

7. Modern Ethics

It is quite possible that the horrendous plagues of the mid-3rd century fundamentally changed Roman culture. In its aftermath, cults flourished and from amongst them, one, Christianity, rose to become the state religion. Over a millennium later, we have some evidence that a devastating plague played a part in yet another cultural transformation.

The Church in 15th century Europe had a monopoly on education. Its rituals were elaborate, its priests were powerful and it denied ordinary people access to its sacred texts. In all these respects it resembled the Pagan temple of ancient Rome. After the Black Death, which swept through Europe from the 1340s, Church authority crumbled and a new spirit of free enquiry sparked to life. At the same time, new towns and new professions opened up and expanded.

In 1453, Constantinople, the last remnant of the Roman state, fell to a Turkish invasion from the East. This may have had a symbolic and psychological effect. In Italy, the timing seems to connect it with a revival of interest in classical culture. The new bloom of classical art has become known by the French world for rebirth, the *renaissance*.

The Prince and the Politician

Machiavelli was a prominent member of the political elite in the city of Florence. He was present at the overthrow of its monarch in 1498 and was the Secretary of the Republican government for all 14 years of its existence. When the monarchy was restored he was arrested, imprisoned and tortured. It is thought that soon after his release, he began work on a book that would redeem him in the eyes of his new masters.

The region was ruled by a new financial aristocracy. Florence was in the domain of the Medici's and the City was given over to its younger members to govern. Some, particularly those educated by the renaissance scholars, may well have dreamed of building a new Roman empire. At the very least they dreamed of a new Kingdom of Italy, strong enough to rival the centralised western states of Spain and France. In *The Prince*, published in 1516, Machiavelli offers a manual of statecraft, built on a view of human nature with profound ethical implications.

The gist of the message is this: a moral conscience is an unnecessary hindrance to the only task worthy of a good Prince, the unbridled pursuit of power. To be loved by the people may be a good thing, but only in so far as it makes ruling easier. To be feared is far more important. People are largely gullible and cowardly, he says, so it is possible to pose as a saviour and use fear to hold a society together.

While Machiavelli dreamed of a unified and stable Italy, a new mercantile nation was rising in the north. England at the beginning of the 16th century was a centralised state, and while Italy's intellectuals looked back on ancient glories, England had visionaries who looked to the future.

Thomas More was a successful Politician. While working at the heart of English government he wrote a book that was only published abroad in his lifetime, and only in Latin. It was called *Utopia*, and it set out a vision of a meticulously organised alternative society.

The island of Utopia, has the feel of a kind of Socialism, with equality, welfare and no private property. There is also equal representation at every level of government. Yet there are some curious moral elements. Premarital sex is punishable by enforced celibacy, and travelling without a permit punishable by enslavement. For all the joys and virtues of life on Utopia, it is not shared by

foreigners and criminals, who are allocated to the people as slaves, two to every household.

While all religions are permitted on the island, atheism is not. More assumes that those who don't fear of God have no morals. Such people would abuse the system, which is communal, and hence vulnerable to greedy individuals. Atheists are treated with sympathy but are subjected to a strange kind of punishment. They are placed in the hands of priests until they change their mind.

More himself was familiar with the power of priestly attention and didn't have much sympathy for dissenters. In the service of King Henry VIII of England he presided over the destruction of Bible's written in English and the persecution of those who read or distributed them. His Politician's loyalty however, was tested when the King switched sides. He was executed for his opposition. Soon afterwards, copies of *Utopia* were published in English.

Notice how *Utopia* differs from *the Prince*. More is not concerned for the acquisition of power by an individual, benevolent or otherwise. Nor is he concerned with the education of rulers. His book appears in history at the moment when centralised states were taking shape in Europe. For the first time, states were not seen as the private domains of Monarchs, as if mere extensions of Royal households, but as institutions to serve the people. He wanted a rationally ordered society. In contrast to Machiavelli's *Elitism*, this is *Constitutionalism*.

King Henry VIII of England's conversion gave a boost to Rome's opponents. It helped to sustain a generation of sectarian wars, throughout which, most thinkers were pre-occupied with religious matters. It wasn't until the 18th century that exhaustion finally set in. The best way to grasp the new phase of ethical philosophy is to think of three threads, first laid down at this time and later interwoven. Imagine a romantic Frenchman, a systematic German and a calculating Englishman. It is perhaps at this time that Northern Europe's national stereotypes were also taking shape.

The noble savage

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was not so much a Frenchman as Swiss, although he left the French-speaking city of Geneva at the age of 16, and spent much of his life in France. In 1762, he published a treatise on education called *Emile*, on the face of it a fairly straightforward, through radical, approach to childrearing.

Rousseau opposes authoritarian parenting. He encourages the free expression of the child, allowing its natural inclinations to flourish. Rather than indoctrinate, educators should patiently nurture social skills. They should gently guide the child away from corrupting influences to become moral and rational individuals.

The treatise is not however, the straightforward parenting manual it appears to be. Rousseau is developing and popularising a philosophy of ethics. Although he never uses the phrase "noble savage", it has become stuck to this it, often disparagingly by his critics. Nevertheless, it captures something important, which is this: humans are naturally good but are corrupted by society.

Our primitive ancestors, Rousseau argues, in competition with other animals, developed skills, such as tool-making, and learned to co-operate. In society they became aware of their own interests and began to seek reputation and privilege. These things began to consume them, until today, in modern society, such self-obsession is so prevalent that it looks like human nature.

The primitive societies of the past are akin to childhood. They have an honesty and sympathy, while also having, just like a child, volatile emotionality and naiveté. We can't go back to our childhood, and likewise, society can't go back to its simple beginnings, but we can look and learn. We can

change the way we raise and educate our children, and we can change how we order our societies.

Rousseau thought of society as an agreement between individuals for their mutual benefit. This agreement is absolutely essential because anarchy would be as wild as an unsupervised Kindergarten. Freedom for Rousseau does not consist in the absence of government, but in the unhindered participation in it.

There is however, a little twist in Rousseau's Constitutionalism. In his book *The Social Contract*, he explains that we should not think of the sovereign as the King (a physical body), but as an abstraction. It is the people as a whole. It is not the average of their interests, concerns or opinions, but the "general will". People are free, in body and mind, only to the extent that they can reflect on what is good for everyone. In practice then, real power must be embodied in what he calls "Legislators", whose moral stature is reminiscent of Plato's "Guardians".

The moral animal

Immanuel Kant was not so much a German as a Prussian, although no state of Germany existed at the time. He is notorious for never having left his hometown of Königsberg, although this is not strictly true. Nevertheless, he does seem to have been quite unadventurous when it came to work and travel, which is slightly ironic, given that his philosophy stresses the value of experience over simply sitting around thinking.

His most important works on ethics began with an introduction in 1785, and were completed in 1797, very close to the end of his very long life. In them he brings together his views on morality with his psychological theory, into a systematic whole. It is primarily descriptive, that is to say, it is about how we *are*, not how we *ought to be*. Still, by its nature, it has a definite prescriptive dimension.

Kant argued that when we experience the world, we do so through the mediation of our senses. We can't go beyond their reach, so the world that we really inhabit is a construct of our minds. We are not islands unto ourselves. Our worlds have a lot in common because, like our bodies, our minds are basically the same. Our bodies (and brains in particular) physically instantiate the rules by which sensation is converted into experience.

Along with the rules that make sense of our world, there are also rules of behaviour. These fixed moral rules are nothing to do with our feelings, interests or desires, nor are they the product of our culture. They are what Kant calls "categorical imperatives" and are always there even if we try to ignore them. You might reasonably argue that this is the same as what we would normally call a "conscience". You could say that Kant's theory is that the conscience is fixed and universal.

Consider the common belief that it is wrong to lie. Why do people think this? Some might say that if you lie you will be punished by God, and if you speak the truth he will reward you. Others might say that lying is a bad policy because lies always come back to bite you. In either case the motive for not lying is instrumental. These are not examples of morality.

Some people might refrain from lying because other people wouldn't like it. This could be because of empathy, and is also, according to Kant, not an example of morality. Empathy is a feeling, and feelings are ephemeral and potentially fleeting. Action from empathy therefore, is not moral action.

The categorical imperative, on the other hand, is not instrumental and has no justification. It simply says that it is wrong to lie. It is, as it were, a moral truth written into the fabric of our nature. For this reason morality does not depend on a belief in God or any sense of the consequences of an

action. This last point is interesting and important. Whether or not you imagine the effects of your actions to be good or bad is irrelevant. Acting against the categorical imperative is simply incoherent.

To understand this a little better, consider a moral law that Kant describes like this: “act only on the maxim that you can at the same time will that it becomes a universal law”. For example, if I were to say it was Ok to lie for my own gain, this could only work if people believed me. If however, my rule was a universal law, that is to say, everyone was free to lie for their own gain, then no one would believe anyone so I would gain nothing. Kant's moral law forbids lying not because of the consequences, but because it produces a logical contradiction.

It is at this point that Kant's system runs into trouble. We can't act against a categorical imperative yet for an act to be moral or immoral it must be done with freewill. This is uncontroversial and Kant takes it as self-evident. To lie for example, is by definition an act of freewill. To say a falsehood by accident is clearly not immoral. What is not clear, I think, is how they fit together, that is to say, how can actions be governed by the categorical imperative and by freewill at the same time?

Kant's solution is to distinguish between the categorical imperative and the actions of the body. I may feel the compulsion of the imperative (like hearing the voice of conscience) but override it and act to the contrary. Freewill consists in choosing whether to act in accordance with the categorical imperative (the conscience) or with the impulses of the body. Judgement of what is moral or immoral follows from that.

The pleasure principle reborn

Jeremy Bentham was born, raised and lived his whole life in London, so I guess he was as English as its possible to be. He was a lawyer and devoted most of his life's work to legal reform. His social philosophy is a kind of generalisation from these concerns. It is based on the observation that judgements and the framing of legislation are based on the intuition of what feels right. Surely, Bentham felt, the new spirit of enquiry (what later became known as “science”) ought to extend to the law. Some better rational exactness ought to be possible.

The point was to find a general rule for making ethical laws, and Bentham found it in the idea of pleasure and pain. The connection with ancient Hedonism is obvious, but Bentham did not stress it. His idea was less concerned with living a good life, and more concerned with statecraft. It is seeking a principle to guide Constitutional government.

Some people objected that the meaning of life can't be reduced to mere pleasure, and Bentham acknowledged this. This is perhaps why he preferred the word “utility”, which gave rise to the word *Utilitarianism*. Even then however, he was not satisfied that this word captured the sense he intended. He later preferred to use the word “happiness”, putting it into the formula first recorded in 1789: the aim of government is “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”.

Objections however, continue. Do people really only care about their own happiness? And if so, why should we design a state to humbly serve them? In fact, why should anyone in a position of power care for anything but their own happiness?

Bentham noted this last objection. He observed that politicians are often self-serving, that is to say, they are inclined to prefer their own pleasures to the principle of utility (which the principle itself implies). This inclined Bentham to champion democracy, which he felt was necessary to push the principle to the heart of decision making.

On the first objection (that people care about other things than happiness), Bentham took the same path as the ancient Hedonist, Epicurus, who said that there is pleasure in virtuous behaviour. It is a curious paradox of the distinctly human capacity for sympathy and charity that we get a kind of pleasure out of foregoing pleasure to care for others.

Still, some people might take pleasure in things we find detestable. What if, for example, the greatest happiness of the greatest number is achieved by persecuting a minority? This objection was answered by John Stuart Mill, who said that not all pleasures are the same (placating some of Bentham's many critics in the artistic community). Friendship, beauty and art, for example, have greater intrinsic value for the greater pleasure of human flourishing. Accordingly, lower pleasures, such as bullying the weak, have a lower value in utilitarian calculations.

Mill's modifications seem to dilute Utilitarianism's original appeal: the simplified precision of its calculations. On top of that, the realisation that such calculations are very difficult to make leads us to fall back on rules-of-thumb, which are really moral principles. In the end, the difference between Kant-like ethical certainties and Bentham-like calculation, could be how prepared we are to put consequences over principles: a mere matter of degree.

Finally, it should be noted that Bentham was never fully satisfied with words like “pleasure”, “utility” and “happiness”. These words sound quite shallow to us today. Words like “well-being” and “welfare” have since taken their place. They express, not simply a measurable emotional reaction, but rather an abstract sense of satisfaction. Now we are drifting toward Rousseau's idea of the “general will”: something that is good for you, whether or not you are aware of it.

Of Marx and Mill

By the time we reach the 19th century, central European interest in nation building had stepped up. The German philosopher, Hegel, wanted the imminent state of Germany to be “rational”, although he shown no interest in the kind of calculations that kept Bentham busy. As a Professor, not a Politician, Hegel observed that history was evolving inevitably toward a rational state, but by what force only God could say.

One of the so-called “young Hegelians” was not impressed with such disinterested, aloof, not to mention mystical, interpretations. The young Karl Marx felt that philosophers ought to be changing the world. Amidst the great political movements and crises of 1848, he wrote (with his collaborator, Friedrich Engels) a manifesto for a small revolutionary party. It became one of the most influential books of all time. While essentially a theory of history, it nevertheless implied a distinct ethical philosophy.

For Marx, humans are economic animals, and this applies to everything about us, even to how our brains work. What you believe is true and right, is shaped by your material interests. What feels like a universal categorical imperative is in some sense a justification of what you want to be true. Consider for example, how the moralists of Kant and Bentham's time, ignored or even justified, the lucrative trade in African slaves.

When this line of reasoning seems to be reverting to relativism, Marx rescues it like this: the morality that justifies slavery, child labour, imperial aggression and all manner of other forms of exploitation, comes from interests that profit from them. It is the morality of a particular social class. A class that does not share these interests does not share these morals. When that class takes power such things will be abolished, power will be distributed rationally, and a new and higher moral consensus will arise.

That this really resolves the question of ethics is questionable. Does it mean that the values of the last class, what Marx called the “proletarians” (workers without property), are superior? Does it mean that moral argument is futile and we need only fight for economic justice? Is there a trace of the “noble savage” in Marx's theory, that is to say, are we essentially good until society catches us in its web of economic interests, and corrupts us?

After the events of 1848, Marx was exiled by the Prussian state (which went on to unify Germany). He eventually settled in London and was present, although he does not seem to have played a significant role, in the events of 1867. John Stuart Mill was then an MP for the newly formed “Liberal Party” in opposition. In that year, a mass social movement demanded reforms from the new minority Conservative government;. It surprised everyone by granting the right to vote to all adult men. Mill, by the way, seems to have been the first to suggest that it should also be granted to women.

Mill was a Utilitarian and set out to both popularise it and answer its critics. He resolved the contradiction of why pleasure-seeking humans would stick to the principle of utility for example, by arguing that we have in our minds an “internal sanction”. When violated, it causes us pain. This sounds a lot like a conscience, which only raises more questions. Is this conscience built into our brains, as Kant supposed, or reflections of our interests, as Marx did?

Mill's modified Utilitarianism holds to the principle that we are primarily pleasure-seeking, but also acknowledges our common capacity for sympathy and charity. It explains why political reform in Britain happened. It was because campaigns against slavery, child labour and so on, pricked the conscience of the ruling class. Marx would no doubt argue that such concessions were forced, and their conscience will not extend to questioning the profit system on which their wealth depends.

Mill's politics gave rise to *Social Liberalism*. He believed that personal freedom is sacrosanct and the power of government should be strictly limited. However, we are social animals and practical freedom consists in democratic participation. Governments can and should act to maximise happiness, but only to the extent that their power is distributed rationally. Perhaps democracy *is* proletarian power and Social Liberal Utilitarianism *is* the moral consensus that Marx predicted.

Nihilism

Meanwhile, the central European interest in nation building was stepping up a pace. Amongst some German intellectuals it combined with renaissance classicism into something approaching an obsession. The art historian, Jacob Burckhardt became a very popular writer, stimulating interest in ancient Greek civilisation and praising the Italian renaissance. He was Swiss and disliked nationalism (especially German), but his work inspired others to connect heroic morality, Germanic folklore and the ideal state.

One of Burckhardt's students was particularly interested in classical tragedy. From this he developed a moral philosophy that would clash with all the threads woven together by Marx and Mill. His thoughts would also have inadvertent repercussions as they excited nationalist obsessions. It would all end in a continental tragedy on a monumental scale.

Nietzsche was particularly critical of Christianity, which had infiltrated the classical world, transforming its moral order and substituting faith for philosophy. Nietzsche extolled the spirit of philosophy, saying “if you want peace of mind, believe. If you want to be a disciple of truth, enquire.”

What this enquiry brought was “nihilism”, the belief that no morality is true, in other words,

whether categorical imperative, utilitarian or proletarian, there is no good reason to believe in any of them. What is more, this was set to become common knowledge as science advances. Everyone's peace of mind was at stake, even Civilisation itself.

In ancient Greece and Rome, Nietzsche argued, the master-morality had for generations prevailed. It gave us the greatest art, including tragedy, in which Gods and heroes represent different aspects of the human soul in conflict. By honouring their Gods the people honoured themselves. Through it they became true to themselves, and to use his words "supermen". The concept has now entered English from German, as "Übermensch". It is important to note that this is not a class or race, but anyone who takes, and takes joy in, the responsibility for creating their own values.

Then into the classical world came Christianity. Its leaders made false promises and gave the weak a simple contentment that Nietzsche calls "herd happiness". They turned their weakness into strength by using the herd to take power. They redefined goodness as self-control and gave the world a mass, slave-morality, characterised by self-hatred, mystery, falsehood, disengagement and the pursuit of comfort.

In his time, Nietzsche felt the fabrication was unravelling. First the Reformers had broken the power of the Roman church. They thought God would reward them, but the more they searched, the more meaning drained from the world. In place of certainty and revealed truth, scepticism and science now rules. At the end of the 19th century, Nietzsche declared "God is dead" and saw Europe being sucked into a vacuum of meaning.

In his most famous work *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, a messy, convoluted and rambling string of parables, Nietzsche gives voice to a hero. The prophet comes down from the mountain to declare the death of God. He is the author of his own destiny and the hero of his own story. He is also frustrated and despairing of the masses, who either ignore or ridicule him.

Zarathustra's feelings reflect Nietzsche's sense of isolation. In his later years he declared his intention to achieve "the revaluation of all values", yet stalled. There can be no doubt that in the tenor of his argument, Nietzsche believes the master-morality to be superior. There can be no doubt that his revaluation is a glorification of what he calls the "will". This sounds a lot like an alternative morality.

It is important to have some idea of what he meant by the "will". It is the property in every living thing to seek power over every other living thing. It is raw nature at work, seemingly confirmed by the irrefutable evidence of Darwinian evolution. At a time of rapid population growth and the Eugenic fashion for biological improvement, the concept of the "will" would take on a sinister meaning.

Late 19th and early 20th century united Germany was big, aggrieved and financially vulnerable, with a lot of industry and imperial potential. Conditions were perfect for a moral-free Machiavellian prince. After his death, Nietzsche's sister, an active member of the Nazi party, published his notes as *The Will to Power*. The echo is unmistakable in the propaganda film "Triumph of the Will", made just after Hitler became Chancellor in 1933.

Existentialism

In the first half of the 20th century, Europe and East Asia were torn apart. Empire-building turned from global war into a bloody, desperate stalemate. It peaked with the unprecedented horrors of industrial scale genocide and the nuclear destruction of whole cities. The psychological effect was as great as any of the plagues and crises of history, and at its heart was a clash of ideologies

underpinned by philosophies of ethics.

The end of the 1st world war was precipitated by a popular revolution in Russia. A decade or so later, the so-called Soviet Union was a totalitarian state, claiming the mantle of Marx's social and political theory. Britain and France emerged from post-war chaos with their first determinedly Social Liberal governments. In the two interwar decades, Germany lurched from crisis to crisis, finally falling to a regime of unspeakable brutality claiming the inheritance of Nietzsche.

In their midst, a new and strange idea sprang up and evolved. Martin Heidegger said that to be born is to be thrown into a world of meanings not of our choosing. We are uniquely able to reflect on this, but often don't. It is possible he said, to live "authentically": as a self-aware individual, or "inauthentically": as a mere cog in the machine.

After the war, Jean-Paul Sartre put forward a consciously framed ethical theory, which he called "existentialism". For Heidegger the world of experience springs from our birth and ends with our death. This journey from nothingness to nothingness makes everything meaningless. For Sartre, this means only that there is no meaning to discover. The world is not meaningless, because we are here.

Sartre summarised his philosophy with the simple aphorism: "existence precedes essence", that is to say, things just exist until they become meaningful, which happens only when they are given a meaning by us. Understanding how this happens requires some consideration of what awareness actually is.

Awareness is always *of* something, and that is what it means for something to have a meaning. When we become aware of ourselves we give ourselves meaning, yet nothing precedes this moment, so it has no reason and comes from nothing. It is a choice, although not one we can justify and for which we alone are responsible. This choice creates anxiety, which we can escape by "bad faith", that is to say, by adopting mindless, mechanical social roles, and by one way or another, denying freedom. It is also possible however to acknowledge and live out this freedom.

Conclusion

The history of modern ethics has for a long time wrestled with the conscience. Is it written into our brains or a general faculty for reflecting on consequences, or perhaps it is a reflection of our material interests? Some of the answers have underpinned political thought aimed at shaping rational Constitutions, and these have been challenged by Nihilism and the unbridled pursuit of power.

As ideological certainties weakened, Western philosophy seems to have returned to its ancient concern for flourishing or well-being, although in radically new ways. Thanks to Psychotherapy and scientific Psychology we can delve ever deeper into our minds. We have unearthed our subconscious impulses, our deep desires and biases. Understanding ourselves seems tantalisingly within reach, yet perhaps we have become more manipulable.

Meanwhile Existentialism has been absorbed by the modern world the way that the body absorbs a mild dose of a drug: active yet insipid. We teach our children to be true to themselves; we warn against denial and repression; we extolling the virtues of creating our own destiny and loving our choices. There is anxiety in freedom, yet perhaps we will all be *Übermensch*e in the future.

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