

1 What are good morals?

Most of us hold strong moral opinions and make daily judgements of right and wrong. At the same time, moral philosophy is often regarded as a strange topic with no practical relevance. Yet the conclusions of moral philosophy have a great influence on the morals we practice. Even if we do not obey all commandments, but reserve individual freedom of judgement, we are definitely affected by these rules; our exemption does not eliminate their general principles. The choice of moral principles is therefore extremely important, and not something to be left for bishops' synods, ethical committees or worrisome philosophers.

What, then, is good or bad morality? The Sermon on the Mount, in the Gospel of St. Luke, gives an answer which not only is central to Christians, but has had an impact on many secularized attitudes:

"Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you.

And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek, offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloak, forbid not to take thy coat also.

Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods, ask them not again.

And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.

For if ye love them which love you, what thanks have ye? For sinners also love those that love them.

And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thanks have ye? For sinners also do even the same.

And if ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thanks have ye? For sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again.

But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again..."

The message is admirably clear. We should selflessly stand up for our fellow human beings on every occasion. Any other behavior belongs to an essentially lower level - indeed, it is doubtful whether actions in hope of reciprocation display morality at all. The highest moral principle is selflessness, a stance which in more philosophical terms is called altruism. The latter word implies both indifference to personal gain, and active self-sacrifice for others. Most such pleas are less drastic than the Sermon on the Mount, but the judgement is always the same: altruism is good.

In addition to believers, many skeptics about the Bible's holiness as well as God's existence are attracted by this message. Their objections are usually of the type: "A bit unrealistic, but still something to strive for. A fine alternative that ought to be actively supported."

Humanism is a philosophical world-view which arose during the Renaissance and set human values against divine ones. The human values

that earned praise were primarily those of refined culture in antiquity. Philosophy points increasingly to high ideals, beauty and goodness; it is not God we should serve, but art and poetry. The mainstream of humanism, too, advocates opposition to selfishness and encourages sacrifice for loftier goals.

The fundamental principle of communist society is: "From each according to his means, and to each according to his needs." Much else in Marxism is seriously compromised today, yet this ideal must be shared by countless democratic socialists, besides communists. Many non-socialists also maintain that they have no quarrel with the ideals of socialism, but do object to its methods. Their vision has more in common with Paradise than with the Gulag Archipelago.

What the Christian-humanist-socialist tradition upholds is praise of higher ideals when these conflict with a strong, but stifling, egoism. An intensive program of enlightenment is needed to make people widen their perspectives and see the total picture. To become "converted" or "politically aware" is a long step forward in the process.

Science has progressed enormously in understanding the world and ourselves. This has had very little effect on moral theory. While religious metaphysics has been repulsed in its claim to explain how the world looks, the authority to say how the world ought to look has not, remarkably enough, declined as much. Science's achievements and solid reputation have enjoyed certain marketing effects, as is indicated by terms like "scientific socialism" and "Christian science" - but these are only superficial labels. Jesus remains the motor in the Christian machine, and communistic aims are fairly similar in all versions of socialism. Few believers welcome being called utopians, since their ideal is not a dream but a guaranteed future. True utopia is no utopia.

Apart from those of deep faith, there is a far larger group who agree that the goal is a utopia which will never be realized, yet who think that a small step toward utopia is an advance. In a hard world, it is worth recounting an exemplary tale about Comrade Stachanov's superhuman working-day or Mother Teresa's labors in the slums. The chances of the example being followed completely are low, but it can motivate a handout to "Save the Children". This reasoning is sharply challenged by the present book. Is the purpose of morality just to whet our fantasy? Alternatively, it could face the issue of which actual rules are good or bad in practice, and could be used as concrete guidance rather than as vague idealism.

Another focal problem is that of judging acts by their effects. Do good intentions lead to good acts? Here it is indispensable to connect morality with reality. Fragments of reality are all around us, but difficult to generalize from correctly. Reality is complex and can be viewed from diverse standpoints, so a deeper understanding often requires more than a static scenario - it demands a grasp of causality. Darwinism is a candidate well equipped to show why reality looks as it does.

To the great majority, Darwinism is a better description of the

origins of life on earth than the story of Genesis is - not due to higher literary qualities, or to its moral implications, but simply because we believe it is more true. However, when mankind enters the picture, Darwinism has been chased out. At some time between the first stone axe and the first pyramid, we assume, the Natural Condition faded away and Civilization strode in.

Bringing Darwin into the moral debate is thus a grave breach of etiquette, and nonetheless essential. By using the knowledge we have about nature, we can obtain clearer insight into ourselves. We were, after all, and still are, a part of nature. In order to learn about mankind, it may seem tedious to observe our relatives instead of directly confronting ourselves. Descriptive knowledge gathered by studying objects other than those of chief interest does, to be sure, involve a detour. Yet knowledge of causal rules is frequently vast in scope: the law of gravitation applies to much more than Newton's apple, and is easiest to comprehend in elementary instances. Might the laws of animal behavior also account for a good deal of human behavior? One ambition of this book is to demonstrate that such is the case, and that many human actions can find a more subtle understanding in a Darwinian perspective.

Once the Darwinian mechanisms are explained, we have a basis for assessing the possibilities and values of altruistic utopias. Could it be that they are neither possible nor desirable? That a discrepancy exists between morals and real actions is denied by few of us, a common apology being the Biblical saying that "the spirit is strong, but the flesh is weak". Even Jesus had trouble in living up to the ideals of the Gospel of St. Luke. Does this discrepancy between reality and altruistic morality yield the positive effects which are conventionally claimed? Do exhortations to self-sacrifice for other people and lofty goals make the world any better?

The answers are by no means obvious, and depend heavily on what altruistic actions have contributed in practice. Can we imagine altruism making the world worse? Jesus lives on as a paragon even if God has died or retired. One should ask oneself whether altruistic morality deserves the well-intentioned respect it receives from all those who doubt the truth in the rest of Revelation. Are there other, preferable grounds on which to build morality than Christian, or secularized, altruism? This is to challenge habitual notions that most of us have not questioned, and the issues can thus be termed fundamental. We hope that the present book will stimulate fruitful reflection.

A work which begins by discussing the ultimate underpinnings of morality has a long way to go before reaching specific conclusions. But to stop at general principles is frequently disappointing and may arouse the response: "So what?" Principles are tools for obtaining results, and without such a sequel it is tempting to wonder how much has been achieved. Unless some practical lessons are drawn, the suspicion that none exist is not implausible. In order to avoid this unhappy outcome, we have chosen to connect the moral principles with personal, social, and political consequences.

By so doing, we open a door to other objections. Many readers will be opposed to certain normative inferences, for various reasons which need not have to do with moral philosophy, since different views of particular problems can lead to different conclusions. A predictable source of criticism is the view that caution - or seeking the truth on tiptoe - is the supreme strategy. Darwinism is still not accepted in the social sciences, and Darwinistic commentators are accordingly often both careful and reverential. Most biologists arrive at quite conventional normative conclusions after reporting on a science that stands in blatant contrast to the Christian-humanistic perspective. Having indulged in a bit of free-thinking, they end with an oath of loyalty to the established throne and altar.

We regard a cautious approach as intellectually indefensible; nor do we believe that it can be tactically successful. Hence we prefer to risk erring in the other direction, by drawing conclusions that are relevant to the reader's views on important social issues. Our aim is not to win approval in every case, but to show what far-reaching consequences follow from one's attitude toward the claim of altruism to be the best kind of morality.