

Moral Philosophy as the Century Turns

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In his paper, Judge Noonan has offered us a panorama of some of the important changes in moral thought that have occurred in the twentieth century, construing moral thought in a broad sense, and taking appellate court decisions, historical events, and sometimes the shifting doctrines of the Catholic Church as his clue. His central thesis, an optimistic one, is that this is the century in which the person – the sovereign individual, the bearer of individual rights and responsibilities – has become the measure of morality, the touchstone by which we judge actions and events. According to this measure or criterion, a good action, a just policy, an acceptable attitude must be one that respects the individual. That is to say, it must be one that treats the individual *not* as the member of a racial or religious or ethnic group, *not* as the embodiment of a particular sex or gender, *not* as the player of a pre-assigned role in the family or in society, but simply as a human being, whose decisions have weight and whose fate intrinsically matters. Judge Noonan also reviews some of the ways in which he believes this value must be balanced against the values of relationship and community. And in the final section of his paper, he explores some of the challenges that defenders of this criterion of value – and in some cases, of any criterion of value – will have to meet in the century to come.

My own remarks will for the most part be confined to moral philosophy in the more technical and specialized sense – the academic discipline of moral philosophy. This is certainly not because I disagree with Judge Noonan's view that members of a wide range of disciplines and professions have contributed to the moral debates of the twentieth century. It is in part because academic moral philosophy is what I am qualified to talk about, and in part because academic moral philosophy does not play

much of a role in Judge Noonan's account. My contribution will therefore be to say something about the progress of academic moral philosophy during the twentieth century and the tasks it faces in the century ahead. I will also notice where developments in the academic discipline intersect with the changes in cultural attitude that Judge Noonan describes.

Before I do that, however, I cannot resist saying a word about those changes in cultural attitude. I have described Judge Noonan's view as optimistic, primarily because the theory of value that he believes has come to predominate – the theory that takes the person as the measure – is one I endorse myself. If these changes have occurred, in my view, they are good ones. But his view also strikes me as optimistic in another sense – to be frank, overly optimistic. Judge Noonan's paper contains sections headed "The End of Race" "The End of Bigotry" and "The End of Gender." In these sections he argues that race, ethnicity, religion, and gender are no longer used as the measure of human value. There are two ways to understand this claim, each of which seems to me problematic.

If Judge Noonan means that race, ethnicity, and gender are no longer even implicitly used as a measure of human value – in the culture, by large numbers of people – then I think his view is wildly optimistic. I would have said, not that racism, bigotry, and sexism are no longer with us, but that it is no longer considered acceptable to acknowledge them openly – even, among educated people, to acknowledge them to ourselves. Racism, bigotry, and sexism have certainly not lost all of their power. In most forms, however, they have lost one important part of their power – they have lost *respectability*. That's a serious achievement, which has led to progress, especially in institutional life, where the fact that people are not permitted to voice certain attitudes can block the effects of those attitudes. But it is still only a tenuous achievement, a wedge, a foot in the door, upon which our hopes for the future must now rest. And not all forms of bigotry have even lost respectability. An egregious case is provided by the

still open hounding of homosexuals, even at the legislative level. A more subtle case is provided by the dominance of religious values over the practice of medical ethics.

On the other hand, if Judge Noonan means to point to theoretical advances, to attitudes embodied in philosophical and legal theory, then there is another problem. Judge Noonan proposes that it was the horrors in Europe between 1933 and 1945 that caused what he calls “the turn” to the use of the person as the measure of the moral. But the theory that the person is the measure of the moral is no twentieth century innovation. It dates back to the Enlightenment and the age of the French and American Revolutions. The view that each human being is an end in himself or herself, and that morality consists in respecting this value, is most clearly enshrined in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. And a similar view of the individual as the bearer of rights is often thought to have come into our own political culture by way of the philosophy of John Locke. Thus the question is not, as Judge Noonan appears to think, what happened in the twentieth century to turn our attention to the idea of the person as the measure. It’s rather why this idea, already present in European intellectual culture over two centuries ago, has been realized only in such a truncated and crippled form until so recently.

But let me turn to my own subject. Judge Noonan writes that “the preferred Anglo-American approach” to ethical debate “is to use definition, linguistic analysis, and logic.” While I hope that we will never abandon logic, the use of definition and linguistic analysis were the predominant methods of moral philosophizing in English-speaking countries only during the middle portion of the twentieth century, from the late thirties until the early seventies. A style of moral philosophizing that clearly descends from this period is certainly still practiced today, by such philosophers as Allan Gibbard and Simon Blackburn, but it can no longer be described as the only or predominant approach.¹

¹ Major works by the authors mentioned in the text will be found in the bibliography.

I will begin by charting the changes in question. In the early part of the twentieth century, Anglo-American moral philosophy was dominated by the issues raised in G. E. Moore's influential book, *Principia Ethica*, first published (conveniently for the historian) in 1903. The predominant ethical theory then and for many years to come was utilitarianism, the theory that the right action is the one that maximizes the balance of pleasure over pain, adding up the pleasures and pains of everyone affected by the action. This theory was Moore's target, and he took aim at it by arguing that "good" does not mean "pleasant." In fact, he argued, any attempt to define "good" falls afoul of the (misnamed) "naturalistic fallacy" – the fallacy of believing that "good" can be defined in any naturalistic, or indeed any non-moral or non-normative terms.² When we say that something is good we imply that it ought to be brought about or pursued. But Moore argued that for any natural or metaphysical quality put forward as the defining characteristic of the good, it is an open question – an intelligible question, worth asking – whether things with that characteristic really ought to be brought about or pursued. When we have established that an action maximizes pleasure, for instance, we have not rendered it self-evident and unquestionable that the action ought to be done. "Good" is indefinable, Moore argued, and, as a corollary to that, value must be understood as an intrinsic rather than a relational property. That is, the good cannot be defined relationally as that which someone desires or that which someone enjoys. Good things must be good in themselves.

The first fruit of Moore's influence was an interesting but now largely forgotten debate about the nature of value, carried on in the works of W. D. Ross, H. A. Prichard, C. I. Lewis, Ralph Barton Perry, and others. Some of these philosophers took up the question whether value is a relational or an intrinsic property and some challenged the exhaustiveness of this distinction. Others used the tools developed by Moore himself to

² The "naturalistic fallacy" is misnamed because Moore believed that his argument showed that not only "naturalistic" definitions of "good" but also "metaphysical" ones are impossible.

challenge Moore's own acceptance of that element of utilitarianism that later came to be called "consequentialism" - the idea that the right is that which promotes the good.³ But Moore's question about the definability of goodness intersected, not accidentally, with broader trends in philosophy which were destined to change the shape of the subject.⁴

The period starting in the late nineteen thirties and forties was the age of what we might call "high" analytic philosophy. Suppose we view philosophy as the study of the most fundamental ideas which human beings use to conceptualize the world, in order to understand it, predict and control it, and act in it. It is the business of philosophy to raise questions about the ideas of good and evil, of reason, cause, substance, space, time and number, of mind and body, of event and action – the most basic concepts with which both everyday reasoning and the special sciences must start. Then we may say, albeit with great oversimplification, that the focus of modern philosophy has shifted slightly, over the last few centuries, in the following way. The eighteenth century saw the central questions of philosophy as concerned with the intellectual sources of these fundamental concepts – whether they arise from the activity of reason or from sense experience. The nineteenth century added a new concern with the historical genealogy or evolution of fundamental concepts. And the twentieth century turned its focus to the analysis of fundamental concepts, or, as the early twentieth century philosophers would much prefer to say, the analysis of language. Empiricism – originally the doctrine that all ideas come from experience – shifted in the early twentieth century from a view about the sources of our concepts to a

³ Ross and Prichard's views on the irreducibility of the notion of rightness are still remembered, but the debate about value in which those views were situated has been forgotten.

⁴ Not accidentally, because Moore himself was one of the founders of analytic philosophy.

view about their contents, about how they are to be analyzed.⁵ According to the “verificationist” theory of meaning popular among Logical Empiricists, a concept’s content is given by the way its application would be empirically verified, by the experiences we would use to tell whether the concept applies or not. This view, popularized by A. J. Ayer’s book *Language, Truth, and Logic* in the late thirties, raised important questions about moral language, for the applicability of moral concepts, of good and bad and right and wrong, cannot be empirically verified. Under the influence of verificationism, early twentieth century philosophers came to doubt whether moral concepts had what they called “cognitive content” at all. This is one philosophical expression of the famous Fact/Value distinction, and it sparked a debate about what the function of moral language is, if it is not to report facts about the world. Various “non-cognitivist” proposals about the nature of moral language were explored. Prescriptivists, led by R. M. Hare in his book *The Language of Morals*, held that moral language is essentially prescriptive or imperative. Emotivists held that moral language is used to express our approval and disapproval of actions, and that moral judgments are no more true or false than cheering or booing are true or false. By the nineteen fifties, this view, especially in the form in which it was propounded by Charles Stevenson in *Ethics and Language*, was the prevalent moral theory in the United States.

Whatever its merits in other areas – and they are considerable – the high analytic period was something of a disaster for moral philosophy. The view that moral language is merely used to express attitudes or influence actions seems to most people and many philosophers to deprive morality of its objectivity and authority. Furthermore, the purveyors of these views believed that the business of moral philosophy is to explain the use of moral language *rather than* to say what is right or wrong. In the mid-twentieth century philosophers occasionally said with a certain

⁵ I don’t mean to take any stand here on the interesting question whether one may believe a concept comes from experience without believing it must be analyzed in terms of experience –

amount of huff that it is not the function of the moral philosopher to moralize or to preach. Thus in spite or perhaps because of the moral horrors of the mid-twentieth century, moral philosophy held itself aloof from its ancient ambition of providing ethical guidance for human beings. In an irresistibly quotable moment (Judge Noonan also quotes this remark in his paper) Bernard Williams wrote in 1972 that “Contemporary moral philosophy has found an original way of being boring, which is by not discussing moral issues at all.”⁶

Of course this is an exaggeration; even in the period of high analytic philosophy, the analysis of moral language was not the only thing that moral philosophers did. Moral philosophers continued to take sides in the central debate that the two previous centuries had bequeathed to us: the debate between “consequentialism” – the view that the measure of an action’s rightness is the quantity of good that it produces – and “deontology” – variously described as the view that the right is independent of the good, the view that there are “side constraints” on the pursuit of the good, the view that the right takes precedence over the good, or even the view that the good is defined after and in terms of the right. This confusion about how to describe deontology, I should note, is significant. Consequentialism (in its utilitarian form) had become so prevalent by the early twentieth century that the opposing school of thought had to define itself more or less reactively, as being “not-consequentialist.” The original utilitarians of the eighteenth century, especially Bentham, had argued that everyone in fact accepts the consequentialist criterion of right action; that is, everyone agrees that it is important and normally right to maximize the production of the good.⁷ The difference between consequentialists and deontologists, they claimed, is that consequentialists think this is all there is to morality, while deontologists think that something else – say, justice, rights, integrity, or fidelity – matters too. The burden of proof is therefore on the

that is, the question whether these slightly different forms of empiricism are separable.

⁶ Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, p. x.

deontologist to show that these values cannot be grounded in consequentialist considerations, and to offer an alternative grounding for them. Through the middle years of the twentieth century this view about the burden of proof was widely accepted even by those who rejected consequentialism. As a result, debate tended to take the form of efforts to refute consequentialism.

Some moral philosophers, probably more than philosophers in other fields, also continued to study the history, the classics, of the subject. As Judge Noonan notes, in moral philosophy we do not ignore the teachers of the past. But analytic philosophy in its early years was a self-consciously iconoclastic movement, and many of its practitioners were prepared to reject the achievements of previous centuries as nonsensical views that were based on linguistic confusion or that merely expressed the moral prejudices of their day. In this atmosphere the study of the history of philosophy did not flourish; it became a scholarly discipline existing on the sidelines of philosophy itself, not integrated with ongoing efforts at philosophical reflection. One was either a philosopher or an historian of philosophy, but not both.⁸ When philosophers working on “contemporary problems” did mention the great thinkers of the past, it was often with a stereotyped and oversimplified conception of what they had said in view.⁹

With the publication of John Rawls’s book *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, all of this began to undergo a radical change. In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls presents an answer to the question: what principles of justice should govern a liberal society? In order to explain the impact of this book, it is necessary to provide a brief sketch of its contents.

⁷ Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Chapters I and II.

⁸ As late as 1978 when I first went on the job market with a dissertation defending Kant’s ethics in hand, the philosophers who interviewed me kept asking me *which was I doing – was I doing philosophy or was I doing history of philosophy?* and my refusal to answer this question was sometimes seen as evasive.

⁹ A notable and underappreciated exception is W. D. Falk, whose work brought traditional thinkers such as Aristotle, Hume, and Kant into conversation with the emotivists and prescriptivists of his day.

The book consists of three parts. In the first part, Rawls proposes two principles of justice. The first is that the citizen of a liberal society should have the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a like liberty for all citizens. The second principle has two parts. The first part specifies that the other goods distributed by a liberal society – economic and social goods – should be distributed equally, unless an unequal distribution is to the benefit of everyone, and especially to the benefit of those who will fall on the low side of the inequality. So for instance it might be justified to attach higher incomes to demanding professions such as medicine, in order to attract talent, provided that those who as a result have lower incomes benefit from the fact that talented people take up the demanding professions – say because that leads to better medical care for everyone. The second part of the second principle specifies that inequalities such as higher incomes should be attached only to positions and offices that are open to everyone, under policies that aggressively guarantee fair equality of opportunity. The general idea is that society should be so designed that it is to the benefit of each and every citizen – not to the benefit of the citizens taken collectively or additively, as in utilitarianism, but to rather to the benefit of each citizen individually.

To defend these principles, Rawls turns to the social contract tradition in political philosophy, and, in his own words, carries it to a higher order of abstraction.¹⁰ While the social contract theory held that government is justified by the fact that people agree to live under it, Rawls held that principles of justice themselves could be justified by showing that they are the ones citizens of a liberal society would agree to have govern the institutions under which they live. The argument is intended to work from the basic assumptions of liberalism itself – that people are equal in the sense that they should have an equal voice in decisions, and that the purpose of social life is not to impose some particular conception of the good life on all citizens, but rather to provide the resources for each person to pursue his or her own conception of the good. Rawls

¹⁰ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. viii.

argues, then, that citizens eager to pursue their own conception of the good, but acknowledging one another's equality, would choose his two principles.

In the second part of the book, Rawls examines the sort of social and economic institutions that might meet the criteria set by the two principles defended in the first part. He also takes up questions of civil disobedience and conscientious objection that could hardly be ignored in a book about justice published on the heels of the war in Vietnam and the campus disorders of the sixties. In general, Rawls and the other late twentieth century moral philosophers who returned the subject to the discussion of substantive moral issues were strongly motivated by the moral perplexities and horrors of the Vietnam War.¹¹

In the third part of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls presents a theory of the good, with a view to explaining among other things why justice as he conceives it is a good. He also takes up questions of moral psychology and moral education. He speculates about the kind of community which would develop in a society of the sort he envisions; and about the kinds of attitudes people would be likely to develop towards one another and towards justice itself. Although not a complete account of moral philosophy, *A Theory of Justice* is one of the most systematic and complete philosophical accounts of political morality ever produced.

It is difficult to overestimate the revitalizing effect which this book had on the practice of moral philosophy - the recovery of the discipline's self-confidence to which it led. *A Theory of Justice* was translated into nearly every European language as well as several Asian languages within a few years of its publication.¹² Here was a philosopher

¹¹ For an example, see Thomas Nagel's essay "War and Massacre" in his collection *Mortal Questions*.

¹² In his essay "The Fate and Meaning of Political Philosophy in Our Century" for this volume, Pierre Manent claims that there has been no political philosopher of stature in this century, and that traditional political philosophy has withered away. Rawls is not mentioned in his essay. Given the worldwide enthusiasm for Rawls's work, I find this puzzling, and I mean here to contest Manent's claims.

making substantive moral claims about what society should be like, a philosopher offering moral guidance. Here was a philosopher speaking to the issues of the day as well as the basic eternal issues. Here was a powerful alternative to consequentialism. And the values which the book champions – the values for which it provides a foundation – are precisely the ones Judge Noonan identifies in his account of the turn to the person as the measure. In his argument for the two principles of justice, Rawls insists that when we perform the thought experiment of imagining citizens choosing their own principles, we should imagine that these citizens do not even know what their own race, religion, or gender is, so that they will be forced to favor principles which are advantageous to each person regardless of these matters.

It is also important to understanding the book's influence to appreciate something my sketch will have failed to convey. *A Theory of Justice* shows at every turn Rawls's deep knowledge of the historical classics of moral philosophy, and his ability to find in these classics resources for constructing new theories or new versions of old ones. Kant, Hume, Hobbes, Rousseau, Mill, Marx, and Aristotle inhabit its pages, often in the background but certainly present, as figures from whom we are to learn. This reflects an important point about Rawls's own teaching. For several decades, graduate students in moral philosophy who came to Harvard studied the classics of moral philosophy with Rawls. Many went on to do philosophy that was intended to put the resources of the tradition to work in ongoing philosophical reflection.¹³ Rawls had an especially strong influence on the study of Kant, and a number of contemporary Kantians, including Barbara Herman, Thomas Hill, Jr., Onora O'Neill, and myself were students of Rawls. Although Rawls's influence is a major source of this return to the classics of the subject, it is not the only one. It is part of a more general reaction against the sterility of mid-century moral philosophy. The Aristotelian tradition in

¹³ A representative collection of historical writing in moral philosophy by Rawls's students may be found in *Reclaiming the History of Ethics: Essays for John Rawls*.

ethics had been kept alive by Catholic thinkers and at the British Universities, and it has many proponents today. The Hobbesian tradition has been revitalized by David Gauthier in his book *Morals by Agreement*. The “non-cognitivists” of the analytic tradition claimed Hume, who believed moral judgments are grounded in sentiment, as a forerunner. But Hume has also been claimed as an ally of feminist ethics by influential contemporary Humeans such as Annette Baier. Thus, in the last third of the once-ahistorical twentieth century, moral philosophers are at work on contemporary versions of many of the important theories of the tradition.

Moral philosophy’s recovery of its confidence in its ability to provide moral guidance coincided with events that produced pressure from outside for philosophy of exactly this sort. Partly in the wake of Watergate, there was suddenly both interest in and financial support for programs in practical ethics. Courses and programs in medical, biomedical, and business ethics sprang up all across America and in many European countries. Institutes devoted to practical ethics were formed; in some cases, philosophers have even been hired as ethical consultants in hospital wards, or called upon to testify in court cases or before Congress. Unfortunately, however, a sort of sociological division has existed from the start between those who study what is now called “practical” or “applied” ethics and ethical theorists, to the detriment of both. Much of practical ethics remains rather simple-minded, while theorists lose the enrichment that comes from attempting to work out the ramifications of a philosophical outlook for practical issues. There are a variety of reasons for this division, but the one I will mention concerns a theoretical issue – the prevalence of an unsophisticated notion of what is involved in applying a principle to a case. It is commonly assumed that one may simply see whether a principle applies to a case without any knowledge of the theory in which the concepts employed in that principle are imbedded. The parallel case of applying civil laws should have taught us why this cannot be right, but the

illusion persists.¹⁴ Overcoming the division between the two sides of ethics is one of the tasks that faces us in the century ahead.

The last thing I have to say about the legacy of Rawls brings me at the same time to another of the things I shall have to say about the tasks of moral philosophy in the twenty-first century. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, moral philosophy in the English-speaking world has been dominated by a set of empiricist assumptions in two areas – the areas of metaphysics and of moral psychology. Let me speak first of metaphysics. Anglo-American empiricism still retains from the eighteenth century a view about who its opponent is and a picture of what the disagreement is about. According to this view, empiricism's opponent is rationalism, and the disagreement is about how human beings learn about a conceptual structure which is supposedly already present in the world. Empiricists, according to this view, believe that the only way to discover what the world really consists in is through the process of scientific theory-construction – anything that cannot be uncovered through this process is not part of the “real.” A striking example is provided by a group of philosophers mentioned by Judge Noonan, who believe that no mental item which does not play an essential role in neuroscientific explanations can be worth talking about. Motives and intentions, and the moral values which characterize them, are dislodged from the realm of the real by this picture. As a result, moral values are deemed to be, in John Mackie's famous phrase, “queer entities” that do not fit into the naturalistic conception of the world.¹⁵ Traditional Rationalists, by contrast, believe that some of the conceptual structure of the world is already built into the human mind and can be grasped as self-evident – our a priori grasp of mathematical truth, which nevertheless applies to the outside world, is often offered as an example. Behind this construal of the basic disagreement is an unconsciously held view about what human concepts are for,

¹⁴ I have explored this problem further in “Two Arguments against Lying” in my collection *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*.

namely, the view that all of our concepts are in the business of describing the world. According to this view, the world has a pre-given conceptual structure of its own, and the business of our concepts is to duplicate that structure. This, I believe, is the basic assumption behind metaphysical realism, a view which has become a topic of much discussion in philosophy in recent years.

The assumption behind realism was already denied by Immanuel Kant two centuries ago. Kant saw human concepts as relativized to the basic cognitive tasks of human life, understanding and volition. According to Kant, the business of theoretical concepts is not simply to describe the world, but to constitute it as something understandable, something we can find our way around in. The world presents us with a mass of sensations which our basic concepts serve to organize into a coherent environment. In a parallel way, the business of practical concepts is to constitute ourselves as autonomous rational agents with wills. The question whether we should use concepts like intention, action, good, and evil is not a question about whether they are needed for neuroscientific explanations, but a question about whether they form part of a conceptual scheme which is essential to our functioning as practically rational agents. In Kant's view, we are as much rational agents as we are scientific knowers, and the conceptual scheme associated with our lives as knowers should not take precedence over that associated with our lives as agents. If anything, we are rational agents in a deeper way, for seeking scientific knowledge is a form of deliberate action, and action also gives knowledge its point. If Kant is right in supposing, as he did, that the conception of ourselves as rational agents and the conception of ourselves as moral beings are inseparable, then the moral view of the world cannot be regarded as something layered on top of the scientific view, which might possibly be peeled away. Thus Kant's view of our conceptual life is completely different from that of both traditional rationalism and empiricism. But throughout the nineteenth and the first

¹⁵ Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, p. 38.

part of the twentieth century most English-speaking moral philosophers read Kant as if he were a traditional Rationalist. The deeper difference between Kant and the dominant empiricism, and its radical implications for moral thought, was therefore overlooked. In fact, the English-speaking world to this extent simply failed to consider the Kantian alternative until very recent years.

In the years that followed the publication of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls was pressed to explain the metaphysical conception behind his account of justice, and the development of his thought on this point came in two stages. At the first stage, he distanced his conception of the metaphysics of justice firmly from traditional rationalistic realism. He at first identified his theory as a form of Kantian constructivism, meaning that moral concepts and principles are constructed to serve our basic cognitive tasks, or to solve cognitive problems.¹⁶ At the second stage, Rawls turned to a still more radical view. He came to recognize that no controversial metaphysical view could serve as the foundation for liberal principles, since members of a liberal society differ about – among other things – metaphysics. But the idea that our most basic concepts and principles are constructed to carry out fundamental cognitive tasks opens up a less controversial possibility: namely, that we can also construct concepts and principles for dealing with more mundane tasks. The concept of justice names a problem, the problem of how the benefits and burdens of social life should be distributed in a society. The principles of liberal justice are constructed as a solution to this problem suitable for a liberal society. The question to ask about them is not whether they are true, but whether they represent the best solution. The principles of justice for a liberal society may in this way be put on a foundation of “political constructivism.”¹⁷

¹⁶ This is not the way Rawls himself describes constructivism. See his “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory” (1980) reprinted in *John Rawls: Collected Papers*.

¹⁷ For these developments see “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical” (1985) reprinted in *John Rawls: Collected Papers*, and Rawls’s second book, *Political Liberalism*.

This second move, the turn to political constructivism, offers a possible solution to the old problem how a liberal government may be justified to all of the citizens in the pluralistic society it is supposed to permit. To put it in more popular terms, it provides a way of answering the charge that liberalism must be grounded in a metaphysical conception of its own, a doctrine of “secular humanism” which is “just another religion.” Rawls’s proposal has sparked a great deal of discussion about the nature of liberalism and its metaphysical commitments. But my concern here is with the first step, Rawls’s unearthing of the idea of Kantian constructivism, and its importance not for political but for moral philosophy. Constructivism has offered us a new metaphysical option, a way of believing in determinate moral values without believing that the world contains mysterious moral facts. Values arise from the application of principles which in turn are essential to our constitution as rational agents. But, as I have suggested, constructivism emerges from a deep philosophical conception of the nature and function of human conceptual life in general. The defender of moral constructivism must be willing to defend this conception. And its attacker, of course, must be willing to defend the opposite view.

This sets one of the tasks of moral philosophy in the century to come. In his Presidential Address to the American Philosophical Association in 1974, Rawls made a plea for what he called “the independence of moral theory.”¹⁸ We have seen how in the twentieth century morality had come under attacks inspired by work in other parts of philosophy. Philosophers of language argued that moral language lacks respectable descriptive meaning, or “cognitive content.” Philosophers in the grip of empiricist metaphysics claimed that moral values are queer entities that do not fit into the scientific world view. As against these attacks, Rawls argued that “for the present, anyway” moral theory should and could be carried on independently of the rest of

¹⁸ See Rawls, “The Independence of Moral Theory” (1975) reprinted in *John Rawls: Collected Papers*.

philosophy. Rawls certainly did show us how to make progress in moral theory, but my own view is that the time for independence is over. An important task of moral philosophy now, I believe, is to reintegrate itself into philosophy in general. Indeed this task has already begun in the work of some of the other influential moral philosophers of the last third of the twentieth century. I will mention in particular Thomas Nagel and Bernard Williams, both of whom imbed their moral philosophy in a more general philosophical outlook. In the work of these two philosophers, the integration of moral philosophy into philosophy in general does not take the form it has taken through so much of the twentieth century, in which other branches of philosophy dictate the metaphysical, epistemological, and linguistic limits within which moral philosophy must function. In their work, the influence runs both ways – the need to explain morality and its role in our lives also sets constraints on our views about metaphysics and the workings of the mind.

A second area in which empiricist assumptions have dominated at least English-speaking moral philosophy is that of moral psychology. Here again, Anglo-American empiricism retains from the eighteenth century a view about who its opponent is and a picture of what the disagreement is about. In this case, the rationalist opponent supposedly believes that human beings can be motivated by pure reason, while the empiricist insists that all motivation must be rooted in passion or desire. And here again, there is another option, obscurely present in Kant, but more clearly present in ancient Greek philosophy – namely, that reason, desire, and emotion all play distinct roles in the economy of the mind and the motivation of intentional action, and so are in no way rivals. Pursuing this alternative promises to shed light on the deep and still unsolved problem of what an action is, how actions are different from other events, and therefore why actions are essentially subject to moral evaluation.

A related issue, with which I will end, concerns the philosophy of personal relationships. Since the beginnings of modern moral philosophy in the mid-seventeenth

century, moral and political philosophy have developed hand in hand. The natural law theorists of the seventeenth century, such as Grotius, Pufendorf, and Hobbes, thought of morality as governing our relationships as citizens, or at least as fellow members of society, and hardly distinguished moral from political thought. While the two disciplines were more separate in the eighteenth century, the nineteenth century utilitarians brought them back together again. Throughout the modern period, friendship and more generally personal relationships – an important topic in ancient Greek philosophy – has been almost completely neglected. While feminist thought in our own century has helped to bring the topic back into view, one still finds in the literature an implicit assumption that our relations as fellow citizens and fellow human beings is a matter of reason and morality, while our relations as friends, lovers, spouses, parents, and children is a matter of emotion and affection. This way of conceiving the difference between the two sorts of relationships – too simple and too stark – is an offshoot of the psychological view described above – the view of reason and passion as rival forces – and, in my view, it requires revision along with it. In any case, if moral philosophy continues to aspire to deal with matters that are really important to human beings, this ancient and neglected topic is one that needs reawakening.

I have mentioned the development of a more subtle view of the relationship between theoretical and practical ethics, the development of a more sophisticated moral psychology, the renewal of philosophical reflection about personal relationships, and, above all, a reexamination of the question of nature and function of human concepts, as tasks now facing moral philosophy. Disparate as they sound, these are not unrelated ideas. Twentieth century thought has, I believe, been dominated by the idea that the real world is the world described by science, together with the suspicion that the belief in moral values may be a mere superstition, and an unexamined view that we could set this “superstition” aside and still be recognizably ourselves. In my view, this could not be more wrong. When we focus our attention on the nature of action and the

psychology behind it, on the nature of human relationships and the practical requirements to which they give rise, and on the role of moral concepts in governing our own constitution as agents, we will see that morality is something too deeply imbedded in human life to be set aside on the grounds of a supposedly scientific skepticism. But the work of showing this in detail is yet to be done.

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