking about comprehending, accepting, and appreciating situations as they are. Nothing yet has been said about deciding. That happens, as I argued in Chapter Eight, in private and away from view, but the best way to prepare our decider for this work is to develop a calm and undistorted version of what is going on. Here the analogy between life and certain of the arts practiced in the East is informative. One of the first popular books about Zen Buddhism was Eugen Herrigel’s *Zen in the Art of Archery*. As we know, the desire to do well can interfere with our performance, and so can worries, fears, and excessive deliberation and planning. Before students of archery were even allowed to pick up a bow they were taught to be calm and to empty their minds—to breathe, to wait, and to pay attention. When Herrigel’s teacher finally allowed him to work with a bow, he told him that

the shot will only go smoothly when it takes the archer
himself by surprise. It must be as if the bowstring suddenly

cut through the thumb that held it. You mustn't open the right hand on purpose (Herrigel, 29).

On another occasion, the Master admonished the stubborn and intellectualizing Westerner with the following words:

“The right art,” cried the Master, “is purposeless, aimless!

The more obstinately you try to learn how to shoot the arrow for the sake of hitting the goal, the less you will succeed in the one and the further the other will recede.

What stands in your way is that you have a much too willful will. You think that what you do not do yourself does not happen” (Herrigel, 31).

With a “too willful will” we fail for trying too much, too hard, or too soon. We may try too hard because we think success matters more than it does, or try too much or too soon because we overestimate our resources, support, or the wisdom of our strategy. If we “look carefully” we are less likely to make these mistakes, and less likely to make inflexible or unrealistic demands on ourselves and others. If we do our part, which is to prepare our decider with unbiased and accurate information and to get our desires and emotions under control, we are likely to be satisfied with the decisions that we find ourselves making.

5. Exercises in Harmony. A good way to determine if the Way of Harmony is for you is to try it. Even someone addicted to control can let go briefly, just to see how that feels. I have here assembled a few exercises that anyone who would like a taste of the way of harmony can perform. Most of them involve getting calm, looking carefully, quieting our assessor, and being flexible and welcoming the contribution of the remainder of the universe.

(a) *Weather.* We have absolutely no control over the weather, so we might as well learn how to harmonize with it. Our first exercise, call it a warm-up, is to accept the weather, whatever it is, without grumbling. For a day, or for as long as you can, stop complaining about the cold, the heat, the rain, or the snow. The point of the exercise is to try for a different and more welcoming, or at least a neutral, response to inconvenient (not catastrophic) weather. If you simply go about your business and treat the cold or the heat as a natural and unavoidable feature of the situation, you may suffer from the cold or the heat, but not from your reaction to it.

If you can attain a level of meteorological harmony that allows you to accept average “bad” weather without complaint, you can reinforce this new-found harmony by doing something pleasant that is made possible by the now welcome weather. If your picnic was washed out by the rain, then you can read, listen to music, walk in the rain, take a nap, go to a movie, or visit your favorite mall—thanks to the rain. Clouds really do have silver linings.

(b) Bees and Other Alarming Animals. The first exercise set us the task of finding harmony with the weather, an aspect of inanimate nature. With this second set of exercises we turn our attention to animate nature. Consider bees. Maybe bees can sense aggression or smell fear, and maybe not, but they can certainly sense a threat behind frantic attempts to swat them. Who is more likely to get stung, someone who lashes out at every bee that comes within swinging distance, or someone who routinely ignores normal non-hostile bee behavior?

Here is an exercise you can perform at a picnic or while sitting on your porch enjoying a sunny day. When some bee lands on your hand, just sit quietly until it has rested or wandered about a bit and then moved on. “Bon voyage, Bee!” I am not recommending this as a policy for dealing with all or any insects; I am saying that if you can sit there and let that bee occupy your surface for a bit, you will both be the better for it. It is possible that you will sense a hint of harmony, a glimpse of generosity, a feeling of interspecies cooperation in your brief episode of good will to the representative of the insect world.

After achieving apiological harmony we can move on to beings more like ourselves. There is much to be said about pets, and many questions about control and harmony arise when we are speaking of companion animals. For *our* exercise, let us leave out domestic favorites like dogs, cats and hamsters and turn our attention to more challenging cases. If you hate or fear snakes, spiders, bats, mice or lizards, take the

trouble to learn more about them. Watch them as they go about their business and, as you do, try to adopt the attitude of a curious and fascinated child at a museum of natural history, handling live insects and harmless snakes. As you learn more about the creatures you disliked or feared, the payoff comes when you start to admire rather than to despise them, and when your first impulse is no longer to flee or to kill them, your second is to wish them well, and your third is to lend them a helping hand from time to time.

(c) *Eat your Vegetables.* Many people claim not to like vegetables, and the first president Bush is known to have said this: “I do not like broccoli. And I haven't liked it since I was a little kid and my mother made me eat it. And I'm President of the United States and I'm not going to eat any more broccoli.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/03/23/us/i-m-president-so-no-more-broccoli.html> What President Bush did not (or would not) understand was that distaste for this or that food has its causes and can be reversed, even sometimes in the case of broccoli. Long ago I didn't like sweet peppers, but after I decided to become less arbitrary and opinionated I gave them another chance, and I'm glad I did.

So the exercise is to come to terms with some food you dislike. This is not about changing your diet, or about making yourself eat bugs or monkey brains, it is about practicing harmony with food, and often with the people who share it with you. To some carnivores, all I am saying is “give peas a chance.”

(d) *Driving a Car.* On a freeway, fast-moving cars change lanes and merge, and usually stay out of accidents. When things are going smoothly the process is fascinating to observe and a delight to participate in. We can, in this potentially dangerous situation, find trust, compromise, and the comforts of harmony. The exercise is to drive your car for a day (or even an hour) more harmoniously than usual. Look for opportunities to yield to pedestrians and other drivers, stop for someone who wants to pull out of a parking space, let someone in your lane. Experience the gratitude and friendly feelings of those to whom you have shown a small courtesy and then drive on, searching for another victim on which to inflict your consideration.

Once again a warning is in order. Just as it is not wise to present a swarm of enraged killer bees with Buddhist tranquility, it may be equally unwise to try this exercise in some cities where the operative metaphor is DRIVING IS RACING rather than DRIVING IS DANCING. The point of mentioning these exercises is to suggest simple ways to sample small episodes of harmony. Someone who tries them under circumstances that guarantee their failure probably doesn't want to sample harmony.

(e) *Crossing Broadway.* It is Saturday evening and two large crowds of people face each other from the opposite sides the crowded street, waiting for the "walk" sign. Even before the light changes, the two hordes launch themselves toward each other and then, miraculously, merge and swerve, speed up and slow down—old, young, male, female, couples with baby carriages, shufflers, striders, even

bicyclists—and, on a good day, nobody even touches anybody else. Everyone does what he or she must to get to the other side with an absolute minimum of contact.

The exercise is to dive into a scene like this and notice the rapid and often graceful adjustments the participants make from second to second. Observe small acts of kindness and deference, and observe also those who are not involved in the dance but who walk with eyes down and cell phones up. Yet even these defections rarely result in collisions because those who *are* paying attention usually manage to swerve out of the way at the last second. There are free riders in every walk of life, and we all have to learn how to deal with them, but when there are too many of them, harmony becomes impossible and discord rules.

(f) *Looking at Things from a Different Point of View.* It is one thing to *take* a point of view, and something different to *look at* things from a point of view. To *take* a point of view is to adopt a point of view, to make that point of view your point of view. To *look at* things from a point of view is to take it temporarily and hypothetically. Even atheists can look at things from the religious point of view by imagining (or remembering) themselves as believers, and then asking how they would (or did) understand and respond to events. When we look at things from the point of view of self-interest or of some morality, we determine what the self-interested or the moral solution to a problem is. When we look at some event from the point of view of our

child, our partner, our neighbor, or our opponent, we try to imagine how they see that event, how it fits into their plans and intentions, how they feel about it.

The exercise is to look at some situation or policy from the point of view of someone with whom you disagree. Try to figure out why Joel has is a vegan, John hunts, and Jim supports lower taxes for the rich or opposes same sex marriage. It might help to ask what a well-informed, fair and articulate representative of one of these beliefs or policies might say in its defense. Better yet, find such a person and (without getting into an argument) interview him or her. If we can understand why people hold beliefs that we reject and support policies that we oppose, we may develop some sympathy for their position, or at least for them. And we may not.

In the film version of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Douglas Adams introduces the concept of the "point of view gun," a device that causes another person, when hit, to see things from the point of view of the person firing the gun. According to The Guide, the gun "was commissioned by the *Intergalactic Consortium of Angry Housewives*, who were tired of ending every argument with their husbands with the phrase "You just don't get it do you?"

(g) Listening. There are times when it is hard to be silent, but listening (like oratory) is a skill that can be learned. There is much to recommend listening as a habit, but for now just consider it as an exercise. Warm up by giving your full attention to a report on National Public Radio or to some podcast on your iPod. Don't use the TV

for this—the pictures are far too distracting. Try not to drift off, start multitasking, or argue with what you hear. Just listen. To do this well you have to know how to be quiet, how to focus, and how to allow your thoughts to follow someone else's train. This may take some practice.

When we can listen to a disembodied voice without wandering off into our private thoughts, it is time to try our skill when the words are coming from human speakers, and not just from buds in our ears. Humans are more difficult cases because as they are speaking we are often busy preparing a response to what they are saying, or to what we imagine they are about to say. To listen carefully, we must achieve a kind of emptiness, and try to process the speaker's words with a minimum of distortion. Unlike a recorded sample, actual speech comes in a context that has to be taken into consideration. The speaker is, after all, speaking directly to *us*.

The ultimate listening exercise starts when, upon realizing that someone is trying to tell us something, we decide to give the speaker our full attention, to determine what exactly is being said (and implied), rather than lining up what to say when it is (finally!) our turn to talk. But the exercise is to listen carefully, not to become a conversational zombie. A skillful listener will know when to listen, when to encourage the speaker with questions, *and* when to talk.

(h) *Yielding and Compromising.* The Confucians have a virtue they call *rang*, which can be translated as *deference*, or *yielding precedence*. This practice is a

essential feature of any peaceful society (or any mature human relationship) and it needs to be encouraged from a young age. We don't get harmony unless we can yield, for we can't expect reality, in its animate or inanimate form, always or even often to conform to our wishes or demands. If we can encourage deference, we will cut down on pushing and shoving, cutting in line, road rage, divorce, and homicide. If everyone were just a little more polite than might be expected, life would go much more smoothly.

Here the exercise is simple. Yield. You can start by just noticing the ways you already do this, and then try doing it more. You don't push others out of your way, or take up two seats on the bus when others are standing. You hold doors open for others in the complicated and familiar doorway dance. We all defer and yield and regularly perform acts of micro-courtesy, so the actual exercise involves yielding on some non-trivial matter—perhaps about where or what to eat, or what show to see, or what music to listen to, or where to go for the weekend. Against your desire, or even your better judgment, let someone have it their way, and do this with grace, appropriate enthusiasm, and support, not with sullen and grudging compliance. More than half the time you will be pleasantly surprised at how well things go.

(i) Giving. The exercise is to give something away, something that you value and that you know the other person would be glad to have. It is too easy to give away something you no longer want. Also, it is important to give the gift without any expectation of, or desire for, reciprocity or reward. Do not treat the gift as a bribe or as

a payment in advance for loyalty or affection. If your gift is aimed at gaining the recipient's obedience, then you are practicing control, not harmony, and you must start the exercise all over from scratch. If we can give someone a free gift, a gift with no strings attached, we will have managed to get a glimpse of ourselves acting without control as a motive. If we lack the ability to let go of our concern about how things might turn out for us, we will find that harmony is difficult, if not impossible, to attain.

There are many things we might give. We can begin with physical objects, but we can make the exercise more interesting by considering non-material gifts that people often appreciate. Time, attention, help, respect, and consideration are all gifts that are usually welcome—criticism and advice, not so much.

(j) *Forgiving.* Unlike giving, forgiving does not involve a transfer of things we value to another. Sometimes we simply say words like “I forgive you” or “Forget about it.” This may be enough for the person seeking forgiveness, but it may also be nothing but words. A deeper forgiveness happens when the forgiver truly lets the other person off the hook, when certain angry thoughts and feelings no longer occur. The fully forgiven person is out of the doghouse, the former relationship can be resumed, and the forgiver can tell the forgiven one to “forget about it,” and really mean it.

The exercise, of course, is to try out the second kind of forgiveness. Even if you aren't able to forgive someone fully, if you make the effort perhaps you can learn what it

might take for you to do so. You may even learn that there are some people you can never forgive, but when you do learn this, it is worth asking yourself “Why not?”

(k) Saying “Joy to the World” and Meaning it. One of the kindest and most compassionate Buddhist saints, Santadeva, offered the following meditation:

***May the fearful be without fear, and those who are
oppressed with sorrow find joy, and those who are
anxious be free from anxiety and at peace.***

The exercise is to say this *and really mean it*.

7. Conclusion. Moralists, error theorists, and moral abolitionists would all say that the poorest, meanest, most ordinary person in the world has exactly the same value as any king, queen, president, pope, or media star. This is our “moral equivalence” as rational beings, children of God, or receptacles of pleasure and pain. For the moralist this is because humans are equally valuable, which is difficult to explain, but for the moral error theorist and the moral abolitionist it is because the idea of value has been left behind. In either case, Nobody is better than anyone else.

When we are prepared to recognize other people as moral (or amoral) equals, and willing to look at things from their point of view, which requires that we listen to what they are saying about their priorities and their lives, then hard problems become easy. When this sort of consideration is mutual, hard problems disappear.

Imagine now that you have made substantial progress along the path of harmony. Your assessor has been, if not silenced, at least quieted, your mind is steadier and calmer, you have developed a sensitivity to the circumstances of others and a greater awareness of your own inner life. Because of these changes, you will probably get along better with others, have fewer conflicts, and less stress. You will also be likely to cause others less grief, you will perform tasks better, and you may even have better health, better sex, and a longer life. This is not to say that anyone who moves any distance in the direction of harmony will inevitably be happier. Sometimes, in difficult environments or unfortunate circumstances, our best efforts result in unhappiness, pain, or even death. Everything is a risk. But for the majority of cases, we can second Wittgenstein's remark that the harmonious life and the happy life seem to be related, to which we can add that discord and unhappiness are rarely strangers.

Chapter Eleven (June 2012)

Applied Ethics: Part One

A man is truly ethical only when he obeys the compulsion to help all life which he is able to assist, and shrinks from injuring anything that lives. He does not ask how far this or that life deserves one's sympathy as being valuable, nor, beyond that, whether and to what degree it is capable of feeling. Life as such is sacred to him. Albert Schweitzer

1. Applied Ethics. Thanks to the conventions that guide our discussions, any time we take a moral stand questions about meaning and justification are just around the corner; and thanks to the complexity of the problems and their interconnections, any attempt to answer those questions can quickly strand us in remote areas of philosophy. The episode of interest in metaethics was an honest attempt to confront natural questions about meaning and justification, but the inherent difficulty of the related problems made every controversy indefinitely expandable. When this finally became clear, moral philosophers moved to avoid the “interminable metaethical squabbles” by putting “theoretical” questions about meaning and justification to one side, and turning directly to what came to be called “applied ethics,” though, given our distinction between ethics and morality, what was going on might better have been called “applied *morality*.” If Schweitzer had been using words as I have proposed using them here, the above quote would have started with the words “A man is truly moral only when . . .”. Let us keep this in mind as we discuss what was, and still is, called “applied ethics.”

A question from “applied ethics” is a question about the *morality* of some act or practice. When, if ever, is abortion morally permissible? Does a fetus have a right to life? Is suicide forbidden by morality? Is the death penalty morally justifiable? Would it be morally wrong to televise an execution? Is torture ever a moral option? What moral duties do we have to the poor, to relatives, to future generations, to the members of other species, to the ecosystem? Applied ethics brings these questions to the center of the stage—sometimes by “applying” moral theories like utilitarianism to generate answers, and sometimes by plunging in without assuming some fundamental moral principle. The unifying hallmark of applied ethics, however, is the attempt to find true answers to relatively specific questions about our moral values, obligations, and rights.

Let us remind ourselves of what it would take to *apply* a theory of moral obligation to justify our judgment of the morality of some action. If we were utilitarians, we would first have to formulate some version of the principle of utility, and we would have to assume, since we won’t be able to show, that this version of the principle is warranted in a way that competing versions are not. Before drawing any conclusions, we would need to establish our “sphere of considerability” and our theory of value. We would also have to assume that some kind of quantitative or qualitative comparison is a possibility and not a philosopher’s fantasy, and that our knowledge of the present and the future is more extensive than it could possibly be.

But utilitarians are not the only ones with problems. Rule deontologists and rights theorists are burdened with equally unanswerable questions: how do we determine the relative importance of different rules, or of different rights; how do we resolve clashes among them; and, of course, what role, if any, does a rule about utility

play? These difficulties, which we have already explored, should be more than sufficient to suggest that moral abolitionists might be in a better position than moral realists or moral fictionalists to deal with the issues that concern applied ethicists.

In spite of the daunting theoretical difficulties confronting them, moral philosophers remain devoted to applied ethics. This is partly explained by the fact that they now realize how easy it is to become lost in those “interminable squabbles” of metaethics. They seem to think that if they can avoid the bog of metaethics, they can find the high ground where the questions are urgent and answerable; and they seem to have come to agree with Harman’s complaint that metaethics isn’t interesting.

Since none of our problems (disease, hunger, poverty, inequality, intolerance, and corruption, to mention a few) can be resolved without some people being placed at risk, dislocated, regulated, taxed, fined, fired, impeached, and in other ways inconvenienced, arguments that appeal to justice and rights are permanent features of our social and intellectual environment. Those who participate in these arguments usually have serious personal interests at stake, and they come to the argument with their biases and moral dogmas, their own account of the facts, and a tendency to use every rhetorical trick in the book.

The interest in the questions of applied ethics may have received a boost from the growth of social media and the technology of information-sharing. We can now observe and weigh in on events as they are happening. Secrets are harder to keep, opinions are easier to publish, and smart phones are always ready to record and post images of the events that trouble and delight us. There is more to moralize about, and there are more opportunities to interact with others with the same or different opinions.

As a result, just about anyone with an opinion can get a hearing. Caught by the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR, disputants never doubt that they are in the right, or that their mission is to establish this by any means necessary. One who starts a blog about some moral question, usually has a sharp ax to grind, and is not disposed to find much value in those who think differently, though he or she is usually quite willing to argue the point. While it won't fit on a bumper sticker, another metaphor might be more accurate: ARGUING ABOUT WHAT IS MORALLY RIGHT AND WRONG IS WALKING INTO A QUAGMIRE WITHOUT AN EXIT STRATEGY.

Applying Ethics. In Chapter One we saw how Baruch Brody hoped to bypass the nagging objections of those who questioned the many presuppositions of applied ethics. When he got down to business, he “applied” one form of utilitarianism and one form of deontology to questions about suicide, euthanasia, abortion, crime and punishment, the justification of law, and the distribution of wealth. His deontologist has intuitions about rights and the need for retribution, and his utilitarian thinks punishment is justified only when it deters. The utilitarian calls an act a crime if the good that results from stopping it outweighs the harm that results from stopping it; while the deontologist says that crimes are acts that harm people by violating their rights (Brody, 55 and 68). His utilitarian supports plea-bargaining and wants to lower the standard of evidence in order to convict more criminals. His deontologist wants to retain the requirement of proof beyond a reasonable doubt, and thinks that plea-bargaining is an unfair practice that ignores desert.

Brody acknowledged that his versions of utilitarianism and of deontology are not the only possible ones, and, as I observed in Chapter One, he was aware that moral

philosophers have never adequately met the challenges of nihilists, skeptics, subjectivists, and amoralists. He allowed that these challenges are serious, but did not concern himself with them because they are problems for theoretical ethics, and his book “is not about theoretical ethics” (*Ethics and Its Applications*, p. 6).

It is a weakness, not only of Brody’s book but of applied ethics in general, that so many of these “theoretical” questions are put to one side and so much is taken for granted. We must feel sympathy for some concerned moralist who, wanting to avoid getting mired in traditional metaphysical, epistemological, and linguistic issues, yields to the temptation to treat “theoretical” questions as annoying distractions. But when we ignore these questions, or dismiss them in short paragraphs as Brody did, we run the risk of being seen as constructing theories of sand on a foundation of thin air. Not everyone is willing to assume, even “for the sake of argument,” that moral realism is true.

A different approach to applied ethics can be found in Peter Singer’s *Practical Ethics*. While Brody prefers a form of deontological intuitionism, Singer is a preference utilitarian—that is, an act utilitarian with a theory of value according to which the good is not happiness but the satisfaction of preferences. From the (alleged) facts and (undefended) principles of this brand of utilitarianism, Singer easily generates answers to questions about taking life and distributing resources. It follows from his preference utilitarianism that it is wrong to kill most of the animals we now kill, that abortions are not morally wrong, that sometimes infanticide is justified (p. 122), and that “those earning average or above average incomes in affluent societies, unless they have an unusually large number of dependents or other special needs, ought to give a tenth of their

income to reducing absolute poverty” (p. 181). Needless to say, neither the premises nor the conclusions of Singer’s arguments have been accepted by omnivores, those with a strong belief in property rights, or moral error theorists.

The historian who surveys the battlefields of applied ethics will be impressed by the ritualistic character of the arguments and by their renowned inconclusiveness. There are so many views about what is good and right, so many wishful predictions and ways to interpret events, that it really does appear that we can mount a moral defense for anything we might have chosen to do, and a moral assault on anything or anyone we happen to dislike.

2. Abolishing Morality. If we agree with the error theorist that morality, which is to say, applied ethics, is undermined by the falsity of its assumption that there are objectively correct answers to questions about moral duty and intrinsic value, then what are our options? We may fear that if we are unable to resort to moral language we will be disadvantaged in our dealings with others, and so, for practical reasons, we might continue to speak as if we were “believing” moralists. At the end of Chapter Six we considered the pros and cons of continuing as moral fictionalists after accepting the moral error theory. My choice was to avoid the pretence, embrace moral abolitionism, and then to argue that moral abolitionism is not to be feared, but to be considered, and perhaps even embraced.

If we ask moral abolitionists how they would answer the moral questions that attract the attention of applied ethicists, they will tell us to forget about answering them—at least as long as they are thought of as *moral* questions. Like Sextus, the Buddha, and Wittgenstein, moral abolitionists say that some questions are a waste of

time. Moral abolitionists may have much to say (and learn) about the practical issues that concern moral philosophers, but their greatest contribution to moral philosophy may be their steadfast refusal to address questions about our moral obligations, duties, and rights.

We have seen that when we abolish moral language and thinking we are not left without resources for dealing with life's problems, and we know, I hope, that error theorists are not, as such, violent, heartless, or selfish. What allows us to cause great suffering for even small personal gain is not a rejection of morality, or a refusal to speak in moral terms, but a lack of attention, consideration, understanding, and compassion. We are predisposed to neglect and even harm others when we don't know them and/or don't like them, when we are uninterested in the way they feel, when their suffering doesn't bother us.

We are natural information gatherers and problem solvers, and when our problems involve other people, it can be disastrous not to gather what information we can about their circumstances, beliefs, interpretations, explanations, and values. If "Know thy enemy" is good advice, isn't "Know thy friend" even better advice, and isn't Socrates' contribution, "Know thyself" the one we should start with? We spend our lives constructing that self and with it our story, a narrative in which we are the main character. Let us admit this and then acknowledge that everyone else does the same thing, and that their versions are always different, and sometimes very different, from ours. Unless we attend to the versions of others, and to their version of our version, we will fail to understand why they do what they do, and whether our aim is to help them, to manipulate them, or to destroy them, we will probably fail.

Information about what others think and feel, about their beliefs, principles and values, is a major component of a healthy and evolving understanding of the world. If we can prevent our narrative from being warped by the need to accommodate false and foolish beliefs, two things happen. First, our decider is treated to a relatively accurate view of what is going on, and, as a result, we come up with fewer dumb decisions. Second, as we collect more information about others and free ourselves from mistakes foisted on us by our tradition, our desires and our language, we will almost certainly become less self-centered, more compassionate, and more cooperative. This is not to say that deeper understanding will always lead to harmony, forgiveness, assistance, encouragement, or even toleration, but without it, none of the five items just mentioned has a much of a chance.

In these final two chapters I will try to show that informed and compassionate moral abolitionists have many reasonable and helpful things to say about the fundamental topics that concern the applied ethicist. I have already indicated that I believe that moral abolitionists are in a better position than moralists to discuss these matters and even to give helpful advice. For one thing, the moral abolitionist, free of the mistaken beliefs of the moralist, can avoid the inevitable and interminable disputes about which values and principles are the right ones. For another, moral abolitionists will not feel compelled to take a stand on every thought experiment that inventive moralists might concoct. Moralists, who assume that moral questions do have right answers, have been willing to invest serious time and energy discussing imaginary scenarios that are improbable and often quite bizarre. There is something to be learned from this, but it may not be what the fans of “moral dilemmas” think.

3. Thought Experiments and Actual Decisions. Here is one “case” that has cost philosophers and philosophy students many hours. We are trapped in a cave because a fat man is stuck in the only exit, his head protruding into the world above. Water in the cave is rising and everyone in the group, with the exception of the fat man, will soon drown. One member of the group has a stick of dynamite and argues that the only way to escape certain death is to blow the fat man out of the hole—thereby killing him. Should we do it? Kai Nielsen, working with act utilitarian assumptions, concludes that “if there really is no other way of unsticking our fat man and if plainly, without blasting him out, everyone in the cave will drown, then innocent or not, he should be blasted out” (Nielsen, “Against Moral Conservatism,” in Pojman, *Ethical Theory*, p. 186).

The example is under-described, but no amount of filling would place us, sitting in our comfortable chairs, in a position to decide what someone else *should* do in a case as bizarre as this. Maybe the fat man is on the brink of finding a cure for AIDS. Maybe the others are criminals who were torturing the fat man. Maybe the explosion will set off a chain reaction and destroy the whole cave system. Who knows? If the people in the cave are utilitarians, they will drown before they figure out how blowing up the fat man will affect the lives of even his immediate family. And if they do blow him up, they will never, till their dying day, be able to establish that they did “the right thing.”

If the moral error theorist is right, there is no correct answer to the question of what we ought to do in that wet cave because there is nothing that we ought to do. This doesn’t mean that we don’t get into situations where we have to make hard decisions about what to do. But until we get into one of those situations, we cannot say, with any

confidence, what we would do. When we find ourselves in a difficult, unprecedented, or even bizarre situation where no option is attractive, what we end up doing will depend on any number of factors, only some of which will be present to our awareness. If we are not actually in the situation, but are just reading about it in a book or hearing about it from a moral philosopher, what we tell ourselves we “should do” or would do is no more than a fantasy about a fiction.

Consider the “Trolley Problem,” a more recent thought experiment that has managed to entice many moral philosophers to leave Nielsen’s cave. This moral dilemma exercise has attracted enough attention to have been satirized on the Science Fiction Channel’s “Stargate Atlantis” in an episode called “The Game.” The annoying but brilliant scientist Rodney McKay is at dinner with Teyla, a level-headed and sensitive alien, Ronon an alien warrior, and John Sheppard, a human and their leader:

Rodney: Let me ask you a question. Say there’s a runaway train. It’s hurtling out of control toward ten people standing in the middle of the tracks. The only way to save those people is to flip a switch and send the train down another set of tracks. The only problem is there is a baby sitting in the middle of those tracks

Teyla: Why would anyone leave a baby in harm’s way like that?

Rodney: Why? I don’t know. That’s not the point. It’s an ethical dilemma. Katie Brown brought it up over dinner the other night. The question is: is it appropriate to divert the train and kill the one baby to save the ten people.

Ronon: Wouldn’t the people just see the train coming and move?

Rodney: No. No they wouldn’t see it.

Ronon: Why not?

Rodney: I don't know. Well look. Say they're blind.

Teyla: All of them?

Rodney: Yes, all of them.

Ronon: Why don't you just call out and tell them to move out of the way?

Rodney: Well because they can't hear you.

Sheppard: What, they're deaf too?

Rodney. (Exasperated pause}

Sheppard: How fast is the train going?

Rodney: The speed doesn't matter.

Ronon: Sure it does. If it's going slow enough you can outrun it and shove everyone to the side.

Sheppard: Or better yet, go get the baby.

Rodney: For God's sake I was just trying to . . .

At that point the discussion is interrupted by a call to Rodney from Major Lorne on M4D05A. Applied ethicists should be so lucky.

Political correctness may have led philosophers to retire Nielsen's example of the fat man in the cave, but while Peter Singer does not use the word 'fat', largeness is involved in one hybrid example he offers us. After noting that most of us would agree that we "should" pull a switch that would divert a trolley and cause it to kill one individual (even a baby) rather than everyone in the group it was bearing down on, he turns to his hybrid.

In another dilemma, the trolley, as before, is about to kill five people. This time, however, you are not standing near the track, but on a footbridge above the track. You cannot divert the trolley. You consider jumping off the bridge, in front of the trolley, thus sacrificing yourself to save the five people in danger, but you realize that you are far too light to stop the trolley.

Standing next to you, however, is a very large stranger. The only way you can prevent the trolley from killing five people is by pushing this large stranger off the footbridge, in front of the trolley. If you push the stranger off, he will be killed, but you will save the other five. When asked what you should do in these circumstances, most people say that it would be wrong to push the stranger.

<http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/200703--.htm>

Singer allows that we (i.e., the moralists among us) have these moral intuitions, and he mentions Marc Hauser, who devised a “Moral Sense Test” and placed it on the Internet. “After receiving tens of thousands of responses he [Hauser] finds remarkable consistency despite differences in nationality, ethnicity, religion, age, and sex.” It appears that almost everyone is more inclined to favor throwing the switch than the very large stranger, even if the final count is the same—one dead and five saved.

Singer says that philosophers have “puzzled about how to justify our intuitions in these situations.” He is, after all, a utilitarian, and a utilitarian will usually say (as

Nielsen did) that we ought to save more lives when we can. So, as far as Singer is concerned, we need to explain why, in this kind of a case, our intuitions do not tell us to do what is right. Our reluctance to throw the large man onto the tracks may not be justifiable on utilitarian grounds because it is hard to discount the fact that five is greater than one, but the reluctance can be *explained*, which is all that Hauser was attempting to do. By using magnetic resonance imaging he found that when we think about hands-on violence against a person, our emotional areas flare up (presumably in an uncomfortable way) more than they do when we think about doing similar damage by pulling a switch or pressing a button. We may feel differently about acts of direct and acts of remote harming because we have had eons to develop inhibitions against hands-on violence, whereas the possibility of killing people remotely is quite new. The utilitarian will say that our evolved inhibition against hands-on violence has made us lose sight of the fact that squeamishness here (or in Nielsen's cave) would be quite immoral.

If Singer is allowed to assume the correctness of his preferred form of utilitarianism he will have little trouble "justifying" the judgment that we ought to save the five. But there are other equally indefensible moral perches from which one could "justify" letting things take their own course. One could claim that it is morally wrong to do anything that you believe will result in another person's death. Or one could say that the very large stranger had a very large right to life.

Moralists can be expected to show up with an opinion about even the most bizarre thought experiments, but if the moral error theorist is right, then there is no truth about what we ought to do on Singer's footbridge, and no justification of any intuition

about it. There is only what we believe we ought to do (if we are moralists), what, if anything, we believe we *would* do, and what we actually would do if we found ourselves in such an unlikely situation. I doubt the three are often identical.

When moral abolitionists are faced with genuine hard choices, they can make decisions at least as efficiently and intelligently as moralists or moral fictionalists, but because the mechanism we actually use to make these decisions runs best on concrete details about real situations, and uses clues we might pick up subconsciously, our decider is not very useful in dealing with whimsical examples and underdescribed thought experiments.

4. Moral Problems can Become Ethical Questions. Every day of our lives we are forced to find a satisfactory ground between too much and too little. How much shall we give, help, learn, demand, or take? Who, or what, shall we include within our sphere of considerability? How much deception, coercion and exploitation are we willing to accept, or to practice? Moral abolitionists are fortunate to be in a position to think about these questions without the need to find the one right answer, indeed, without the debilitating handicap of believing (or having to pretend) that there *is* a right answer.

The problem with moralism is that morality is flexible enough to support either side of any issue. Whatever your bias, morality is there for you. Consider the recent flair-up about abortion and contraception, or the perennial debates about the decriminalization of drugs. Think of the arguments about splitting the economic pie, policing at home, or fighting abroad. What about our relationship to the environment and to the other beings we share it with, and what about prisons and the death penalty? We could argue about these issues forever without discovering the morally right or best way to proceed,

primarily because there is no available moral truth about how we ought to deal with any of them. Not only will a mistaken but widespread belief in the objectivity of morality not be “useful” in helping us resolve our conflicts of interest, it might make things worse. After a long argument it is easy to become impatient, more certain of our own position, and less certain of the sincerity of the opposition. As this goes on, the chance for agreement or even mutual understanding weakens, and as our disputes become more heated, compromise becomes less likely. When we go moralistic we add an entire level of controversy and introduce unanswerable questions that usurp the original question, which is always some practical question about what to do or support. If we set out on the path of the moral abolitionist and put 2500 years of moral sophistry and stalemates behind us, we may come up with fresh ways to resolve some of our more difficult problems. We might, for example, learn to listen to one another or to act from kinder motives than justice.

5. Reproductive Issues. The vague title of this section is a sign that our focus has widened since the heyday of the “applied ethics era.” Then, the hottest of the hot topics was abortion, but recent developments in the technology of reproduction have raised new questions and started new arguments, and with expectable advances in embryonic stem-cell research just around the corner, questions about the use and disposition of embryos have multiplied.

In this section, I will first look at the way a belief in objective morality both intensifies and destabilizes discussions about abortion. Then I will mention some of the harm caused by moralistic meddling when the topic is stem-cell research. Finally I will

take note of the fact that there are still those who allow their moral and religious beliefs to overcome both common sense and compassion when the topic is contraception.

Abortion. The questions we ask about abortion are different from other questions about killing because the status of the “victim” is unclear. A newly fertilized ovum may be genetically human, but it is contentious to call it a *person* or a *human being*. Terminology is not neutral. Whether you refer to a fetus as a “person,” “fetal tissue,” an “unborn child,” or a “tiny defenseless baby” will depend on your beliefs and attitudes about abortion, and on what beliefs, attitudes, and policies you hope to influence.

The egg is human before it is fertilized. From conception to the third week it is called a **zygote**. From four to seven weeks an **embryo**, and from eight weeks to birth a **fetus**. A zygote or an embryo is human and alive, but is it a “human being” or a “human life”? If we take words as they are used, neither a zygote nor a fetus is a human being or a person. If we ask how many people were at a party, we do not count pregnant women as two, nor are they charged double admission. The usage of our forefathers seems to have been the same as our own. In his decision in *Roe v. Wade*, Justice Blackmun wrote that the use of ‘person’ in the Constitution seems to have application only “postnatally.” (*Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 [1973]) When we apply a term like ‘person’ or ‘human being’ to a zygote, an embryo, or even a fetus, it is almost certainly in order to discourage abortions by linking them with murder (which we then understand to be the *wrongful* killing of a human being). For some “the evil of abortion” has even seemed to justify, or demand, the use of deadly force to save “innocent children.”

Far too many people who could not say what “Roe v. Wade” mandated still believe that the Supreme Court ought to overturn it. Strong moral feelings need no facts. This case was brought in 1973 to the court by Roe (the appellant) against Wade, who represented the state of Texas. The lawyers for Roe argued that the Texas laws forbidding abortion were unconstitutional and that a woman ought to be allowed to have an abortion at will, for any reason, at any time. The lawyers for the State of Texas argued that abortion is murder and ought always to be forbidden by law.

The court ruled that the Texas law banning abortions is unconstitutional because it is a violation of a woman’s right to privacy, and because there is no support in the Constitution for the claim that the fetus is a person. But the Justices did not agree completely with the appellant either, so they decided to place no restrictions on a woman's right to seek an abortion during the first trimester, but ruled that during the second trimester, the state has an interest in regulating abortions to protect the health of the woman, and that in the third trimester, abortions may be regulated out of concern for the fetus.

While legitimate legal questions can be raised about privacy and personhood, those who oppose Roe v. Wade so vehemently are worried about more than Constitutional Law. They claim that the real issue is the moral one, so let us put the law aside and ask what there is to say about abortion from the moral point of view. The two extreme positions found in Roe v. Wade are reproduced in the moral arena. The Pro-life claim that “Abortion is murder” is based on the assumption that the fetus is a person. Those on the Pro-choice side will reject that understanding of ‘person’ and will add that a woman has a right to make choices about what goes on in her own body. Since the

word 'person' and the idea of a moral right are so subject to rhetoric and so utterly open to appropriation, it is impossible to imagine that moralists who support and moralists who oppose abortion will find a definition of 'person' or a view of rights on which they can agree. The truth is, of course, that a fetus is a developing group of live human cells, and an abortion decision is a decision to kill it, whatever it is called. It is just that calling it a baby, or seeing or thinking of it as a baby, triggers deep seated impulses to protect. That is why when the epitaph "Baby killer!" was attached to Dr. George Tiller the result was his assassination in 2009..

Moralists who reason about the morality of abortion can show up on either side of the fence. Some emphasize the rights of the (potential) child, others insist on the rights of the mother. Utilitarians criticize rights theorists (as Bentham did) for simply objectifying their preferences. Only utilitarians, they say, can point to something real on which to base a judgment: How much good can be expected from the available choices? But this question is much easier to ask than to answer, and anyone who takes it seriously runs the risk of getting lost in a web of hypotheticals and bogus calculations about imaginary futures.

Still, utilitarians are likely to end up supporting choice, and their concern to maximize happiness or preference-satisfaction may even lead some to support infanticide. Peter Singer supports it in some cases—much to the horror of many who think differently. Those who oppose it will be asked to justify "forcing life" on those severely damaged newborns who are destined for a brief life of uncomprehending pain. Moralists who are not forced by circumstances to make one of these actual life and death decisions would be wise to stand aside in mute sympathy for those who are.

Some moral abolitionists will, on some occasions, have to make decisions about whether to have an abortion, to support or oppose someone who is considering having one, or to work or vote for or against abortion restrictions. When this happens, they will be well-positioned to make such a decision since they are unlikely to be under the influence of charged moral language, indefensible moral assumptions, or religious dogmas. Clearheaded moral abolitionists will not allow themselves to get caught up in rhetorical traps, and they will not be hampered by the belief that there is always (or even ever) a morally right way to deal with situations as complex and personal as unwanted pregnancies.

Stem Cell Research. The opponents of both abortion and stem cell research are troubled by our treatment of human embryos, whether *in utero* (in the uterus) or *in vitro* (in a glass lab vessel). The opponents of *in vitro* fertilization often criticize the whole concept, but they are particularly concerned about what happens to embryos that are not implanted. Some are frozen for possible later implantation, some are discarded, and some are killed so that their stem cells can be removed (harvested) for research purposes. So if abortion is murder, then research on stem cells from “sacrificed” embryos is in the same moral boat. Both require the deliberate killing of embryos.

It appears that anyone who really believes that a human being or a person comes into existence at the moment of conception should be willing to say that killing an embryo is as much a moral offence as killing a second or third trimester fetus, or even a human baby. On this view, researchers and abortion providers would be subject to prosecution for homicide, and in fact laws to this effect have been proposed. Finally, morality would demand the rescue of as many of those stranded embryos as possible

and would obligate us to strive to get them implanted so that they can continue their journey through life. Few of those who take the “pro-life” side are that consistent.

Utilitarians have only to look at the probable medical benefits of stem cell research to find plenty of reasons to support it. It promises to help in treating Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, cancer, and spinal cord injury, for starters. But one does not have to be a utilitarian or a rights theorist, or any kind of moralist, to be in favor of expanded stem cell research. Given the great promise of that work, anyone who cares for the health and happiness of his or her fellow humans, and is not under the influence of the idea that the embryo is a person, is likely to support it. Those who find stem cell research morally objectionable can forgo medical treatments based on it by making their reluctance a part of their living wills. What the moral error theorist wants to know is why we should (in any sense of ‘should’) allow what we believe to be false factual, moral, and religious beliefs to stand in the way of making life better, and sometimes bearable, for thousands of certifiable “persons.”

(c) Contraception. It seems obvious that the best way to reduce the number of abortions is to reduce unwanted pregnancies. Unfortunately, a confused form of moralism often blocks the shortest path to this goal by opposing efforts to supply information about, and materials necessary for, birth-control even to those adolescents who are already sexually active. Only a moralist, and a pretty ill-informed one at that, would be able to find reasons for a policy that puts young people at such a great risk for disease and unwanted pregnancy. But morality may not deserve all the blame. Politics and religion are also deeply involved in this fracas, and their champions never go into battle without a cohort of moral arguments, however ragged and infirm.

What do moralists have against contraception? Utilitarians who understand the threats of overpopulation and sexually transmitted diseases will rarely be troubled by abortion, but they are likely to see contraception as a better option. A small number of utilitarians who oppose contraception will head for the nearest slippery slope. They may argue that providing information to the young about sexuality, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases (or even discussing these topics) will lead to early sexual activity, and that will lead to unwanted pregnancies, and that will lead to abortions, and worse.

The assumption that openness and accurate information about sexual matters is harmful to young people has been discredited by the disastrous outcome of the Bush administration's "abstinence only" policies. Google the topic and learn (from *Wikipedia*) that "Abstinence-only education has been criticized in official statements by the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, the Society for Adolescent Medicine, the American College Health Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Public Health Association, which all maintain that sex education needs to be comprehensive to be effective." See also Julie F. Kay and Ashley Jackson, *Sex, Lies, and Stereotypes: How Abstinence-Only Programs Harm Women and Girls*.

http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/pihhr/files/resources_and_publications/meeting_reports/SexLies_Stereotypes2008.pdf

If we set far-fetched slippery slope arguments to one side, are there any other considerations that might lead us to think it is morally wrong to practice birth control? Since nobody can argue that sex itself is bad, the fall-back position is to say that it is not sex, but sex without intending to produce a child that is "morally wrong." The source of

this “contra-contraception” movement is the Catholic Church. Replace the two ‘contra’s with a ‘pro’ and we get the idea of a pro-conception policy, which is never a bad idea for a minority religion or ethnic group hoping to survive. Two arguments are traditionally advanced, and it is hard to say which is worse. One claims that contraception is wrong because it thwarts nature, and the other says that it is murder.

Contraception is against nature. Clement of Alexandria tells us that “to indulge in intercourse without intending children is to outrage nature, whom [we] should take as our instructor.” (Quoted by John A. Hardon, S. J. in “The Catholic Tradition on the Morality of Contraception,” hereafter CTMC.) St. Augustine even opposed *coitus interruptus*, saying, “Onan, son of Juda, did this very thing, and the Lord slew him on that account. Therefore, the procreation of children is itself the primary, natural, legitimate purpose of marriage.” (CTMC) Therefore?

<http://www.therealpresence.org/archives/Abortion Euthanasia/Abortion Euthanasia 004.htm>

The idea that some activity goes against nature has been used to oppose everything from vaccination to celibacy. Pope Pius XI said that those who indulge in sex without aiming at procreation “act against nature” and that this is “shameful” and “intrinsically immoral.” (CTMC) Nature may push us in many directions, but when we push back in an effort to give some shape to our lives, neither the struggle nor the result is shameful or intrinsically immoral. The world isn’t designed, but even if it were, everything that has come into being, including babies and condoms, would be natural and part of the plan. Even going against nature would then be a part of our nature.

Contraception is murder. St. Jerome scornfully referred to those women who drink potions “to ensure sterility and are guilty of murdering a human being not yet conceived.” (CTMC) Caesarius, Archbishop of Arles in France (470-542), agreed and

claimed that if a woman accepts “a potion to prevent conception . . . she will be held guilty of as many murders as the number of those she might have conceived or borne, and unless suitable penance saves her she will be condemned to eternal death in hell.” (Sermon 1, 12; CC 103, 9) (CTMC)

We have seen how there is a permanent rhetorical struggle over the meaning of expressions such as ‘person’ or ‘human being’. Given the way we now use the words, it is controversial to say that a fetus in the third trimester is a person, more so to say the same of an embryo or a zygote, and ludicrous to speak (as St. Jerome does) of murdering a “human being” who has failed to come into being because of *coitus interruptus* or some more reliable form of contraception.

We are currently struggling to extract our laws about contraception from the clutches of religion, factual ignorance, and fear. For the moral abolitionist the answer is simple. Make information available, make contraception available, and trust parents, health professionals, and ourselves to figure out what to do. Here is what the murdered Dr. Tiller wrote on his website:

Women and families are intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and ethically competent to struggle with complex health issues—including abortion—and come to decisions that are appropriate for themselves. <http://healthwise-everythinghealth.blogspot.com/2009/05/save-fetus-kill-doctor.html>

There are healthy ways to communicate about reproductive issues if we can manage to speak truthfully, freely, and without embarrassment. This is not easy because underlying many of our peculiar and incomprehensible prohibitions and taboos

regarding sexual matters is the idea that sex is dangerous, evil, shameful, and yet irresistible. When moralists get onto these topics they can be meddlesome, naïve, unappreciative of difference, in love with conformity, and comically (as well as tragically) righteous. In these matters, as in all other aspects of life, we need to find a way to free ourselves from the uninformed, dogmatic, and often harmful moralistic beliefs of those who came before us. Liberal commentators have expressed surprise that contraception is still thought to be an issue, but they have probably not understood that no moral issue is ever “settled” because, no matter what the facts, a moral argument can always be constructed. This is why medical and personal concerns make so much more sense than moral concerns when people face conflicts that demand major decisions.

6. Crime and Punishment. In Chapter Eight I mentioned our natural instinct to lash out at those who injure or displease us. This fierce tendency may have aided us in our evolutionary ascent, and it can be a useful trait if our goal is control. The oldest law codes we know were devoted to establishing punishments for the various offences of the day. Hammurabi decreed that “If a man has broken into a house, they shall put him to death and hang him before the breach which he has made.” (Nice, 27) Hobbes thought that a powerful “Sovereign” might, out of self interest, institute and enforce laws against the most dangerous forms of uncivil behavior. Our modern idea of a sovereign state with clear and well-enforced criminal laws is also grounded in the hope that the fear of punishment will make us behave.

When moralists debate about punishment, every form of (mis)treatment has defenders. Hammurabi wanted to send a strong message to burglars, and today’s utilitarians often defend severe punishments in order to discourage all sorts of crimes.

Kinder utilitarians insist that mercy and rehabilitation have better consequences.

Deontologists think that criminals ought to suffer in some way, but they oppose punishing anyone to send a message or to take out our individual or collective anger.

“Punishment is punishment,” F. H. Bradley said,

only where it is deserved. We pay the penalty, because we owe it, and for no other reason; and if punishment is inflicted for any other reason whatever than because it is merited by wrong, it is a gross immorality, a crying injustice, an abominable crime, and not what it pretends to be. (Bradley, 26-27)

The passage in the Bible that calls for “an eye for an eye,” expresses (but does not justify) the relatively advanced thought that we deserve what we have dished out—no more and no less. “And your eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” (*Exodus* 21:24) This deontological call for pitiless proportional punishment is a step beyond the application of the death penalty for petty offences, but it is based on the flawed moralistic idea that it is sometimes morally right, or even morally required, for us to cause suffering to someone “because it is merited by wrong” that he or she has done.

The metaphor at work here is JUSTICE IS BALANCING THE SCALES, and the blindfold that Justice is often depicted as wearing serves to secure her impartiality. When you have done something wrong, the scales of Justice, not our anger or lust for revenge, determine how much you must suffer to pay for your misdeed. Our belief that wrongdoers deserve their due is so deep that we have not been willing to leave the job of distributing desert to human agents. We know that sometimes law and human action

fail to balance the scales, so we have imagined a variety of hells, and adopted a vague, unverifiable, but emotionally comforting non-sectarian doctrine of karma, often expressed by the slogan “What goes around comes around.”

There is much to argue about here, but fortunately the moral abolitionist is not saddled with the need calculate how much any person, even the most extreme offender, deserves to suffer. If it is *moral* desert we are talking about, nobody deserves to suffer, but the word ‘desert’ has plenty of uses that have nothing to do with morality. The winner of the race deserves the prize and the one who fulfills the contract deserves the agreed on payment. Of course none of this needs the extra embroidery of morality. A serious rejection of the idea of “moral desert” and a growing ability to see the world with fewer illusions will be what finally makes it possible to discuss responses and remedies to crimes and incivilities without having to pander to moral ire and posturing and without pretending that the thirst for revenge is really a desire that people get what they deserve. I think that we have overdosed on desert and that that it would be both healthy and economical to try something else.

Error theorists are not anarchists. Like almost everyone else, they will want laws to protect themselves and others from human predators, and laws to regulate important transactions, enforce contracts, and sometimes even to regulate where our dogs can relieve themselves. They will not consider themselves *morally* bound to follow the laws of their state, or even the conventions of their society, but there is no reason to think they will conform to those laws and conventions any less than moralists. If a law is particularly cruel or stupid, however, an error theorist may be more reluctant to conform to it than would a moralist who believes in a moral obligation to obey the law. That reluctance can be very healthy—if not for the error theorist, then at least for his or her society.

Error theorists will not believe, and moral abolitionists will not say, either that punishment is morally justifiable or that it is morally wrong, but they can take a stand on their government's, or any government's, policy of punishment. A moral abolitionist who believes that only strict laws and harsh punishment will make society work is likely to throw in with the hard-liners. Another moral abolitionist with different beliefs and preferences may favor kinder and gentler laws. Decisions about what laws and policies to support are difficult enough without bringing in indefensible moral assumptions and inflammatory moral language.

As I observed in Chapter Eight, and as almost everyone would admit, our penal system is broken. Our prisons are clogged with between two and three million people, many of whom are innocent and/or harmless. Arbitrary and ancient moral and religious beliefs have led to laws that punish victimless crimes and to punitive and inconsistent, drug laws that harm users and their families more than the drugs they prohibit. It is not my intention to present here a plan to fix our broken and shameful system, but I am tempted to offer a few suggestions based on the thought that the real culprit is not the inmate in our prisons, but the marriage of the ancient and deluded idea that we are ever morally obliged to make anyone suffer, and the modern and greed infested policy of privatizing prisons.

We know that many of those in our prisons and jails are innocent. Compassion urges us to make an effort to determine who they are and to release them as quickly as possible. If there is even a chance that DNA evidence would show that someone is innocent of any crime, then why would we hesitate to consider it? It is hard to imagine anything more distressing than being falsely incarcerated. Information about how one

organization is working to help those in this situation can be found on the web site of “The Innocence Project” <http://www.innocenceproject.org/>.

Even if we manage to release all or most of the innocent, there is much to be done before we can begin to feel comfortable with our justice system. We could speed up the process (already underway) of revising our harsh drug laws and our mandatory sentencing laws, and we could release harmless recreational drug users, and even some non-violent first-time lawbreakers. Some addicts and alcoholics will need treatment and support, but addiction is a disease rarely chosen freely, and with the right treatment it can often be defeated. The “right treatment,” however, does not involve confinement with other addicts in a dirty and dangerous prison. Restoring former addicts and reformed criminals to society would be less expensive in the long run than the system we now have, and it would be a thousand times more humane. This is not to recommend that we just “throw open” the prison doors. A robust restoration strategy will work only if those we release are prepared for life on the outside, and only if, after they are released, they are given serious and persistent help getting (and keeping) their new lives up and running. Inattention, politics, greed, and a mean-spirited notion of moral desert have so far kept us from being very good at this.

If we do manage to reduce the prison population, reform some laws, set humane standards for prisons, and change our attitude about desert, we will still want to keep those who are incorrigible and dangerous where they can do no harm. But even in those cases, there is no reason (other than our lust for revenge) to cling to the idea that the role of incarceration is to deliver the suffering that we believe our criminals deserve.

It is true that punishment has been around from the beginning. Even Adam, Eve and the snake were punished. But perhaps the time has come to take a more informed and humane approach to those who violate our wishes or our laws, and to construct a less vindictive system that is free of the anger and the errors of moralism. As we grow in our understanding of even our lawbreakers, we may replace our vengeful moralism with compassion, and find ourselves turning from the question “What punishment do they deserve?” to the question “What help do they need?”

Restorative Justice. Restorative justice is an approach to criminal justice that has recently become a movement in many countries. John Braithwaite, a critic of systems of law that look first or exclusively to punishment, characterizes restorative justice as an attempt to restore the offender, the victim, and society to a state of harmony through understanding, remorse, restitution, and forgiveness. The method is to bring involved parties together to work out some acceptable resolution of the disruption in the social order caused by the crime. According to Braithwaite, elements of restorative justice can be found in ancient Arab, Greek, and Roman civilizations, early Germanic tribes after the fall of Rome, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism (John Braithwaite, *Restorative Justice and Responsive Regulation*, Oxford, 2002).

Braithwaite claims that such a system can be more effective in reducing offences than our current punitive system, more satisfying to the victim, and better for the community. The scant research we have seems to bear this out. According to the web page of the *Centre for Restorative Justice*, affiliated with Simon Fraser University, many studies do indicate that “offenders diverted to restorative justice programs tend to recidivate less, and that all who are involved in the process generally feel more

satisfaction when compared to traditional methods.” (<http://www.sfu.ca/cfrj/intro.html> and also see <http://www.anu.edu.au/fellows/jbraithwaite/lectures/index.php>).

The human capacity for anger is great, but so is the capacity to forgive. This is shown by the work of “Truth and Reconciliation Projects” in South Africa, Australia, and elsewhere where citizens have set out to come to terms with their past. These reconciliation projects often lead to a kind of forgiveness that goes far beyond what many of us would have thought possible; and yet critics worry that in some cases forgiveness can come too soon and too easily. Opponents of Desmond Tutu’s “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” in South Africa argued that it was unjust to ask the victims of apartheid to abandon their desire to see their former oppressors get what they deserve. Similar arguments, all based on the moralistic idea of desert, are made against the proponents of Restorative Justice everywhere.

It often feels good to cause, or to learn of, the suffering of those we blame for causing us to suffer. But it also feels good when those who have hurt us admit to the deed, realize the harm done, regret their actions, and feel a sincere desire to make restitution. These three R’s, realization, regret, and restitution, can lead to a fourth, which is restoration to full membership in a community or group. It is important to restorative projects that the realization is genuine, the regret is sincere, and the restitution is willingly undertaken by the offender. If the restitution is enforced, it will be seen as just another form of punishment, like a fine or a sentence to manual labor.

Successful restoration also depends on the willingness of the injured party or parties to forgive. In Chapter Ten I suggested some exercises for experiencing harmony, one of which was to forgive someone. There I distinguished between an

external or formal kind of forgiveness, and an internal forgiveness that comes from the heart. Anyone can say “I forgive you,” but it is harder for those who buy into the ideas of good, evil, duty, desert, and the other elements of morality, to forgive deeply because they recognize an entire layer of moral offence that needs additional forgiveness, a layer that is not even acknowledged by the moral abolitionist.

It is sometimes hard to be sure that someone really does regret having done something that has hurt someone, or that he or she has reached the point of saying “Never again!” and meaning it. Skeptics say that we can never be sure that someone is truly remorseful, but let us not underestimate our own acuity in spotting deceit, or the ability of others to realize and regret the harm they have done.

The greatest barrier to a more humane and effective criminal justice system remains the belief that morality requires justice, that justice involves people getting what they deserve, and that what they deserve is to suffer enough to make up for the evil that they have done. Restorative justice may be impossible on any large scale until this unkind manifestation of moralism is purged from our justice system, if it ever is.

7. The death penalty. Death is a very special punishment. “Retributivists” say that some people deserve to die because of what they have done. The slogan “a life for a life” expresses the feeling that by taking a life, a killer has created an imbalance, a gap that can only be filled by his or her own death. Some utilitarians support the death penalty by claiming that we are better off with it, but other utilitarians oppose it by claiming that we are better off without it. Those who support it usually do so on the grounds that it deters further acts of killing. Their critics (who are in the majority these days) argue that

the death penalty is an ineffective deterrent, and that even if it did deter, that would not be a conclusive reason to adopt it.

What happens to the death penalty when we abandon the idea of moral desert? Informed and relatively compassionate moral abolitionists who believe in the deterrent power of the death penalty, or who have lost a loved one to violence, may support capital punishment, but without appealing to our moral right or duty to impose it. Other moral abolitionists will oppose it, but again without appealing to the traditional moral considerations. They will not say that life is sacred, or that it is always morally wrong to kill another person, but they can still have feelings, a preference, and perhaps an explanation of those feelings. Perhaps they find it inconsistent to embrace the murderer's assumption that killing is one way to deal with a problem. Perhaps they think the associated physical and legal apparatus of the death penalty wastes millions of dollars that could go to crime prevention. Or they may feel that the death penalty is a racist, cruel, outdated and unevenly applied remedy that doesn't deter murderers nearly as well as any number of less final sentences would do. Or they may just hate the thought of anyone being killed on purpose.

A third group of moral abolitionists includes those who have never had the occasion to confront the question in a way that forced them to make a decision, one way or the other. They know that there are intelligent and dedicated advocates on both sides of the issue, and that many states (17 and counting) and over a hundred countries have abolished the death penalty. But they are also aware that there is strong emotional support for "the ultimate penalty." Moral abolitionists who want or need to form an opinion about the death penalty, do not have to toss a coin. They can just find out more about the

issue—not the moral arguments pro and con, but the readily available facts. There is no better alternative to ignorant moralizing about the death penalty, or thoughtless conformity with our friends, than just setting out to investigate the actual laws we have, the ways they are enforced, and the ways this system affects the lives of all those involved. It is hard to see how the death penalty will be able to survive this kind of investigation. (See <http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/death-penalty/us-death-penalty-facts>)

8. Conclusion. In this chapter we have examined some traditional moral issues and compared the reactions of the moralist and the moral abolitionist. My goal was definitely not to answer the related moral questions, but to suggest that we can make progress on these matters only when we have turned the moral questions into practical questions. Don't ask what you ought to do, decide what you will do. Moralism has almost destroyed our criminal justice system by fixating on desert. Moralists have confused us about our reproductive choices, and about almost everything else involving sex, by promoting patently false beliefs and sub-standard arguments. They have done these things with the goal of influencing decisions that have nothing to do with them, but that can influence, and sometimes ruin, the lives of complete strangers. In the next, and final, chapter we will add to our survey of the damage that can be done when we moralize about our interactions with humans, non-human animals, and the environment.

6. Conclusion. We started our inquiry in **Chapter One** by acknowledging the depressing state of our public moral discourse. Arguments about morality are ubiquitous, interminable, indecisive, ritualistic, and poisoned with self-interest and sophistry. After many hundreds of hours (or years) of inconclusive debate, it occurred to a few that something was amiss. When the simple belief that there is an objective and discoverable distinction between right and wrong was eventually called into question, the result, canvassed in **Chapter Two**, was a boisterous parade of anti-realists, relativists, skeptics, nihilists, determinists, subjectivists, amoralists, non-cognitivists, and error theorists, all dedicated to disturbing our comfortable certainty about morality.

Those who believe in a conscious, powerful, and demanding divinity, have an answer for the skeptics and amoralists. Morality depends on the will and the commands of their god. But we saw in **Chapter Three** that even if we assume that the world was created by a wise and powerful designer, it is still possible to ask, and difficult to answer, what I called **The Question**: “Why do we have a moral obligation to obey this being?” That unanswered question, and others, led us, in **Chapter Four**, to the search for a respectable secular morality. We were not impressed by the rationalists, and when we got to empiricism, the most sensible voice seemed to be that of David Hume. According to John Mackie, a 20th Century Humean, Hume’s “Objectification Theory” (his “projectivism”) is a part of the best explanation for the widespread but false belief that there are moral facts and/or properties.

If neither the rationalists nor the empiricists have managed to defend morality any better than the religious moralists, and if Mackie and Hume’s explanations of our moral beliefs and beliefs about morality are plausible, then moral realism is in trouble. But before rashly dumping all of “morality,” we paused to survey, in **Chapter Five**, some of the many answers offered to questions about good, bad, right, and wrong. Moral anti-realists don’t buy any of these answers, so by the end of the chapter we had generated an inventory of the various normative theories of value, obligation, and rights that make up the contents of the moral abolitionist’s intellectual dumpster.

Even after learning what we are going to abandon when we abandon morality, and why it may be a good idea to do so, we were not quite ready to start our new post-moral reflections because several objections to amoralism, the error theory, and even moral abolitionism had not yet been answered. So, in **Chapter Six**, we considered some of the peculiar and desperate things moral philosophers have said in order to defend morality against its traditional enemies. I then moved on to suggest that the worries of these philosophers are unwarranted because we can do quite well without what Mackie called “the moral overlay.” I concluded Chapter Six with a criticism of moral fictionalism, the idea that while moral judgments are all false, there are practical reasons for continuing to exploit them. However useful morality may have been in the past, if it is truly in error, as the error theorist insists, it will be available to encourage and defend destruction and atrocities unimaginable in previous centuries. This alone might make morality, in Nietzsche’s words, “the danger of dangers.” Plenty of powerful religious and political figures have insisted that their followers have a moral duty to destroy some country, or to abuse or even kill the members of some race, religion, or alternative persuasion. Our future will be much brighter if we can all stop our self-involved and combative moral posturing, develop a more realistic understanding of our conflicts of interest, and come up with ways to resolve them that are based on mutual respect and the best information we can get.

When we finally arrived at **Chapter Seven** we were officially “beyond morality.” Questions such as “What ought I do?” and “What is truly good?” were given a rest and we started asking “What shall I do?” and “What do I value?” By looking beyond morality we can tune in on some very wise advice by people who sound quite unlike the moralists we usually hear. For example, Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic Emperor, was just writing in his diary about his efforts to deal with the problems of state and with unreliable associates and relatives, and trying to figure out how to deal with life’s difficulties. He rarely wrote anything that was not framed as advice to himself, and we are fortunate to be able to listen in. Other helpful suggestions about emotions and desires flow in from Epicureans, Buddhists, Daoists, and from all those who have elaborated on and/or profited from that ancient wisdom.

The result of taking some of this advice seriously can be very positive, but we still needed to know how to apply these helpful suggestions in our own lives. That meant that we needed to take a close look at what happens when we do come to that “fork in the road.” We decide, of course, but how does that work? Our desire and emotions come in but, as I argued in **Chapter Eight**, decisions emerge, as do beliefs, from an unconscious “processor” that we do not completely control or even fully monitor. Decisions and beliefs are formed, as Malcolm Gladwell remarked, behind the locked door of our minds; and this is a good thing, because otherwise we might just paralyze ourselves trying to figure everything out, or we might get eaten (or beaten) because we were thinking when we should have been jumping.

I concluded that we will understand the decision process better if we become more familiar with what finds its way into this device, which I decided to call our “decider.” Chapter Eight contained a far-from-complete inventory of ways we have developed to influence decisions, ways to put in a good word, or several, to deciders. Each day we are bombarded with threats of punishment, promises of reward, warnings about possible consequences both natural and supernatural, deceptions, slogans, stories, jokes—the list is endless. We even use these methods on ourselves. If we want to change in ways that will make our lives more satisfying, then our best hope is to monitor, clarify, purify, understand, and regulate the input to our decider. We must make sure that our information is good information, that our sources are reliable, our influences are honorable, and that we are free of greed, anger, and inattention.

Of all the methods we have devised to advance our interests, language is our crowing achievement. It plays a role in the use of almost all the techniques discussed in Chapter Eight and its abuse and deliberate exploitation has expedited much of our misery. Language can function as a tool or a weapon, and it can both cause and cure confusion and error. Understanding the ways we are manipulated by those who use it as a weapon is a large part of becoming well, so in **Chapter Nine** I canvass some of the traps language sets for us, and examine three attempts to walk away from problems spawned by careless uses of words or by misguided questions. A deep understanding of the role language plays in the construction of our version of reality may be the very thing to help us walk around those traps and away from moralism.

The aim of those “methods of socialization” discussed in Chapter Eight and the point behind much of our talk is control. But there is a danger of being controlled by the desire for control, so it is wise to ask how much control we really want to have over others. How manipulative, how didactic, how demanding shall we be? Which of those “methods” shall we use, and how far shall we go in our use of them?

In **Chapter Ten**, after distinguishing between the “way of control” and the “way of harmony,” I claimed that we are almost all a bit heavy on the control side and I suggested that we can reach a balance by leaning in the direction of harmony. In order to “reprogram for harmony,” we have to begin by “looking carefully,” and that means undoing some of the damage caused by the overenthusiastic application of some of those methods of socialization. Fear, false beliefs, superstition, slogans, and propaganda have all done us harm, and it may take a while to recover from our “socialization.”

When we have recovered, and have managed to gain a relatively “clear view” of our world, our life, and our use of language, the next step is to learn to appreciate how well things can work if we are not always at the controls. Harmony comes when we know when to let things happen, when to let go and trust others. At this stage of our inquiry we are far beyond the thought that harmony needs a moral defense—to know it is to love it. But how do we come to know it? Since the answer is “practice,” I ended the chapter by suggesting several simple exercises that can give anyone who tries one of them a “taste” of harmony. Rather than proving that harmony is best, I just say, “Try it; you’ll like it.” Who can argue with that?

Earlier I said that these remarks about moving from control to harmony “complete the answer to the question of how it is possible, pleasant, and sociable to live beyond morality.” In **Chapters Eleven and Twelve** I moved on to show how moral abolitionists can navigate the hazardous waters of applied ethics at least as well as any moralist, and perhaps better because they do not have to carry a cargo of false beliefs heavy enough to sink a battleship.

I began Chapter Eleven with a quote from Albert Schweitzer, who said that “a man is truly ethical only when he obeys the compulsion to help all life which he is able to assist, and shrinks from injuring anything that lives.” I don’t think Schweitzer was using ‘ethical’ in the sense I have been promoting here. For him, “truly ethical” probably meant “truly moral,” but even so, an amoralist can hear and respond to this remark as a heartfelt plea to make this attitude a part of our *ethics* (now in *my* sense of the word). This attitude goes way beyond morality, and also beyond the ethics of all but a few. The goal of respecting *all* life may be beyond the reach of anyone reading (or writing) these words, but the idea of respecting life more than we currently do is beyond neither our comprehension nor our capacity. We may not be able to see all life as *sacred* (whatever that means), but we can come to *realize* (in my sense of *that* word) that it is *life*. Even that one thought can make a difference.

In these final two chapters we have seen how the moral abolitionist can stand side by side with moralists, address the same practical problems, and, freed from the need to embrace false hypotheses and beliefs, deal with these problems without being distracted by conflicting and often absurd rules and requirements. Whether dealing with matters of life and death, the distribution of resources, or the treatment of others, moral abolitionists come out looking more humane and practical than the moralists, who are too often unable to see, or admit, the precariousness of their rationalizations for trying to impose their will on those who do not share their principles. However certain they may feel, their moral judgments remain dependent on unsupported or even unintelligible assumptions. Unless they can stun their critics with their rhetoric, they face the same ridicule as anyone who is unable to process or tolerate the sincere doubts of others.

When we finally realize that the bondage the moralist insists upon is an illusion, we may think that we have been liberated and that now “everything is permitted.” We may feel cut loose, on our own, or, as some French philosopher more dramatically asserted, abandoned. But that too is an illusion. Without (or beyond) morality we do not float free, but are held in place by countless other laws, attachments, and forces. Moralists have always been more than willing to take credit for the order we have achieved, but we have seen that the role of morality in our actual choices is often minimal. At its core, morality is based on mistaken assumptions and confused concepts, so all those who take it seriously have doomed themselves to endless arguments, to idle and imaginative fantasizing about future consequences, and to conflicts of interest dressed as conflicts of principle. When people complain about the lack of values, they are usually complaining about the fact that other people fail to value the things they value, and they are presupposing that the things they value are the things that are truly valuable. When we finally get beyond morality, we leave all of this confusion and self-interested posturing behind. None of it is necessary and all of it is perplexing and distracting. Without morality we will have fewer reasons to object to the private acts of others or to censure them for doing, saying, or seeing things we would not do, say, or look at. We will back off and let others make the decisions that concern them, as we may hope to be allowed to make our own.

We are not going to get the world we want by arguing that war is morally wrong, that humans have inherent value, or that everyone deserves to be happy. Peace and happiness and the other things we all hope for will only come when we develop the habits and institutions that generate and nourish them—habits of cooperation and consideration, habits of generosity of thought and action and of yielding for the sake of harmony. These characteristics are easier to acquire when we have left the trackless jungle of morality behind us. They unfold as we attain a clear view and a deep understanding of the true character of our rules and principles, our institutions and conventions, our friends and fellow beings.

