

## **Moral Bearings: Thinking about the Basis of an Ethical Life**

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### Philosophy and the quest for foundations

When I first took up the study of philosophy forty seven years ago, the course text was a Latin work entitled *Cursus Philosophiae*, written by a French Jesuit, Charles Boyer.<sup>1</sup> (The author is to be distinguished, of course, from the then contemporary French film star of the same name.) That was in an ecclesiastical faculty at a time when neo-scholasticism still reigned supreme. In my second year we were taught by a lecturer who had recently returned from Europe with an interest in phenomenology and a conviction that we needed to know something about modern European philosophy in general. So we heard about Descartes and Spinoza, Kant and Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre, to some extent in their own right, not simply as adversaries and proponents of errors already identified and refuted long in advance by Thomas Aquinas. But neo-scholasticism, as distilled by Charles Boyer, certainly provided the main philosophical diet, with arguments set out in the form of theorems or proofs in which erroneous views were castigated and sure and certain conclusions were propounded, notably in metaphysics, epistemology and ethics.

Boyer's text offered the following definition of philosophy, no doubt with a view to ensuring that the reader would get things straight from the beginning:

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[Philosophy is] the science of all things considered through their ultimate principles by the natural light of reason.<sup>2</sup>

Neo-scholasticism, it should be said, was far from alone in its portrayal of philosophy as an all-embracing inquiry into ultimate foundations. Indeed, one could say that an understanding of this kind has suffused philosophy from its beginning, when there emerged among the Ionian thinkers of the sixth century (Greek era) a form of inquiry into the basic principles of the cosmos, which was distinct, but not entirely distinct, from the mythological accounts of the poets. From an early stage, notably with Parmenides, philosophy assumed an Olympian perspective or god's-eye point of view as the way of truth, a voice which speaks as if from outside time and space. No one gave this approach more authoritative voice or more moving expression than Plato who, two generations after Parmenides, identified philosophers as 'lovers of the vision of truth' who 'see the absolute, the eternal and immutable', who are not concerned with running around to the Dionysiac festivals or gaping at the sights and sounds of the Olympic games, but who stand, in effect, on Olympus itself and contemplate all time and all eternity (*Republic*, 475e; 479e; 500c).

When the Platonist (or Greek) vision appeared to collapse in the post-medieval world, Descartes provided a partial rescue, with the promise of a new understanding of the foundations of knowledge. This was grounded in the experience of the individual thinking subject but in a way that yielded, through the method of radical doubt and ingenious argument, yet again a divinely guaranteed Olympian perspective, at least so far as clear ideas, especially in mathematics and the natural sciences, were concerned. By contrast, the status of ethics as a form of knowledge became particularly problematic from this point, since ethics appeared to be fixed entirely on the subjective side of the divide. That is how many people have seen the matter since that time. Even so, the quest for foundations for knowledge, including attempts to find a rational ground for ethics, as in the Kantian conception of the moral law, has continued as a dominant theme

in modern philosophy. By now, however, there is a widespread conviction that what Nietzsche announced late in the nineteenth century in terms of the death of God has finally come to pass; that neither religion nor philosophy, reason nor science, can serve as the ultimate ground of truth, and that the quest itself is radically misguided. On the other hand, there is considerable disagreement about where the loss of faith in foundations leaves us.

One common response is to conclude, as in some forms of post-modernism, that there are no grounds for comparing and assessing points of view at all, that nothing is true or good in any general sense, nothing is firm. As expressed in one of Nietzsche's favourite metaphors, this is the view that we have left the land behind us and have embarked on an open sea without fixed bearings. In such a world, he suggests, in place of a single over-arching perspective, we are faced with what may be an infinity of interpretations and points of view without number.<sup>3</sup> But is it true, in ethics or in other fields, that if we give up the idea of an absolute foundation we are forced into free fall, that if we cannot take an Olympian perspective we must find ourselves entirely at sea?

It is worth reflecting for a moment on some of the ramifications of Nietzsche's image of the boat on the open sea. Its context is the belief that the foundations of European culture, as provided hitherto by Christianity and Greek-inspired philosophy, have collapsed and must be replaced—how we cannot yet be sure—by some stronger, healthier, more satisfactory sense of ourselves and the world we inhabit. Those who grasp the truth of the situation now enter on a new enterprise: 'we have left the land and have embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us—indeed, we have gone farther and destroyed the land behind us'.<sup>4</sup> In thinking about the image of the open sea, we must assume that these fearless adventurers will take their bearings from the sun and stars and will have to find ways of acting together to resolve the common problems they face, knowing that they cannot go back to the world they have left. What qualities or virtues do these Nietzschean sailors need if

they are to survive and have some chance of success in their quest for a new world? Nietzsche does not offer a reply at this point: the passage about the open sea is followed immediately by the famous section in *The Gay Science* concerning the death of God. But elsewhere in this text, and in related writings, Nietzsche does furnish the makings of an answer. For all his reputation as a moral iconoclast, he emphasises again and again the compelling need for truthfulness, honesty, courage, nobility, generosity, and unwavering hope, if we are to deal with the cultural crisis which surrounds us. Even when allowances are made for a distinctive Nietzschean stamp, these are virtues which already held a central place in Greek and Christian cultures. In other words, there would appear to be significant common ground between the moral map of the old world and what is needed to give shape to the new world which Nietzsche portrays as waiting to be born.

#### A general argument for common ground in ethics

The idea that there is, or might be, common ethical ground across different times and cultures is widely criticised in contemporary ethical writing.<sup>5</sup> Why is this? One reason is that it is seen as a relic of uncritical foundationalism in ethics. It carries with it the baggage of claims to universal, unchanging truths, an essential human nature, or related ideas of an absolute standpoint, the eternal moral law, the ineffable form of the Good. Moreover, in the history of western culture these ideas took on a range of religious forms, sometimes liberating but commonly oppressive, associated with the Christian idea of God as ultimate source of unity, truth and goodness and as absolute moral judge of human life. Secondly, talk of common ground in ethics could be seen as a failure to take account of differences between people in both historical and cultural terms. In this view, a general prejudice in favour of sameness and continuity has now been challenged by a more informed historical sense, which is alert to differences and discontinuities over time;<sup>6</sup> even more importantly, there is

the view that common ground has been put in question by the evidence of ethical diversity across different cultures, attested by modern anthropological inquiry. Thirdly, talk of common ground might be seen as morally objectionable, in the sense that typically it involves the privileging of the values of one's own culture (or sub-culture); one is then led to see and judge the world in terms of those values. This is given sharper point by the fact that awareness of other cultures in European experience was commonly associated with aggression, as in the crusades in the middle ages, pogroms against Jews over the centuries, and colonial expansion and conquest in the modern era.

These arguments, singly or together, might lead to the conclusion that ethical views are time-bound and perspectival in a local sense, typically that they have no reach beyond the particular cultural background in which they arise. I intend to argue against this conclusion, but not in the name of seeking a transcendent ground for ethics, whether of a religious or a philosophical kind. I will say a word about this approach first.

For the definitive argument against the idea that moral claims might be grounded in divine authority, one should go back to Plato's *Euthyphro*. In brief, Plato shows that reference to God's will, which many religious-minded people find reassuring, either renders the moral life arbitrary (as no more than obedience to a form of power); or else it is completely unilluminating, supposing that the believer wants to hold that God wills the good because it is good. For, in that case, one must know what the good is independently of God's will. What Plato offered in place of the attempt to ground morality in this way might be seen nonetheless as a philosophical version of the religious model. In place of the knowledge of God's will, he put knowledge of the Good, the Idea or Form of the Good, which exists in an eternal order beyond the familiar human world. The suggestion in the *Phaedrus* (250a–b) is that in experience we catch a glimpse of the pure being of justice, temperance, beauty and all the great moral qualities which we hold in honour, as if sustained by a faint memory of what we once saw when dwelling with the gods in a previous existence.

This fleeting vision of the good, supported by Plato's genius for argument, myth and poetry, is immensely powerful and must speak in some sense to a dimension of human experience.<sup>7</sup> It connects especially with the sense that some manifestations of good and evil—especially evil—defy human understanding. Yet the appeal to a transcendent, otherwise unknowable, good cannot throw light on any specific moral claim. This applies also, I think, to more recent attempts to ground morality in a transcendent source, such as Levinas's idea of the infinitely Other. The critical consideration is that our idea of good, as our idea of evil, is necessarily the fruit of human experience, gathered within human communities, in the places in which we live our lives. The postulate of a transcendent order may give depth to our convictions; but if we can say what it is that makes for moral goodness, we have to find it within the world of human understanding, imagination and experience (which may reach out, of course, beyond the merely human world).

I want to go back now to the claim that ethical views abound in different cultures to the exclusion of common ground.

The standard argument appeals to claims about cross-cultural ethical diversity. We are familiar with ethical differences within our own society: people hold conflicting views on a range of important issues, for example, on critical matters relating to birth and death, sexuality, race relations, or what justice requires in the distribution and use of material resources. These differences are genuinely problematic, and in some cases might threaten to tear a society apart. At the same time, they exist in conjunction with wide agreement on ethical matters, including consensus on a significant list of binding moral demands and prohibitions. Also, in principle at least, the topics in dispute are subject to reasonable debate even if the prospect of general agreement is unlikely. In the case of ethical diversity across cultures, however, the argument is of a different order: here, in the view of a number of contemporary philosophers, cross-cultural ethical differences exclude common ground and rule out any basis for discussion or resolution. Proponents of this view do not deny that the people

concerned share a nature with us, but they hold that the idea of a common humanity does not encompass ethical matters. Ethical beliefs, they conclude, are to be understood as essentially local and time-bound in character, true or false (if true or false at all) in a relative sense.

Clearly, the force of this argument rests on the factual claim that appropriate anthropological or historical investigation has indeed shown that there are cultures with little or no common ethical ground. This is the contention of descriptive cultural relativism. Many anthropologists espouse this view and many philosophers, John Mackie or Bernard Williams for example, refer to it as to an established fact.<sup>8</sup> Is it a fact? Undoubtedly, ethnographic and historical studies provide evidence of great cultural diversity between people; but the critical issue is whether the embedded ethical differences are of the radical kind that cultural relativism supposes—that is, differences such as to exclude common ground or to defy possible mediation. In fact, the evidence for ethical difference of the required kind appears greatly exaggerated (as Michele Moody-Adams has argued persuasively in a recent book).<sup>9</sup> The standard examples, in the writings of anthropologists and philosophers who draw on them, relate to specific practices in the major areas of human relationships, the treatment of the young and the very old, rules of kinship and sexual practices, and relations with others beyond the identified group. The recurring examples concern such practices as ritual headhunting, the exposure of infants or the very old to death, polygamy, strange initiation practices, callousness in regard to animal suffering.

These different practices are, of course, elements in the larger set of beliefs, traditions and values which constitute the world of the different culture. The task of describing precisely what the people believe, how their institutional arrangements work, what they are doing in particular situations, how they understand what they are doing, is long and demanding. Among other things it requires familiarity with the language, or languages, of the people concerned. Even then, in giving accounts of unfamiliar

practices, ethnographers have to cope with a standard problem of under-determination, of not knowing enough or as much as they would like about the people in question. But let us agree that these difficulties have been overcome to a satisfactory level in a large number of impressive studies. Two considerations are now relevant. First, the standard examples of ethical difference concerned with the treatment of the young and the old, family organisation, and so on, do not manifest radical difference to the exclusion of more general common ground, for example, the existence in every society of provisions for caring for the young and for sharing goods and compensating harms. Taking account of differences in beliefs and circumstances, and allowing that the same basic value (courage, for example) can be expressed differently in different social forms, the evidence for radical difference of the specified kind is curiously elusive.

The second query concerns the assumption that cross-cultural studies describe ethical practices on the basis of empirical data established in evaluatively neutral terms. The point is that we are able to ascribe values to others only because we hold some related values ourselves. We are able to recognise that the others are engaged in evaluation only by being engaged in the practice ourselves. How could observers pick out the moral phenomena of a different way of life, or even decide that a people have moral beliefs, except on the basis of making connections which grow out of their own grasp of moral ideas? That is, the establishment of common ethical ground is the first and necessary step in identifying and making sense of ethical differences.<sup>10</sup> This process, at least in its original setting, is a practical enterprise. One who would give an adequate account of the ethical beliefs of the people of another culture must live with them for a time, build up relationships with them and share their life to some degree. This would not be possible without the establishment of a degree of trust expressed in a range of value-laden practices which have to do with meeting ordinary human needs for food and shelter and with promoting informative, truth-telling communication on each side. In a word, we find that the



parties concerned, like Nietzsche's sailors on the open sea, have need for the common moral qualities of truthfulness, trust, honesty, courage, hope and generosity.

Clearly, these remarks do not settle the matter, but they provide good reason for thinking that the prevailing opposition to talk of common ethical ground is not well founded. My general hypothesis is that local forms of ethics might be seen in important respects as distinctive ways of dealing with common conditions, possibilities, and problems related to the kind of beings we are and the world we inhabit. These factors provide a broad framework for morality and shape the character of the many forms it has taken in different times and places.

It is important to recognise the limited character of the ethical generality which is involved in this approach. Specifically, it is not part of a project for a universal ethics or a single true morality which could be detached from specific forms of human life and then re-applied universally as a generic formula. The relevant generality, built around the idea of common factors and the rather bare notion of a range of broadly identifiable virtues and vices, could not serve this universalist role. The recognition of common ground in different ethical forms could not take the place of the substantive ethics of particular times and places. What it offers, rather, is support for the view that, while our thinking about ethical issues is always at a time and place, we are able to go beyond the constraints of the merely local perspective. In this way, the recognition of common ground could be linked with the idea of agreement in ethical judgments, albeit at a very general level, and provide the basis for a related notion of ethical objectivity. In this context, the recognition of common ground helps to provide reasonable confidence that we, and others, have some ethical knowledge which is as firm as any knowledge human beings can have (allowing that there is dispute on many matters and much that we do not know). To explore these ideas further, I propose to consider some of the ways in which our moral understanding and experience is shaped by conditions of dependence on others, beginning in childhood

and continuing in different ways throughout our lives.

Before that, however, I want to round off the present discussion by commenting briefly on the claim that we 'find' common ground with others because we construct it in the very process of interpreting their views from the standpoint of our own perspective; and that this is expressed typically in a form of ethical imperialism. In reply, it is clear that our own moral understanding does indeed provide the basis for understanding others. This emphasises the importance of being sensitive to the scope for misunderstanding and mistakes and the need for caution in drawing conclusions (whether of sameness or difference). But it does not follow that we are caught in a viciously expanding circle in which the interpreter constantly reconstructs the other in his or her own likeness. This is put in question precisely by the widespread recognition that different people do hold different ethical views. The recognition of difference in itself, however, is a two-edged sword. In the history of unhappy confrontations between cultures, the conviction about difference commonly assumes that these others are not fully human in some privileged sense and can be swept aside. Against this, a willingness to recognise common ethical ground across difference could make all the difference.

The moral ground can be divided in different ways in these situations. Take a familiar example. Representatives of colonial powers, convinced of the superiority of their way of life and its associated values, frequently did untold harm to the way of life of indigenous peoples. On the other hand, it was precisely in the name of a common humanity and the conviction that values such as fairness, truthfulness and respect have general import that others spoke out against the wrongs done to indigenous peoples in driving them from their land and undermining their way of life. Australian society in the nineteenth century, and to the present time, provides a good example of divided moral ground in this domain; and the issues are yet to be resolved.

What is at stake once again is the recognition that the same value, broadly conceived, may be expressed differently in

different cultures. In commenting on the interpretative study of cultures, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz proposed two guiding principles: (a) 'to see others as sharing a nature with ourselves' as a matter of 'the merest decency'; and (b) '[to see] ourselves amongst others, as a local example of the forms human life has taken locally, a case among cases, a world among worlds'.<sup>11</sup> The task of recognising ourselves as 'a local example of the forms human life has taken locally' relates to overcoming the temptation to generalise our own standpoint. But this undertaking does not, in fact, suppose that we could, or should, retreat to the closed world of a purely local perspective. On the contrary, the achievement of realising our ethical or cultural particularity would not be possible without a general, albeit revisable, conception of human life and ethical values. In any case, notwithstanding the force of the myth of Babel, no culture is an island 'whole and entire to itself', but is shaped through relations to other times, other places, other ways of life. In short, a local ethics typically involves a window on the world.

### Human well-being, dependence on others, and the virtues

In the remaining part of this paper, I want to consider some of the ways in which the general human condition of dependence on others shapes the character of morality, allowing that relevant practices differ in different cultures. The salient forms of dependence arise in childhood and old age and in periods of illness; but a moment's thought makes clear that forms of dependence, and inter-dependence, run across human activity and social life at every stage of our existence—engagement in teaching and learning in a school or university provides a primary example. The theme of dependence and its connection with the virtues has been explored recently in a recent study by Alasdair MacIntyre: I am indebted to this study, though in taking up the topic I am returning to themes which I first discussed about a decade ago in a book on moral development.<sup>12</sup>

I am treating moral philosophy here as continuous with

ordinary moral inquiry about what is important and worthwhile in human life. This is moral inquiry in the Socratic sense of asking how one should live, taking its stand broadly with the Aristotelian view that questions about ethics are continuous with questions about what is involved in living a human life, in which notions of good and bad are based on the consideration that we are an animal species of a particular kind marked by a range of broadly identifiable characteristics, capacities and powers. In the setting of a particular time and place, the focal question then concerns the well-being of beings of this kind, the terms in which they can be said to live well. There is considerable disagreement about this, as my subsequent critique of some of Nietzsche's views will make clear. Nevertheless, the topic includes matters about which we know some important things if we know anything at all.

An approach which stresses the consideration that we are an animal species of a particular kind might be thought to give too much weight to biological considerations. But the approach is shorthand for much else, for the terms in which things can go well or badly run across the whole range of human capacities and powers at each stage of life, and relate to the forms of social and political organisation and practice we develop and the environment in which we live. Ideally, the project calls for a philosophical anthropology as well as attention to the particularities of time and place. But it is important to recognise that people everywhere can have a genuine understanding of what it is to be human and to live an ethical life without having to provide a theory of human nature. Take an example. We express our humanness, in Primo Levi's words:

through the ability to love or remember or share or feel gratitude, to be something more than a bundle of 'suffering and needs', more than someone else's instrument; through the ability to value time or recognise other worlds, to do good or imagine the possibility of doing it, to act, even hopelessly, against oppression.<sup>13</sup>

One could object that this begs the question of common ground

since moral considerations enter into the account of what it is to be human. Levi's remarks, we know, relate to a particular aspect of his own experience, prompted by reflections on the profound evil which human beings effected in the Holocaust. But the remarks serve to make the general point that the attempt to understand what it is to be human inevitably and properly brings in moral considerations; it also reflects the fact that moral inquiry necessarily arises *in medias res*. One has to make a beginning somewhere; what matters then is how the inquiry proceeds, especially in meeting appropriate standards of argument and evaluation. In the present instance, my inquiry concerns our dependence on others, especially in childhood. I think that this is a good place to begin; but I have to point out that the discussion will not take the issues very far.

Consider a child and those who have primary care for it, usually the child's parents, or at least one of its parents. What very young children need if they are to do well is an immense amount of attention on the part of their carers relating to their need for food, warmth, sleep, security, protection from harm, and not least the need for on-going human company, all as an expression of sustained love of a broadly unconditional kind. The care that is directed to the child, supposing the child is fortunate, is concerned in the first place with meeting his or her immediate needs. But this care also has medium and long-term directions, preparing the child for the next stage of development where, for example, she learns to walk and talk and to develop a sense of self, and on through the long process of learning and growth in childhood and adolescence to some broadly envisaged stage of maturity.

The needs that are met by parental care identify a domain of what is good for the child, though of course the child has no awareness of that until much later. On the other hand, the task of meeting the needs calls for a broadly identifiable range of moral qualities on the part of carers: good practical judgment based on a working knowledge of what children need, loving commitment, responsibility, self-control, patience, courage, fairness, good

humour even when the going is hard, and a willingness to let go, to let children become their own persons, to move into worlds beyond this particular relationship, and eventually to assume responsibility for their lives. What emerges is a case for seeing the carer-child relationship as a paradigm for moral relationships and moral authority. For the carer has to take responsibility for the well-being of the child; and this includes responsibility for helping the child to acquire the qualities which make it possible to become a person who cares about his or her own well-being and the well-being of others.

As everyone knows, the task is immensely difficult. Quite apart from the many cases of neglect, exploitation or abuse, the early learning of the child, as MacIntyre comments, is characteristically imperfect learning at the hands of imperfect teachers who were once imperfect learners themselves.<sup>14</sup> In advance of the insights of Freudian psychoanalysis, Nietzsche pushed this consideration to a further level:

Parents involuntarily make of their child something similar to themselves—they call it ‘education’—and at the bottom of her heart no mother doubts that she has borne a piece of property, no father disputes his right to subject it to *his* concepts and values.<sup>15</sup>

What Nietzsche marks out is a genuine problem in education, not the whole truth; the critical point is that the task can be done well or badly and is subject to evaluation (as Nietzsche’s own comment makes clear). Along with this combative reflection, one could juxtapose Hegel’s observation in *The Philosophy of Right* that ‘children are potentially free ... Consequently they are not things and cannot be the property either of their parents or others’.<sup>16</sup> Hegel’s subsequent account of the basis of an ethical life is that early ethical education consists best in conveying principles ‘in the form of immediate feeling for which differences are not yet explicit, so that thus equipped with the basis of an ethical life, the child’s heart may live its early years in love, trust, and obedience’. In short, ethical education in the beginning is grounded in the affections, especially in love and trust. Later education can then take this further to the level of habit acquired

through encouragement and constraint, to the point at which children have their own lives and freedom of personality, their independence and responsibility. Clearly, an account on these lines has the character of an ideal, if one thinks of the moral evil, ignorance and failure which commonly blights human development. But that is not an objection, since it is only in terms of standards of well-being that relative success or failure can be assessed.

What do we need to have acquired on the long road to independent responsibility? The short answer is that we need to have acquired the knowledge and dispositions which our carers and teachers originally needed in helping to get us to that point, viz., good practical judgment concerning human well-being, our own and others, the ability to distinguish between a good reason for action and forms of self-indulgence (for example), self-knowledge, some knowledge of others and the world, of connections between actions and their outcomes, a power of imagination to be able to envisage different possibilities, critical detachment combined with willingness to take advice from others, self-control, a concern for justice, truthfulness, courage in facing difficulties, generosity, a capacity for love and friendship, a willingness to accept difference, and the like.

There is no implication here, of course, that the social relationships involved in the care and education of children subsume the whole domain of human well-being and morality. Their significance is that they constitute, for better or worse, the primary matrix of development and provide the original ground for the qualities which bear centrally on human well-being; but circles of wider relationships are present from the beginning and build out to the complex set of communities of the larger society and world in which one comes to live. Childhood is the primary age of dependence, but mutual dependence continues in any complex enterprise, and dependence returns, albeit in different ways, in illness and old age.

The question for consideration is this. What difference does recognition of original and continuing dependence make to a

more general understanding of human well-being and moral values? The answer is that, in addition to the qualities which allow us to assume independence, we need also to have acquired what MacIntyre calls virtues of acknowledged dependence. The social relationships through which we become responsible moral beings are essentially networks of giving and receiving in which 'the good of each cannot be pursued without also pursuing the good of all those who participate in those relationships'.<sup>17</sup> This emphasis draws attention to the neglected idea of the common good—that is, goods to which one has access as member of a community, goods that one person has, not in opposition to the other, but insofar as the other has them as well. To participate in social relationships of this form is to recognise what we owe to particular others, to return support to them as appropriate, and to extend it in our turn to others. With reference to giving, the primary virtues of acknowledged dependence are a commitment to justice enlarged by generosity and, more generally, the disposition to help those who are in need; with reference to receiving, it is a matter of appropriate gratitude and courtesy. In addition, it is clear that the virtues which mark independence also involve a framework of dependence, as one can see if one thinks about justice, truthfulness, courage, and the capacity for love and friendship. These familiar considerations have radical bearing on how we conceive the common moral ideal of independence, self-sufficiency and responsibility. They have similar importance for our thinking about social, economic and political relationships if these are to be structured around an effective concern for common good in conjunction with individual good.

By way of conclusion, I want to draw out these points by returning to Nietzsche's image of the open sea to ask again how his sailors might fare given his well-known commitment to an ethical and political standpoint in which dependence on others is treated as deeply problematic. The open sea lies 'in the horizon of the infinite'; it is a world which 'may include infinite interpretations'. In this vein Nietzsche observes (in *Thus Spoke*



*Zarathustra*) that there are many different peoples, many different types of human beings, hence many different forms of life and morality. A second significant theme in his ethical thinking (elaborated in the same source) involves an emphasis on creating one's own table of what is good, giving oneself laws, creating oneself: 'Can you furnish yourself with your own good and evil and hang up your own will above yourself as a law? Can you be judge of yourself and avenger of your law?'<sup>18</sup>

Some readers take these ideas as a Nietzschean endorsement of an ethical free-for-all. This is completely at odds in fact with Nietzsche's considered view, though he certainly rejected the project for a universal morality. It is important to recognise that, for Nietzsche, the task of creating values rests with rare types of human being, with sovereign individuals who forge a new way of thinking and who enrich people's experience and make it possible for others to see differently and to live differently. Such types are marked by an authority which comes from self-mastery, bold courage in taking risks and facing dangers, utter truthfulness, reverence for the self, and freedom from resentment or ill-will. They are marked in particular by 'lofty spiritual independence, the will to stand alone'; and he comments 'few are made for independence—it is a privilege of the strong'. As for the ordinary run of people:

... ever since there have been human beings there have also been human herds (family groups, communities, tribes, nations, states, churches), and always very many who obey compared with the very small number of those who command.<sup>19</sup>

At the heart of Nietzsche's ethics is 'an ideal of human, superhuman well-being' which he calls 'the great health': 'a new health, stronger, more seasoned, tougher, more audacious, and more cheerful than any previous health' which can be attained by the few—this, in contrast with what he saw as the weak, sick, mediocre, miserable health of contemporary herd culture.<sup>20</sup> At the heart of his politics is the related conviction that human societies can be justified only through the rare individuals who transform a culture and give it new health and meaning. The

urgency of these ideas in Nietzsche's thought lies in the belief that European culture, once sustained by Christianity and Platonism, has lost its way and is wracked by a debilitating loss of belief. The critical issue is whether the coming age will give rise to the exceptional beings of great health who will create new meaning and values beyond the shipwreck of the current loss of meaning. Who then are the sailors on Nietzsche's boat and what undiscovered country will they seek?

His diagnosis of the illness of his time—and ours—is marked by considerable power and insight. At the same time, as we have seen, the moral map which he draws for his argonauts of the open sea overlaps considerably with the moral map of its predecessors in the Jewish, Greek and Christian worlds. Nietzsche, of course, is concerned with future possibility, and clearly no map of the future could possibly be complete. But his moral map is marked by a critical absence: it has little or no place for the conditions and forms of human association. In his emphasis on lofty spiritual independence and the 'pathos of distance', questions about social relationships are placed largely in the category of herd culture. In this framework, relationships of dependence fall under particular disdain.

This standpoint emerges notoriously in Nietzsche's characterisation of pity, identified as the central virtue of herd morality, as a sick and debilitating quality. About this one could say that what he objects to are forms of self-deceiving pity which distort genuine benevolence; or that he is espousing a Stoic view in which pity for those in need is seen as misplaced on the grounds that the morally good person is self-sufficient and is not genuinely harmed by sickness or misfortune. There is point in these comments to the extent that the Nietzschean noble individual may, from a distance, exercise benevolence out of a spirit of abundance. But actual concern for the weak or helpless, whatever the circumstances, is incompatible with his conception of strength and well-being, whether in the strong individual or in society as a whole. In this vein, his fundamental objection to pity relates to what pity effects: he rejects it because '[Pity]

preserves what is ripe for destruction; it defends life's disinherited and condemned; through the abundance of the ill-constituted of all kinds which it *retains* in life it gives itself a gloomy and questionable aspect'.<sup>21</sup>

To refer for a last time to Nietzsche's sailors. We can suppose that they are all sovereign individuals, marked by spiritual independence and the related virtues to which he draws attention. Being equal in strength, they may also be friends; but since there is no place for acknowledged dependence, friendship cannot be linked with shared needs; it arises rather as a form of rivalry among the strong: 'In your friend you should possess your best enemy. Your heart should feel closest to him when you oppose him'.<sup>22</sup> One can suppose that in this agonistic spirit the sailors co-operate competitively so far as is necessary to deal with the elements and avoid shipwreck. What they cannot do is to acknowledge that they are engaged in a common task around a common good in which they have need of one another. The pathos of distance thus rests on a form of self-deception. In political terms, the adventurous sailors constitute a loose-knit aristocracy of individuals. Where then is everyone else, the common herd? One has to suppose that they remain in the land of the past; the best hope is that word of the new world will come to them eventually across the distance; and while their values will remain broadly herd values, the hope is that they might be free from resentment towards higher types, the sovereign individuals who embody 'great health'.

This account of ethical and political relationships rests on an illusion. The illusion is that rare, great individuals are fully self-sufficient, that they erupt into the world with all their creative forces fully developed from within. Human beings, even very superior human beings, come into possession of their powers only through a long period of growth from childhood, in relationships of dependence on others; their self-sufficiency and achievement is sustained only in relation to others; and if they live long enough they too will need the support of others in old age. Nietzsche's critique of traditional morality cuts deep, and

his ethical thought is of continuing significance. However, his vision of individuals of great health, of argonauts who strike out for an undiscovered country, is flawed in its origins. What is missing is attention to the basis of an ethical life in the carer-child relationship and acknowledgement of dependence, and inter-dependence, in the other primary forms of human association.

#### Notes

- 1 Carolus Boyer SJ, *Cursus Philosophiae ad usum seminariorum*, 2 vols, Paris, 1937.
- 2 '[Philosophia est] scientia omnium rerum per ultimas causas naturali rationis lumine comparata', Boyer, p.46.
- 3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann, New York, 1974, §124; and see §374.
- 4 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §124.
- 5 Philosophers sometimes draw a distinction between ethics and morality. This may be appropriate in certain contexts for various purposes; but in the context of this paper I will be using the terms interchangeably.
- 6 Michel Foucault's ethical writings, especially the volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, have been influential in this respect; see also *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, vol. I of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, ed. Paul Rabinow, Harmondsworth, 1997; for another important reference, see Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, Los Angeles, 1993.
- 7 Iris Murdoch has given contemporary voice to this dimension of moral experience in *The Sovereignty of the Good*, London, 1970, also in some of the essays in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, London, 1992, and *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, London, 1997; see also Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, London, 1991, and *A Common Humanity*, Melbourne, 1999.
- 8 See J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Harmondsworth, 1977, especially Part One, §8 'The argument from relativity', pp.36-8; and Bernard Williams, 'Who needs ethical knowledge?', in *Making Sense of Humanity*, Cambridge, 1995, pp.203-12.
- 9 Michele M. Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture and Philosophy*, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1997; see Chapters 1 and 2 in particular where Moody-Adams argues that 'serious moral disagreements—if they are genuinely moral disagreements—will always be disagreements in the secondary "details" of morality, not in ultimate

- or fundamental principles and beliefs' (p.16).
- 10 The standpoint that is intimated here rests on a general argument concerning the conditions for interpretation developed in particular by Donald Davidson; Davidson puts the argument in an ethical context succinctly: 'Just as in coming to the best understanding I can of your beliefs, I must find you coherent and correct, so I must match up your values with mine: not of course in all matters, but in enough to give point to our differences', *Expressing Evaluations*, University of Kansas, 1982, p.18; more generally, see Donald Davidson, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' in *Inquiries into Truth and Meaning*, Oxford, 1984; see also, Barry Stroud, *The Study of Human Nature*, Tanner Lectures on Human Values, X, Salt Lake City, 1988; and Susan Hurley, *Natural Reasons: personality and polity*, Oxford, 1989.
  - 11 Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: further essays in interpretative anthropology*, New York, 1983, p.16.
  - 12 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, London, 1999; Paul Crittenden, *Learning to be Moral: Philosophical Thoughts about Moral Development*, New Jersey and London, 1990.
  - 13 The words are quoted from Michael Wood, 'The Problem of Reality' in *The London Review of Books* 20: 19 (1 Oct. 1998): 5, a review of Myriam Anissimov's biography of Levi, *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist*, trans. Steve Cox, London, 1998; these various 'definitions' of humanity are offered in Primo Levi, *If This is a Man*, trans. S. Wolf, Sydney, 1963, and *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans R. Rosenthal, New York, 1988.
  - 14 MacIntyre, p.84.
  - 15 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth, 1973, §194.
  - 16 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford, 1952, §175, p.117.
  - 17 MacIntyre, p.107; see chapter 10 for his illuminating discussion of the virtues of acknowledged dependence.
  - 18 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth, 1969, Part I, §15; and §17
  - 19 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §199; and see §§29 and 201.
  - 20 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §382; and see *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Kaufmann, New York, 1967, Second Essay, §24.
  - 21 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth, 1968, §7.
  - 22 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part I, §14.