

Moral philosophy without morality?

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I

Of the traditional areas of philosophy, moral philosophy is one in which the inadequacy of recent work has been most obvious. The writings of people like R M Hare can readily be seen as representing in an extreme degree the barrenness of so much contemporary philosophy. A common response to their work has consequently been to say something like this: that recent moral philosophy has been so arid and sterile because philosophers have turned away from substantive moral questions and have occupied themselves solely with 'the language of morals', with the analysis of moral concepts. This diagnosis might seem to be confirmed by their own pronouncements about what they are doing. Although it is perhaps unfair to do so, I cannot resist quoting, as an example, the write-up on the back cover of Nowell-Smith's *Ethics*:

'What ought I to do, here and now?' This is a question which each of us frequently has to answer. More rarely, in a reflective moment or when faced with a difficult moral problem, we ask such questions as: 'What ought I to do in general?', 'To what moral code ought I to adhere?', 'Why should I adhere to any moral code at all?'. These are the perennial questions of moral philosophy. It is not, however, the aim of this book to answer these questions...

There is indeed a certain truth in the above explanation of why recent moral philosophy has been so boring. As it stands, however, this explanation is inadequate. The trouble with it is that it accepts these philosophers' own characterisation of their work at its face value. There are two main respects in which it is inadequate:

(a) Modern moral philosophy has not in fact been morally neutral. It has been done from a specific moral standpoint. This has become quite explicit in some of the more recent work; G J Warnock, for example, in *The Object of Morality*, is concerned to argue that morality has a specific content, and to justify its having such a content. But one can also identify a particular morality (and, significantly, it is more or less the same morality) which is implicitly presupposed, though unacknowledged, in the work of writers like Hare who take moral philosophy to be concerned solely with the form of moral discourse.

(b) What is really significant about the method employed by modern moral philosophers is not the fact that it consists in conceptual analysis, but rather their particular view of what 'conceptual analysis' actually is. This view is epitomised in the following quotation.¹

[Contemporary philosophers] would say ... that philosophy is the study of the concepts that we employ, and not of the facts, phenomena, cases, or events to which those concepts

might be or are applied. To investigate the latter is to raise political or moral or religious, but not philosophical, problems or questions.²

What we have here is essentially a Platonic view of concepts. It is supposed that concepts on the one hand, and facts, phenomena and events on the other, belong in two different realms, and that they can therefore be investigated quite separately. What is usually then implied is that the investigation and analysis of concepts is a purely a priori study, whereas knowledge of things in the world and of facts about the world is obtained entirely by empirical investigation.

Now, put like that, as a kind of Platonic dualism, the thesis is obviously untenable, and I doubt whether any contemporary philosopher would subscribe to it. Nevertheless, some such view does in fact underly the practice of recent moral philosophy. In opposition to such a view I would claim that, although philosophy certainly does involve the analysis of concepts, and although this could even be regarded as distinctive of philosophical enquiry, still, the analysis of concepts is not a self-contained activity. On the one hand, how we analyse concepts will affect our view of the facts about the world. (For example, if we accept a Humean analysis of the concept of causality, we are committed to a certain belief about events in the world, namely that they are not linked by any necessary connections.) And, perhaps even more importantly, our factual beliefs affect the concepts we employ. If our knowledge of empirical facts about the world changes radically, this will require a corresponding revision of our concepts.

Applied specifically to moral philosophy, this means that, most obviously, our empirical knowledge of social and psychological facts will be relevant to the analysis of moral concepts. Depending on what one takes to be the nature of contemporary society and the nature of human behaviour, particular moral concepts will have to be regarded as more or less appropriate, and will need to be interpreted in different ways. And the most important general indictment of recent moral philosophy is that it has studiously ignored relevant empirical facts of this kind. Consequently, it has taken moral concepts to be essentially uncontroversial. Moral concepts have been accepted as though ready-made, as though their status and viability, their appropriateness to human activity, were not in question, and as though they could be analysed in purely a priori fashion.

The exception proves the rule. Warnock, in his recent book, thinks it important to ground the concept of morality in a general view of what he calls 'the human predicament'. But he demonstrates how out of practice philosophers are at this game, both by the obvious embarrassment with which he sets about his task, and by the banal half-truths he comes up with. Whenever he uses the term 'the human predicament', he apologises for talking 'pompously' or 'in archaic style'. As for what I have referred to as the 'banal half-truths', the following is typical:

*It seems reasonable, and in the present context is highly relevant, to say, without necessarily going quite as far as Hobbes did, that the human predicament is inherently such that things are liable to go badly.*³

II

I shall now attempt to substantiate these two points - that moral philosophers have been committed, even without acknowledging it, to a substantive morality, and that they have dealt in a purely a priori fashion with concepts whose status is called in question by empirical considerations - by looking at some of the basic assumptions which have been most influential in recent moral philosophy.

(a) The first of these is the primary role which has been given to the concepts of wants, desires, interests, etc. Moral beliefs have been widely thought to be reducible to statements about these. It has been assumed by many philosophers that at least the most basic and most important wants and desires are simply given, i.e. that with regard to those things which are desired for their own sake rather than for the sake of any further end, such desires are immune to further assessment. They may indeed conflict with one another, and if they do so, one of them may have to be sacrificed to another, but in themselves, it is thought, they are immune to criticism.

What is significant is that this view has been maintained in the face of so much evidence of how, in our society, people's wants are manipulated, are artificially stimulated and created. People can be said to have 'false wants' both insofar as they are deliberately manipulated, by techniques of persuasion such as advertising, and also insofar as they unconsciously adapt their wants to the kinds of satisfaction attainable within the limits of the existing social structure. Certain kinds of 'false' wants are built into the operation of the economy, for example, and are thus adopted unconsciously by people as their own. I can't elaborate on this here, but it should be obvious that I am thinking particularly of Marcuse's writing, such as his *One-Dimensional Man*. Thus if people appear to want, for their own sake, such things as social status or superfluous material luxuries for example, we can't simply stop at that fact. Such wants are not just 'given'. The concept of 'wants' and 'desires' therefore cannot be treated as philosophically unproblematic, nor can it play the kind of role widely assigned to it in practical reasoning. From a philosophical point of view what is needed, in the light of these empirical considerations, is an examination of the distinction between true and false wants, true and false needs.

(b) A second typical feature of recent moral philosophy has been the fundamental importance attached to the concept of altruism and to the egoism/altruism distinction. The notion of altruism, when added to the notion of desires, has regularly been taken to be the defining feature of morality. It has very often been suggested that practical reasoning falls into two clear categories: reasoning concerned with the satisfaction of one's desires is prudential, and reasoning which takes equal account of everyone's desires, others' as well as one's own, constitutes moral reasoning. Moreover philosophers have thought that it can be proved entirely a priori that one ought to be altruistic. The notion of 'universalisability' is usually appealed to, and is thought to be the means of proving that anyone who doesn't give equal weight to other people's desires, when these will be affected by his actions, is being irrational. Now if it were not for universalisability, I would be inclined to say that this is just obviously false. It seems to be simply obvious that egoism is not irrational. The idea that the arguments of someone like Nietzsche, for example, could be countered by a simply logical appeal to 'universalisability' is surely intrinsically implausible. Of course egoism makes sense. Of course it is not irrational. It may even be right.

What are more important, however, are those psychological considerations which call in question the egoism/altruism dichotomy altogether. I have in mind, in particular, what might be called 'the ambiguity of altruism'. Supposedly altruistic behaviour can in fact have a psychological character of widely differing kinds. To take the most basic opposition: altruistic behaviour may be masochistic behaviour, the product of frustrated aggressions which are turned inward against oneself and thus produce an attitude of self-negation and self-denial; or, at the other extreme, it may be the genuine, spontaneous generosity and sympathy and humanity of someone who can afford to give

freely of himself, who is able to recognise others as independent beings with needs and interests of their own, because he is secure in his own identity. I think it would be fair to regard only the latter as genuine altruism. Now, this point is sometimes formulated by saying that 'one cannot love others unless one also loves oneself'.⁴ This locution, however, is misleading. By linking concern for oneself and concern for others *instrumentally*, it preserves the conceptual dichotomy between the two. It invites the response: 'This is simply a contingent connection which you are pointing out; you are telling us that the most effective means of being altruistic is to love oneself equally; but though this may be true empirically, the fact remains that there is a conceptual distinction between egoism and altruism and that the latter concept is definitive of morality.' The point however is precisely that the contingent empirical facts have conceptual implications. They require us to revise our conceptual categories. They point to the need for some basic ethical concept which is prior to both egoism and altruism - perhaps something like 'health' or 'harmony' or 'integrity' or 'fulfilment'. And altruism would have then to be seen simply as one particular natural manifestation of such a state.

(c) The third idea which I want to mention is less widespread, but equally significant. In the last few years some philosophers, apparently still impressed with the idea that morality comes into play when one extends one's behaviour from a concern for one's own interests to a concern for the interests of others, have tried to base this extension on the concept of a 'contract'.⁵ The idea has a long history; we could trace it back to Hobbes, for example (for whom, of course, the connection between morality and the contract is complicated by being mediated via the notion of political authority), and, further back, to what is perhaps its classic statement in Book II of Plato's *Republic*, where it is put into the mouth of Glaucon. The idea is this: given the basic postulate of individuals who are concerned to satisfy their own interests, and given also the fact that these interests conflict, it is in people's interest to enter into a contract whereby they mutually undertake to respect one another's basic interests. It is such a contract which creates moral obligations; having entered into it, men have obligations towards one another in respect of these basic interests.

Now there is a familiar and insuperable objection to the traditional 'contract' theory - namely, that no such general contract has ever been entered into. Contemporary attempts to revive the 'contract' idea have therefore been framed not in terms of any actual contract, but in terms of a purely hypothetical one. The suggestion is that, where it would be in our interests for such a contract to exist, we ought to act as though we had contracted with others to respect certain interests of theirs in return for their respecting our interests. Our obligations towards others are thus supposed to derive from this hypothetical - that is, non-existent - contract.

The objection to this is obvious: Why on earth should I be bound by a contract which I have never made? If the contract is purely hypothetical, it cannot generate any actual obligations. The whole point about a contract is that it provides some kind of guarantee of how other people are going to behave. Given the guarantee that others are likely to respect my interests, it is worth my while to limit my own actions in accordance with the contract. But if the contract is only hypothetical, there is no such guarantee. The supposed reason for acting in accordance with the contract therefore disappears.

The issue here is not just an academic one. Professional politicians and ideologues often talk as though social and economic relations could be seen as some kind of implicit contract. The constant

appeal to 'the national interest' invokes an idea of the economy as a joint enterprise in which all, workers and capitalists alike, pool their resources and abilities, and make certain sacrifices in return for mutual benefits. It is then suggested that the workers ought to limit their wage claims, and in general ought to moderate their concern for their own interests, because this is their side of the bargain. The same idea is in fact extended to the whole field of social relations - one is asked to forego one's own interests in return for the same restraint on the part of everybody else. Here again therefore we must emphasise that no such contract exists. As a matter of empirical fact, social relations within our society are simply not like that. Power and wealth are unequally shared, and those who have an abundance of both have not been restrained in the acquisition of them by any contract. Consequently those who are deprived of power and wealth are under no corresponding obligation to forego their own interests. On the contrary, the appropriate response to their situation is for them to assert their own interests and to aim at the satisfaction of them. In this context, and in relation to the whole question of altruism, we can fittingly quote what Marx and Engels say in the *German Ideology*:

*The communists do not preach morality at all... They do not put to people the moral demand: love one another, do not be egoists, etc.; on the contrary, they are very well aware that egoism, just as much as self-sacrifice, is in definite circumstances a necessary form of the self-assertion of individuals.*⁶

So far, in discussing these three ideas, I have been concerned to emphasise the apriorism of recent moral philosophy, and to indicate how empirical considerations actually call in question the role which this philosophy ascribes to the concepts it analyses. My other intention was to show that this philosophy has not been morally neutral, and this also, I hope, will by now be fairly obvious. The idea that individuals are entirely autonomous in the wants and needs which they aim to satisfy and the goals which they pursue, that these are entirely personal and that there is no room for external criticism of them; the idea of morality as a device which supervenes upon this private activity and prevents people from getting in one another's way when they pursue these ends, by requiring them to take account of one another's interests; the idea of one's relations to other people as essentially contractual - what is all this but the morality of liberalism?

This liberalism is specifically apparent in the frequent distinction, which one finds in a number of contemporary moral philosophers, between, on the one hand, the private and personal ideals which each person pursues within his own individual life, and, on the other hand, a social morality whose function is to arbitrate between competing interests. That this division is characteristic of the liberal tradition will, I think, be obvious. It is epitomised in the view which Mill ascribes to Bentham:

*Bentham's idea of the world is that of a collection of persons pursuing each his separate interest or pleasure, and the prevention of whom from jostling one another more than is avoidable, may be attempted by hopes and fears derived from three sources - the law, religion, and public opinion.*⁷

Mill intends these to be rather scathing remarks, yet he never succeeds in freeing himself from these same limitations; his essay *On Liberty*, for example, is dominated by the same conception. What is significant for the purposes of this paper, then, is that we find the same division, between private ideals and socially negotiated interests, prominent in recent moral philosophers. It plays a large role in Hare's *Freedom and Reason*, for example. It

occurs in Warnock's *The Object of Morality* when he asserts that morality does not tell us 'how one should live' or what could constitute 'the good life'. That, he says, is a matter for individual life-styles, and one may, according to one's individual personality, regard the good life as that of the man of action, or the dedicated artist, or the religious recluse, or the professional golfer.⁸ What morality does is to produce the appropriate conditions within which various kinds of individual lives may be lived. Perhaps the most explicit statement of the morality of liberalism is in Strawson's paper *Social Morality and Individual Ideal* (*Philosophy* 1961). He talks there of the diversity of individual ideas as a sort of picture-gallery of possibilities; he then goes on to suggest that the observance of a recognised social code of morality is necessary as a pre-condition for the pursuit of these ideals, and that a liberal society is one in which the pursuit of a variety of conflicting ideals of life is possible.

If it were my main concern here to criticise this latter-day liberalism, I would try to show how, on the one hand, the quality of one's life as an individual is conditioned by the nature of the social relations and social patterns of behaviour in which one is implicated (think, for example, of how any discussion of alienation would require the abandonment of the liberal dichotomy), and how, on the other hand, one's conception of the general nature and purpose of human activity - one's 'ideals', to use the liberal word - will determine one's view of what men's interests consist in, and will affect one's attitude towards social conflicts of interest and towards the ways in which these can or cannot be resolved, whether by a 'social morality' or by some other means. However, I cannot go into this now. What I want to stress is that recent moral philosophy has tended to presuppose a specific morality, that this morality is contestable, and that if philosophers had been less anxious to limit themselves to a *a priori* analysis and had been more inclined to look at what human societies and human behaviour are actually like, they might have been led to question the moral concepts which they have been content to analyse.

III

If we are going to take this critical function of moral philosophy more seriously, then the very first concept to look at critically might be the concept of morality itself. There are certain standard objections to the use of the concept of 'morality', and in particular to the use of the epithet 'immoral' as applied to men and their actions. These objections are formidable ones. Whether they're entirely valid, I'm not sure. But they certainly need to be taken seriously by moral philosophers, and I therefore want to put them forward now.

(a) We can approach the first objection by taking up my earlier point about altruism. If it is indeed the case that the basic value-concepts to apply to people's lives are concepts such as health and harmony and balance, fulfilment, self-realization, and so on, then I think we could reasonably add that these are not specifically moral concepts. It would be out of place to assert that people ought to aim at these. Not only would the 'ought' be essentially redundant; it would miss the point as to why men fail to achieve such ends. The answer to that question would need to be in terms of factors which are not primarily individual but social. If we take seriously the question 'What is it that screws up people's lives?', then, ultimately, the answer must be: not individual failings and weaknesses, but corrupt and oppressive institutions.

(b) The second objection focuses on the particular kind of motivation which moral behaviour seems to

involve. If, as I think we should, we try to attach a fairly definite meaning to the notion of 'morality', so that moral considerations are not just equated with practical considerations in general but are a particular subset of the latter, then one way of pinning the term down is by noting that it is readily associated with the notion of 'conscience'. Morally motivated behaviour is typically equated with actions performed in obedience to conscience. And conscience, in turn, is characteristically seen as something which imposes itself from without. It is essentially an external kind of motivation. This feature of morality is brought out most clearly by Kant, with his emphasis on the opposition between inclination and duty. Think of Kant's contrast between practical love and pathological love. Morality requires that I show concern for another not because I love him in any normal sense, or because he is my friend or my comrade or stands in any other spontaneous human relationship to me, or even because his situation as another human being evokes my sympathy or pity; I must show concern for him simply and solely because that is what morality commands. We may well wonder how this abstract concern, produced by command, can be genuine or can have any real human value. Now what can be said for Kant, I think, is that his picture is at any rate true to the concept of 'morality' and 'moral duty' and 'moral conscience'. But we are also led to ask how this kind of motivation can be possible. How can moral actions be called forth by this abstract sense of duty? And here the most plausible explanation is the familiar Freudian account of the super-ego. What it implies is that such motivation is, as I indicated, essentially external. Though conscience is regarded as being in some sense internal, it is nevertheless the internalization of an external authority. Initially the appropriate actions are produced in response to an authority, just because they are what the authority commands; and the role of this external authority is then taken over by an internalised version of it. In short, morally motivated behaviour is compulsive behaviour.

(c) The third kind of objection which I have in mind tends often to be put in terms of an opposition between *determinism* and morality - misleadingly so, I shall suggest. It is supposed that the standpoint of determinism rules out that of morality, that once an action has been causally explained and thereby shown to be inevitable, the agent can no longer be regarded as morally responsible and it therefore becomes inappropriate to assess the action in moral terms. This case tends to be argued largely by appeal to examples, and especially to examples from the law courts. A typical example which comes to mind is one from a few months ago, of a young boy who was given a massive sentence after being convicted of 'mugging'; people then pointed to the area where he lived, to the depressed environment in which he'd grown up, the high level of unemployment, the absence of any meaningful opportunities for a worthwhile life; and they were then inclined to say: 'How could he help it? He was bound to act as he did, he didn't have a chance, you can't really blame him.' Examples of this kind do seem to me to be very forceful, but I would say that the reference to determinism obscures what is really significant about them. The problem - that of the inappropriateness of moral vocabulary in such situations - arises regardless of whether or not we suppose the action to be 'inevitable'. It arises, rather, because, once we *understand why* the individual acted as he did, there is no longer the same inclination to condemn him as 'immoral'. The real opposition is between, on the one hand, an *understanding* of the action, which sees it as an intelligible response to a situation, and, on the other hand, a characteristically *moral* view of it. The latter in fact cuts short all understanding. It simply categorises and labels the agent with some such assertion as 'He is immoral', 'He is guilty'. The moral point of view seems to involve a particular view of responsibility, one which sees 'evil' as some kind of quality

residing wholly in the person and, as it were, making up his whole identity. It would be fair to characterise this as a 'judicial' mentality, one which is concerned not with why the agent did what he did, but solely with the question 'innocent or guilty?' It is the mentality which is concerned with passing sentence. I would suggest that we should be more struck by the use of the phrase 'moral judgements'. As this is used, it is not just analogous to 'factual judgements' or 'scientific judgements'. People regularly talk, even within moral philosophy, about '*passing* moral judgements', and this brings out very dramatically the judicial connotations of the phrase. This aspect of morality is one of the main grounds for Nietzsche's attack on the concept. Nietzsche of course linked the moral point of view closely with Christianity. In *The Twilight of the Idols* he has a fine phrase: 'Christianity is the metaphysics of the hangman.' I would say there is a good deal of truth in that.

It is important to notice what concepts are being called in question by these considerations. It is not just a matter of the concept 'moral'. As I have intimated above, the objections also apply to the concept 'ought', at least in its characteristically moral sense, which is the sense that has occupied the attention of philosophers. Of course there are other senses of 'ought'. The 'ought' of advice, as in 'You ought to see the film at the Odeon this week' or 'You ought to see a doctor' is obviously indispensable. But the moral 'ought', which, as Hare rightly says, has the force of an imperative, stands or falls with the concept 'moral', for reasons which I have already indicated.

It is remarkable how philosophers, having accepted that the language of moral oughts belongs with the language of imperatives, have seen nothing questionable about the use of such language. They have apparently given no thought to the question how one can be in a position to issue imperatives to other people. In the case of most uses of imperatives the answer will be obvious and uninteresting. But in the case of moral commands and moral 'oughts', their use seems to carry with it an assumption of moral superiority which, to say the least, needs examining.

What this shows, then, is that even the most general concepts, so general that philosophers have thought them morally uncontentious, actually have a specific moral content. In analysing the terms 'good' and 'right' and 'ought', philosophers have thought that they were on safe neutral ground. I would say they were mistaken.

Another concept which we should seriously consider jettisoning is that of 'the virtues'. The most recent attempt to revive this concept, by G. J. Warnock, is open to objection on both the first two counts. Warnock thinks that the most important reason why 'things tend to go badly' is the fact of limited human sympathies - roughly speaking, the fact that men are too selfish. He gives no attention at all to the idea that things might 'go badly' because of the kind of society in which men have to live and the kinds of institution within which they have to act. Secondly, there is the question of moral motivation. Warnock says that, because men have limited sympathies, morality seeks to counteract these limitations.⁹ What is this supposed to mean? He can't mean literally that 'morality' does this. It must be understood as, in some way or other, a claim about what *human beings* seek to do. But it is difficult to see how men can provide the required countervailing tendency, since, according to Warnock, the human predicament consists precisely in the fact that men are not sympathetic. Warnock seems to imply that morality manages to impose itself by some kind of sleight of hand - men are, in themselves, selfish, but thanks to morality they can turn out to be more sympathetic than they really are. As it stands, this is logically incoherent. What makes it plausible is the psychological fact I mentioned earlier - that moral motivation does characteristically impose itself as something

external, as the internalisation of external authority.

IV

As I've said before, I'm not sure whether these objections to traditional moral concepts are decisive. But certainly I think that they are important objections. Even so, I do not want to push this line of thought too far. In particular, there are two important reservations to be made.

(a) I don't simply want to say that everything is political. The first of my three objections above might be thought to lead to the conclusion that all talk about the desirability of one kind of life rather than another is political discourse, requiring a political solution. Well, as I've said, it does require a political solution. But that doesn't mean that the necessity for personal decisions disappears. For a start, whatever beliefs one has about the necessity for political action, one's own commitment to the political cause requires a decision - a personal decision, moreover, one which depends not just on an abstract calculation that the world after the revolution will be better than it is now, but on showing that an engagement in political activity is something which makes sense in terms of one's own life. Furthermore, I would not go along with the mentality which postpones everything worthwhile until 'after the revolution'. The fact is that one has to live in the existing world, and one has to make one's own life tolerable and meaningful within the existing situation. This split in one's consciousness, between the personal and the political, is an undeniable fact of experience. The appropriate response to it is not to try and pretend that the personal can be somehow swallowed up in the political, but to find forms of activity which link the two in a meaningful way. Women's Liberation is, I think, a movement which has to some extent succeeded in doing this, though the tensions are apparent even there.

(b) My second reservation is this: given that moral motivation can be characterised as external and compulsive, it doesn't follow that the alternative is one of sheer immediacy. One writer who sometimes seems to suggest this is Wilhelm Reich. Consider for example the following passage, where he is talking about patients who have undergone his character-analytic treatment:

If one represses one's own sexuality one develops all kinds of moralistic and aesthetic defenses. When the patients regain contact with their own sexual needs, these neurotic differentiations disappear... Previously, the insoluble conflict between instinctual need and moral inhibition forced the patient to act, in every respect, according to some law outside and above him... When the patient, in the process of acquiring a different structure, realizes the indispensability of genital gratification, he loses this moralistic straitjacket and with it the damming up of his instinctual needs... Moral regulation becomes unnecessary. The previously indispensable mechanism of self-control is no longer needed. This is so because the energy is being withdrawn from the antisocial impulses; there is little left which needs to be kept under control. The healthy individual has no compulsive morality because he has no impulses which call for moral inhibition. What antisocial impulses may be left are easily controlled, provided the basic genital needs are satisfied... The organism is capable of self-regulation.¹⁰

Much of this passage is clearly reminiscent of what we've said previously - 'the healthy individual has no compulsive morality' and so on. But if this is taken to imply that the healthy individual acts

entirely on impulses, entirely in accordance with his most immediate inclinations, this hardly seems either plausible or satisfactory. I do not think it either possible or desirable to eliminate the notions of internal conflict and struggle, and to reduce one's activity to this sort of one-dimensional level. So if one is to be able to talk realistically of acting spontaneously, without external and compulsive moral inhibitions, what one has to get at is the idea of acting in response to a higher self which stands above one and makes demands upon one, but which one accepts just because one recognises it to be one's true self. I regard the proper elucidation of these ideas of a true and a false self as one of the most pressing tasks of philosophy.

V

So, in view of all this, there does remain a need for something like moral philosophy - perhaps I should call it 'ethical philosophy' in order to indicate that within it the status of 'morality' is an open question. The task of this ethical philosophy would be to articulate a workable set of ethical concepts in terms of which one could direct one's life and activity. So in a sense we are brought back to a notion of conceptual analysis - but I have previously indicated various important ways in which this would differ from what presently goes under that name. It would be not just an analytical but also a critical activity - it would not simply accept unquestioningly those ethical concepts which are in current use, but would involve judgements as to which of these are acceptable and which ought to be jettisoned. Thus it would not purport to be a purely neutral activity - it would be quite explicitly for some ethical ideas and against others. And it would no longer be a purely a priori activity - it would embody the recognition that ethical concepts have to be assessed in the light of psychological and sociological facts - perhaps very general but nevertheless empirical facts. Again, it would be primarily concerned with what have been misleadingly called the secondary evaluative concepts - not ones like 'good' and 'right' so much as ones like 'self-realization', 'health', 'authenticity', 'conscience', 'the true self' as well as more frequently discussed ones like 'freedom' and 'justice'.

There remains one other vital difference. What I would stress is the necessity to articulate a system of concepts. Concepts of the sort that I have referred to have to some extent been discussed by analytical philosophers. But they have been discussed piecemeal - and this fact largely accounts for the lack of critical thrust in such philosophy. Taken in isolation, a concept like 'conscience', for example, can be analysed and various different senses can be assigned to it. But the crucial question is: can it form one element in a coherent ethical perspective alongside the other concepts we want to employ? Can it cohabit with concepts like 'authenticity' or 'self-realization', for example? This demand that one's ethical concepts constitute a coherent system corresponds to the necessity that one's life as a whole should have an overall meaningfulness and coherence. Academic philosophers tend to sneer at the suggestion that philosophy has anything to do with questions about the meaning of life. I think it is time that they stopped sneering.

NOTES

- 1 I have actually taken the quotation from Sean Sayers' article 'Towards a Radical Philosophy', which appeared in the *Cambridge Review* (20 Oct. 1972). The ideas in that article have stimulated much of what I have to say here.
- 2 G. J. Warnock *English Philosophy Since 1900* (Oxford, 1958), p.167.

- 3 *The Object of Morality*, p.17
- 4 Cf. Erich Fromm: *Man For Himself*, ch.IV section 1. Despite its limitations, Fromm's discussion, and the book as a whole, are a useful application of psychological ideas to philosophical ethics, and far more valuable than most recent moral philosophy in the analytical tradition.
- 5 I have in mind such works as G. R. Grice's *The Grounds of Moral Judgement*, D. A. J. Richards' *A Theory of Reasons for Action*, and J. Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*. Though these are, in varying degrees, more impressive than anything in the 'Language of Morals' vein, I still feel that they are open to my general criticisms of the tradition.
- 6 Marx and Engels: *The German Ideology*, Lawrence & Wishart, p.267.
- 7 J. S. Mill: *Essays on Bentham and Coleridge*, Chatto & Windus.
- 8 These revealing examples occur on page 90 of *The Object of Morality*.
- 9 *The Object of Morality*, p.26
- 10 *The Sexual Revolution*, pp.6-7

Fielding and the moralists¹

Bernard Harrison

I

Those who believe that morality is the primary concern of the novel have been almost unanimous in dismissing Fielding as a serious novelist. I think this is a pity, since I find Fielding's treatment of moral questions, and particularly of questions about the nature of morality itself, sufficiently powerful for his work to have something to offer, not only to the critic and the common reader, but to the professional philosopher.

Amongst literary men, and not without some reason, the words 'professional philosopher' not uncommonly produce a sinking of the heart. Perhaps I should therefore begin by disclaiming the intention of dealing with Fielding as the prudent and judicious gravel contractor deals with the verdant meadow or the pastoral hillside. I do not propose, that is, to strip away everything of literary interest in his work in order to arrive at some gritty but useful substance of philosophical generalisation which lies beneath. My concern is with the question, how ought Fielding to be read?

I want to suggest that one reason why a writer in one sense so straightforward has so often been read with astonishing obtuseness is to be found in the relative insensitivity of readers to the rather impressive vein of philosophical dialectic which underlies the entire fabric of Fielding's writings, but which is easy to miss, precisely because it is so well and completely integrated into them. To miss the power of Fielding's philosophical position is to miss half the occasional force and all of the cumulative force of the systematic patterns of irony which this position dominates and directs; it is to miss the essential mode of Fielding's concern with the interaction of character and conduct; and, in general, to remain ignorant or misguided on the question of what sort of novel Fielding is, or ought to be, trying to write. To regard Fielding, in the dismissive words of a recent critic, as 'a competent amateur in philosophy' is, as I shall try to show in

what follows, a gross and critically misleading error.

In general, then, I shall be pursuing the line of defence of Fielding already pioneered by Empson in his essay on *Tom Jones*². Empson sees that *Tom Jones* is, among other things, a structure of implicit argument, and that the beauty and power of the novel have much in common with the beauty and power of the more sustained and formally satisfying monuments of philosophy:

... the feeling that he [Fielding] is providing a case is what gives *Tom Jones* its radiance, making it immensely better, I think, than the other two novels ... it builds up like Euclid. Modern critics seem unable to feel this, apparently because it is forbidden by their aesthetic principles, even when Fielding tells them he is doing it; whereas Dr. Johnson and Sir John Hawkins, for example, took it seriously at once, and complained bitterly that the book had an immoral purpose.³

But even Empson, though he sees that Fielding is defending a central doctrine, feels that that doctrine 'retains the shimmering mystery of a mirage', and later on after stating the doctrine (I think wrongly) mutters uncomfortably, 'A modern philosopher might answer that this makes no logical difference'.⁴ Fielding, it seems, needs an advocate among the philosophers, and that is the modest office which I shall try to execute in this essay.

II

One kind of case against Fielding, put baldly, runs like this. A novel by Fielding is a parade of puppets, each clearly labelled by the author at the outset as vicious or virtuous, and allowed no subsequent moral development. This, it is argued, is grossly so in *Jonathan Wild*, a recent edition⁵ of which is garnished with woodcuts so remarkably wooden as to testify mutely to the plausibility of this critical response to the novel. But similar charges can be brought against *Tom Jones*. Fielding indeed wishes us to believe in Book XVII that Tom has learned from his experiences; that he has 'by reflection on his past follies, acquired a discretion and prudence very uncommon in one of his lively parts.' But these changes lie beyond the events of the novel, in which they manifest themselves, if at all, only by the passing remorse and embarrassment which Tom displays at his first meeting with Sophia after his release from Newgate. Beyond this there is only what is politely called the picaresque: that jolly, remorseless procession of Thwackums and Squares, Westons and Partridges, making, to borrow 'Savonarola' Brown's stage-direction, remarks highly characteristic of themselves.

There is no development of character in Fielding, the argument proceeds, because Fielding's characters are not allowed to interact in a fully imagined world. The action proceeds in a toy world of comic convention, presided over by a comic Providence in the person of an ubiquitously intrusive author-narrator who supplies interminable didactic moral commentary, stage-manages the plot by liberal helpings of shameless coincidence, and sees that calamity never goes beyond a joke. In this world character and action fall apart, for action is arranged merely to display predetermined traits of character, and any doubts which action might cast upon the preordained lineaments of particular characters are simply dismissed, by appeal, either directly, or by means of irony, to the judgement of the privileged narrator.

A case of this sort has been persuasively put by Frank Kermode⁶. Kermode, like Coleridge, chooses, as a locus of the divorce between character and conduct in Fielding, the episode in *Tom Jones* in which the young Blifil releases the pet bird which Tom had given to Sophia. Tom tries to coax the bird from a tree and falls into the canal; Sophia weeps; Blifil defends himself on grounds of a humanitarian pity for the bird, but blames himself