

# Some Questions of Moral Philosophy

BY HANNAH ARENDT

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After the publication, in 1963, of *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Hannah Arendt's attention became focused on moral and ethical questions. On February 10, 1965, at the New School for Social Research, she initiated a series of lectures entitled "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy." What follows is the introductory lecture, which, in an edited version, is published here for the first time. The subsequent lectures deal with issues in ethics and politics, ethics and philosophy, ethics and religion, and conclude with a consideration of judging as the connection between political and moral activity. The entire lecture series will be published in *Hannah Arendt: Essays in Understanding 1953-1975*, forthcoming from Harcourt Brace & Company.

Jerome Kohn

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. The thoughts of many of us, I suppose, have wandered back during the last weeks to Winston Spencer Churchill, the greatest statesman thus far of our century, who just died after an incredibly long life, the summit of which was reached at the threshold of old age. This happenstance, if such it was, like almost everything he stood for in his convictions, in his writings, in the grand but not grandiose manner of his speeches, stood in conspicuous contrast to whatever we may think the *Zeitgeist* of this age to be. It is perhaps this contrast that touches us most when we consider his greatness. He has been called a figure of the eighteenth century driven into the twentieth as though the

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virtues of the past had taken over our destinies in their most desperate crisis, and this, I think, is true as far as it goes. But perhaps there is more to it. It is as though, in this shifting of centuries, some permanent eminence of the human spirit flashed up for an historically brief moment to show that whatever makes for greatness—nobility, dignity, steadfastness, and a kind of laughing courage—remains essentially the same throughout the centuries.

Still, Churchill, so old-fashioned or, as I have suggested, beyond the fashions of the times, was by no means unaware of the decisive currents or undercurrents of the age in which he lived. He wrote the following words about thirty years ago when the true monstrosities of the century were yet unknown: "Scarcely anything, material or established, which I was brought up to believe was permanent and vital, has lasted. Everything I was sure, or was taught to be sure, was impossible, has happened." I wanted to mention these succinct words which, alas, became fully true only some years after they were uttered, in order to introduce, right at the beginning of these lectures, the basic experiences which invariably lie behind or beneath them. Among the many things which were still thought to be "permanent and vital" at the beginning of the century and yet have not lasted, I chose to turn our attention to the moral issues, those which concern individual conduct and behavior, the few rules and standards according to which men used to tell right from wrong, and which were invoked to judge or justify others and themselves, and whose validity were supposed to be self-evident to every sane person either as a part of divine or of natural law. Until, that is, without much notice, all this collapsed almost overnight, and then it was as though morality suddenly stood revealed in the original meaning of the word, as a set of *mores*, customs and manners, which could be exchanged for another set with hardly more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of an individual or a people. How strange and how frightening it suddenly appeared that the very terms we use to designate

these things—morality, with its Latin origin, and ethics, with its Greek origin—should never have meant more than usages and habits. And also that two thousand five hundred years of thought, in literature, philosophy and religion, should not have brought forth another word, notwithstanding all the highflown phrases, all assertions and preachings about the existence of a conscience which speaks with an identical voice to all men. What had happened? Did we finally awake from a dream?

To be sure, a few had known before that there was something wrong with this assumption of self-evidence for moral commandments as though the “Thou shalt not bear false testimony” could ever have the same validity as the statement: two and two equal four. Nietzsche’s quest for “new values” certainly was a clear indication of the devaluation of what his time called “values” and what former times more correctly had called virtues. You remember that the only standard he came up with was Life itself, and his criticism of the traditional and essentially Christian virtues was guided by the much more general insight that not only all Christian but also all Platonic ethics use yardsticks and measurements which are not derived from this world but from something beyond it—be it the sky of ideas stretching over the dark cave of strictly human affairs or the truly transcendent beyond of a divinely ordained afterlife. Nietzsche called himself a moralist, and no doubt he was; but to establish life as the highest good is actually, so far as ethics are concerned, question-begging, since all ethics, Christian or non-Christian, presuppose that life is *not* the highest good for mortal men and that there is always more at stake in life than the sustenance and procreation of individual living organisms. That which is at stake may vary greatly: it may be greatness and fame as in Pre-Socratic Greece; it may be the permanence of the city as in Roman virtue; it may be the health of the soul in this life, or the salvation of the soul in the hereafter; and it may be freedom or justice, or many more such things.

Were these things or principles, from which all virtues are ultimately derived, mere values which could be exchanged against other values whenever people changed their minds about them? And would they, as Nietzsche seems to indicate, all go overboard before the overriding claim of Life itself? To be sure, he could not have known that the existence of mankind as a whole could ever be put into jeopardy by human conduct, and in this marginal event one could indeed argue that Life, the survival of the world and the human species, is the highest good. But this would mean no more than that any ethics or morality would simply cease to exist. And in principle this thought was anticipated by the question implicit in the old Latin saying, *Fiat justitia, pereat mundus*: Should the world perish that justice be done? This question was answered by Kant: "If justice perishes, human life on earth has lost its meaning" ("*Wenn die Gerechtigkeit untergeht, hat es keinen Wert mehr, dass Menschen auf Erden leben*"). Hence, the only new moral principle, proclaimed in modern times, turns out to be not the assertion of "new values" but the negation of morality as such, although Nietzsche, of course, did not know this. And it is his abiding greatness that he dared to demonstrate how shabby and meaningless morality had become.

Churchill's words were uttered in the form of a statement, but we, too full of the wisdom of hindsight, shall be tempted to read them also as a premonition. And if it were just a question of premonitions, I could indeed add an astounding number of quotations which would go back at least to the first third of the eighteenth century. The point of the matter for us, however, is that we deal no longer with premonitions but with facts.

We—at least the older ones among us—have witnessed the total collapse of all established moral standards in public and private life during the 1930s and 40s, not only (as is now usually assumed) in Hitler's Germany but also in Stalin's Russia, where at this moment questions are being asked by the younger generation that have a great resemblance to those currently debated in Germany. Still, the differences between

the two are significant enough to be mentioned. It has often been noted that the Russian Revolution caused social upheaval and social remolding of the entire nation unparalleled even in the wake of Nazi Germany's radical fascist dictatorship, which, it is true, left the property relation almost intact and did not eliminate the dominant groups in society. From this, it usually is concluded that what happened in the Third Reich was by nature and not only by historical accident less permanent and less extreme. This may or may not be true with respect to strictly political developments, but it certainly is a fallacy if we regard the issue of morality. Seen from a strictly moral viewpoint, Stalin's crimes were, so to speak, old fashioned; like an ordinary criminal, he never admitted them but kept them surrounded in a cloud of hypocrisy and doubletalk while his followers justified them as temporary means in the pursuit of the "good" cause, or, if they happened to be a bit more sophisticated, by the laws of history to which the revolutionary has to submit and sacrifice himself if need be. Nothing in Marxism, moreover, despite all the talk about "bourgeois morality," announces a new set of moral values. If anything is characteristic of Lenin or Trotsky as the representatives of the professional revolutionary, it is the naive belief that once the social circumstances are changed through revolution, mankind will follow automatically the few moral precepts that have been known and repeated since the dawn of history.

In this respect, the German developments are much more extreme and perhaps also more revealing. There is not only the gruesome fact of elaborately established death factories and the utter absence of hypocrisy in those very substantial numbers who were involved in the extermination program. Equally important, but perhaps more frightening, was the matter-of-course collaboration from all strata of German society, including the older elites which the Nazis left untouched, and who never identified themselves with the party in power. I think it is justifiable on factual grounds to maintain that morally, though not socially, the Nazi regime was

much more extreme than the Stalin regime at its worst. It did indeed announce a new set of values and introduced a legal system designed in accordance with them. It proved, moreover, that no one had to be a convinced Nazi to conform, and to forget overnight, as it were, not his social status, but the moral convictions which once went with it.

In the discussion of these matters, and especially in the general moral denunciation of the Nazi crimes, it is almost always overlooked that the true moral issue did not arise with the behavior of the Nazis but of those who only "coordinated" themselves and did not act out of conviction. It is not too difficult to see and even to understand how someone may decide "to prove a villain" and, given the opportunity, to try out a reversal of the Decalogue, starting with the command: "Thou shalt kill" and ending with a precept: "Thou shalt lie." A number of criminals, as we know only too well, are present in every community, and while most of them suffer from a rather limited imagination, it may be conceded that a few of them probably are no less gifted than Hitler and some of his henchmen. What these people did was horrible, and the way they organized first Germany and then Nazi-occupied Europe is of great interest for political science and the study of forms of government; but neither the one nor the other poses any moral problems. Morality collapsed into a mere set of mores—manners, customs, conventions to be changed at will—not with criminals, but with ordinary people, who, as long as moral standards were socially accepted, never dreamt of doubting what they had been taught to believe in. And this matter, that is, the problem it raises, is not resolved if we admit, as we must, that the Nazi doctrine did not remain with the German people, that Hitler's criminal morality was changed back again at a moment's notice, at the moment "history" had given the notice of defeat. Hence, we must say that we witnessed the total collapse of a "moral" order not once but twice, and this sudden return to "normality," contrary to

what is often complacently assumed, can only reinforce our doubts.

When I think back to the last two decades since the end of the last war, I have the feeling that this moral issue has lain dormant because it was concealed by something about which it is indeed much more difficult to speak and with which it is almost impossible to come to terms—the horror itself in its naked monstrosity. When we were first confronted with it, it seemed, not only to me but to many others, to transcend all moral categories as it certainly exploded all juridical standards. You could express this in various ways. I used to say, this is something which should never have happened, for men will be unable to punish it or forgive it. We shall not be able to become reconciled to it, to come to terms with it, as we must with everything that is past—either because it was bad and we need to overcome it or because it was good and we cannot bear to let it go. It is a past which has grown worse as the years have gone by, and this is partly because the Germans for such a long time refused to prosecute even the murderers among themselves, but partly also because this past could not be “mastered” by anybody. Even the famous healing power of time has somehow failed us. On the contrary, this past has managed to grow worse as the years went by so that we are sometimes tempted to think: this will never be over as long as we are not all dead. No doubt, this is partly due to the complacency of the Adenauer regime which for such a long time did absolutely nothing about the famous “murderers within our midst” and did not regard participation in the Hitler regime, unless it bordered on criminality, as a reason to disqualify anybody for public office. But these are, I think, only partial explanations: the fact is also that this past has turned out to be “unmastered” by everybody, not only by the German nation. And the inability of civilized courtroom procedure to come to terms with it in juridical form, its insistence on pretending that these new-fangled murderers are in no way different from ordinary ones and acted out of the same motives, is only one, though perhaps in

the long run the most fateful, consequence of this state of affairs. I will not speak about this here where we deal with moral, not legal issues. What I wanted to indicate is that the same speechless horror, this refusal to think the unthinkable, has perhaps prevented a very necessary reappraisal of legal categories as it has made us forget the strictly moral, and, one hopes, more manageable, lessons which are closely connected with the whole story but which look like harmless side issues if compared with the horror.

Unfortunately, there is one more aspect to be reckoned with as an obstacle in our enterprise. Since people find it difficult, and rightly so, to live with something that takes their breath away and renders them speechless, they have all too frequently yielded to the obvious temptation to translate their speechlessness into whatever expressions for emotions were close at hand, all of them inadequate. As a result, today the whole story is usually told in terms of sentiments which need not even be cheap in themselves to sentimentalize and cheapen the story. There are very few examples for which this is not true, and these are mostly unrecognized or unknown. The whole atmosphere in which things are discussed today is overcharged with emotions, often of a not very high caliber, and whoever raises these questions must expect to be dragged down, if at all possible, to a level on which nothing serious can be discussed at all. However that may be, let us keep in mind this distinction between the speechless horror, in which one learns nothing other than what can be directly communicated, and the not horrible but often disgusting experiences where people's conduct is open to normal judgment and where the question of morals and ethics arises.

I said that the moral issue lay dormant for a considerable time, implying that it has come to life during the last few years. What has made it come to life? There are, as I see it, several interconnected matters which tend to be cumulative. There was first and most importantly the effect of the post-war trials of the so-called war criminals. What was decisive here was the



simple fact of courtroom procedure that forced everybody, even political scientists, to look at these matters from a moral viewpoint. It is, I think, well-known that there exists hardly a walk of life in which you will find people as wary and suspicious of moral standards, even of the standard of justice, as in the legal professions. The modern social and psychological sciences have, of course, also contributed to this general skepticism. And yet, the simple fact of courtroom procedure in criminal cases, the sequence of accusation-defense-judgment that persists in all the varieties of legal systems and is as old as recorded history, defies all scruples and doubts—not, to be sure, in the sense that it can put them to rest, but in the sense that this particular institution rests on the assumption of personal responsibility and guilt, on the one hand, and on a belief in the functioning of conscience on the other. Legal and moral issues are by no means the same, but they have in common that they deal with persons and not with systems or organizations.

It is the undeniable greatness of the judiciary that it must focus its attention on the individual person, and that even in the age of mass society where everybody is tempted to regard himself as a mere cog in some kind of machinery—be it the well-oiled machinery of some huge bureaucratic enterprise, social, political or professional, or the chaotic, ill-adjusted chance pattern of circumstances under which we all somehow spend our lives. The almost automatic shifting of responsibility that habitually takes place in modern society comes to a sudden halt the moment you enter a courtroom. All justifications of a non-specific abstract nature—everything from the *Zeitgeist* down to the Oedipus complex that indicates that you are not a man but a function of something and, hence, yourself an exchangeable thing rather than a somebody—break down. No matter what the scientific fashions of the time may say, no matter how much they may have penetrated public opinion and, hence, also influenced the practitioners of the law, the institution itself defies, and must defy them all, or pass out of

existence. And the moment you come to the individual person, the question to be raised is no longer, how did this system function, but why did the defendant become a functionary in this organization?

This, of course, is not to deny that it is important to the political and social sciences to understand the functioning of totalitarian governments, to probe into the essence of bureaucracy and its inevitable tendency to make functionaries of men, mere cogs in the administrative machinery, and thus to dehumanize them. The point is that the administration of justice can consider these factors only to the extent that they are circumstances, perhaps mitigating ones, of whatever a man of flesh and blood did. In a perfect bureaucracy—which in terms of rulership is the rule by nobody—courtroom procedure would be superfluous, one would simply have to exchange unfit cogs against fitter ones. When Hitler said that he hoped for the day when it would be considered a disgrace in Germany to be a jurist he spoke with great consistency of his dream of a perfect bureaucracy.

The speechless horror which I mentioned before as an adequate reaction to the system as a whole dissolves in the courtroom where we deal with persons in the ordered discourse of accusation, defense, and judgment. The reason why these courtroom procedures could bring to life specifically moral questions—which is not the case in the trials of ordinary criminals—is obvious; these people were not ordinary criminals but rather very ordinary people who had committed crimes with more or less enthusiasm, simply because they did what they had been told to do. Among them, there were also ordinary criminals who could do with impunity under the Nazi system what they had always wanted to do. But much as the sadists and perverts stood in the limelight in the publicity of these trials, in our context they are of less interest.

I think it can be shown that these trials led to a more general probing into the specific share of guilt of those who did not belong to any of the criminal categories but who played their

role in the regime nevertheless, or whoever only kept silent and tolerated things as they were when they were in a position to speak out. You remember the outcry that greeted Hochhuth's accusation of Pope Pius XII and also my own book on the Eichmann Trial. If we disregard the voices of directly interested parties—the Vatican or Jewish organizations—the outstanding characteristic in these “controversies” was the overwhelming interest in strictly moral issues. Even more striking than this interest was perhaps the incredible moral confusion these debates have revealed, together with an odd tendency to take the side of the culprit, whoever he might be at the moment. There was a whole chorus of voices that assured me that “there sits an Eichmann in everyone of us” just as there was a whole chorus that told Hochhuth that not Pope Pius XII—after all only one man and one Pope—was guilty but all of Christianity and even the whole human race. The only true culprits, it frequently was felt and even said, were people like Hochhuth and myself who dared to sit in judgment; for no one can judge who had not been in the same circumstances under which, presumably, one would have behaved like all others. This position, incidentally, coincided oddly with Eichmann's view on these matters.

In other words, while the moral issues were hotly debated, they were at the same time sidestepped and evaded with equal eagerness. And this was not due to the specific issues under discussion but seems to happen whenever moral topics are discussed, not in general but in a particular case. Thus, I am reminded of an incident a few years ago in connection with the famous quiz show cheating on television. An article by Hans Morgenthau in *The New York Times Magazine* (“Reaction to the Van Doren Reaction,” Nov. 22, 1959) pointed out the obvious—that it was wrong to cheat for money, doubly wrong in intellectual matters, and triply wrong for a teacher. The response was heated outrage: such judgment was against Christian charity and no man, except a saint, could be expected to resist the temptation of so much money. And this

was not said in a cynical mood to make fun of philistine respectability, and it was not meant as a nihilistic argument. No one said—as would invariably have happened 30 or 40 years ago, at least in Europe—that cheating is fun, that virtue is boring and moral people are tiresome. Nor did anybody say that the television quiz program was wrong, that anything like a 64,000 dollar question was almost an invitation for fraudulent behavior, nor stand up for the dignity of learning and criticize the university for not preventing one of its members from indulging in what obviously is unprofessional conduct, even if no cheating were to take place. From the numerous letters written in response to the article, it became quite clear that the public at large, including many students, thought that only one person was to be blamed unequivocally: the man who judged, and not the man who had done wrong, not an institution, not society in general nor the mass media in particular.

Now let me enumerate briefly the general questions which this factual situation, as I see it, has put on the agenda. The first conclusion I think is that no one in his right mind can any longer claim that moral conduct is a matter of course—*das Moralische versteht sich von selbst*—an assumption under which the generation I belong to was still brought up. This assumption included a sharp distinction between legality and morality, and while there existed a vague, inarticulate consensus that by and large the law of the land spells out whatever the moral law may demand, there was not much doubt that in case of conflict, the moral law was the higher law and had to be obeyed first. This claim in turn could make sense only if we took for granted all those phenomena which we usually have in mind when we speak of human conscience. Whatever the source of moral knowledge might be—divine commandments or human reason—every sane man, it was assumed, carried within himself a voice that tells him what is right and what is wrong, and this regardless of the law of the land and regardless of the voices of his fellow-men. Kant once

mentioned that there might be a difficulty: "No one," he said, "who spent his life among rascals without knowing anybody else could have a concept of virtue"—"*Den Begriff der Tugend würde kein Mensch haben, wenn er immer unter lauter Spitzbuben wäre*"—but he meant no more by this than that the human mind is guided by examples in these matters. Not for a moment would he have doubted that, confronted with the example of virtue, human reason knows what is right and that its opposite is wrong. To be sure, Kant believed he had articulated the formula which the human mind applies whenever it has to tell right from wrong. He called this formula the Categorical Imperative; but he was under no illusion that he had made a discovery in moral philosophy which would have implied that no one before him knew what is right and wrong—obviously an absurd notion. He compares his formula (about which we shall have more to say in the coming lectures) to a "compass" with which men will find it easy

to distinguish what is good, what is bad. . . . Without in the least teaching common reason anything new, we need only to draw its attention to its own principle, in the manner of Socrates, thus showing that neither science nor philosophy is needed in order to know what one has to do in order to be honest and good . . . [Indeed,] . . . the knowledge of what everyone is obliged to do, and thus also to know, [is] within the reach of everyone, even the most ordinary man [Kant, 1959, p. 20, ed.]

And if someone had asked Kant where this knowledge within reach of everybody is located, he would have replied in the rational structure of the human mind, whereas, of course, others had located the same knowledge in the human heart. What Kant would not have taken for granted is that man will also act according to his judgment. Man is not only a rational being, he also belongs to the world of the senses which will tempt him to yield to his inclinations instead of following his reason or his heart. Hence, moral conduct is not a matter of course, but moral knowledge, the knowledge of right and

wrong, is. Because inclinations and temptation are rooted in human nature, though not in human reason, Kant called the fact that man is tempted to do wrong by following his inclinations "radical evil." Neither he nor any other moral philosopher actually believed that man could will evil for its own sake; all transgressions are explained by Kant as exceptions that a man is tempted to make from a law which he otherwise recognizes as being valid—thus, the thief recognizes the laws of property, even wishes to be protected by them, and only makes a temporary exception from them in his own favor.

No one wants to be wicked, and those who nevertheless act wickedly fall into an *absurdum morale*—into moral absurdity. He who does this is actually in contradiction with himself, his own reason, and, therefore, in Kant's own words, he must despise himself. That this fear of self-contempt could not possibly be enough to guarantee legality is obvious; but as long as you moved in a society of law-abiding citizens you somehow assumed that self-contempt would work. Kant of course knew that self-contempt, or rather the fear of having to despise yourself, very often did not work, and his explanation of this was that man can lie to himself. He therefore repeatedly declared that the really "sore or foul spot" in human nature is mendacity, the faculty of lying [Kant, 1868, pp. 132–33, ed.]. At first glance this statement seems very surprising because none of our ethical or religious codes (with the exception of Zoroaster) ever contained a Commandment: Thou shalt not lie—quite apart from the consideration that not only we but all codes of civilized nations have put murder at the top of the list of human crimes. Oddly enough, Dostoevsky seems to have shared—without knowing it of course—Kant's opinion. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dmitri K. asks the Starov: "What must I do to win salvation," and the Starov replies: "Above all else, never lie to yourself."

You will have remarked that I have left out of this very schematic and preliminary account all specifically religious moral precepts and beliefs, not because I think them

unimportant (quite the contrary is the case), but because at the moment morality collapsed they played hardly any role. Clearly no one was any longer afraid of an avenging God or, more concretely speaking, of possible punishments in a hereafter. As Nietzsche once remarked: "*Narivität, als ob Moral übrigbliebe, wenn der sanktionierende Gott fehlt! Das 'Jenseits' absolut notwendig, wenn der Glaube an Moral aufrechterhalten werden soll*" [Nietzsche, 1956, p. 484, ed.].<sup>1</sup> Nor did the churches think of so threatening their believers once the crimes turned out to be demanded by the authority of the state. And those few who in all churches and all walks of life refused to participate in crimes did not plead religious beliefs or fears, even if they happened to be believers, but simply stated, like others, that they could not themselves bear responsibility for such deeds. This sounds rather strange and certainly is at odds with the innumerable pious pronouncements of the churches after the war, especially the repeated admonitions from all sides that nothing will save us except a return to religion. But it is a fact and it shows to what an extent religion, if it is more than a social business, has indeed become the most private of private affairs. For, of course, we do not know what went on in the hearts of these men, whether or not they were afraid of hell and eternal damnation. All we know is that hardly anyone thought these oldest beliefs fit for public justification.

There is however another reason why I left religion out of account and began by indicating the great importance of Kant in these matters. Moral philosophy has no place wherever religion, and especially revealed religion in the Hebrew-Christian sense, is the valid standard for human behavior and the valid criterion for judging it. This, of course, does not mean that certain teachings which we know only in a religious context are not of the greatest relevance for moral philosophy. If you look back to traditional, premodern philosophy as it developed within the framework of Christian religion, you will at once discover that there existed no moral subdivision within

it. Medieval philosophy was divided into cosmology, ontology, psychology, and rational theology—that is, into a doctrine about nature and the universe, about Being, about the nature of the human mind and soul, and, finally, about the rational proofs of the existence of God. Insofar as “ethical” questions were discussed at all, especially in Thomas Aquinas, this was done in the fashion of antiquity, where ethics were part and parcel of political philosophy—defining the conduct of man insofar as he was a citizen. Thus, you have in Aristotle two treatises which together contain what he himself calls philosophy of things human: his *Nicomachean Ethics* and his *Politics*. The former deals with the citizen, the latter with civil institutions; the former precedes the latter because the “good life” of the citizen is the *raison d'être* of the polis, the institution of the city. The goal is to find out which is the best constitution, and the treatise on the good life, the *Ethics*, ends with an outline of the program for the treatise on politics. Thomas, both the faithful disciple of Aristotle and a Christian, always must come to the point where he has to differ with the master, and nowhere is the difference more glaring than when he holds that every fault or sin is a violation of the laws prescribed to nature by divine reason. To be sure, Aristotle too knows of the divine, which to him is the imperishable and the immortal, and he too thinks that man’s highest virtue, precisely because he is mortal, consists in dwelling as much as possible in the neighborhood of the divine. But there is no prescription, no command, to this effect that could be obeyed or disobeyed. The whole question turns around the “good life,” which way of life is best for man, something obviously up to man to find out and to judge.

In late antiquity, after the decline of the Polis, the various philosophy schools, especially the Stoics and the Epicureans, not only developed a kind of moral philosophy, they had a tendency, at least in their late Roman versions, to transform all philosophy into moral teachings. The quest for the good life remained the same: How can I attain maximum happiness



here on earth, only this question was now separated from all political implications and raised by men in their private capacity. This whole literature is full of wise recommendations, but you will not find in it, any more than in Aristotle, a real command which ultimately is beyond argument, as you must in all religious teachings. Even Thomas, the greatest rationalizer of Christianity, had to admit that the ultimate reason why a particular prescription is right and a particular command has to be obeyed lies in its divine origin. God said so.

This can be a conclusive answer only within the framework of *revealed* religion; outside this framework, we cannot but raise the question which, as far as I know, Socrates was the first to raise, in Plato's *Euthyphro* where he wishes to know: "Do the gods love piety because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it?" Or to put it another way: Do the gods love goodness because it is good, or do we call it good because the gods love it? Socrates leaves us with the question, and a believer, no doubt, is bound to say: it is their divine origin that distinguishes good principles from evil, they are in accordance with a law given by God to nature and to man, the summit of his creation. Insofar as man is God's creation, the same things, to be sure, which God "loves" must also appear good to him, and in this sense Thomas once indeed remarked, as though in answer to Socrates' question: God commands the good because it is good (as opposed to Duns Scotus, who held the good is good because God commands it). But even in this most rationalized form, the *obligatory* character of the good for man lies in God's command. From this follows the all important principle that in religion, but not in morality, sin is primarily understood as disobedience. Nowhere in the strictly religious tradition will you find the unequivocal and indeed radical answer Kant gave to the Socratic question: "We shall not look upon actions as obligatory because they are the commands of God, but shall regard them as divine commands because we have an inward obligation to them" [Kant, 1965, A819, p. 644, ed.]. Only where this emancipation from religious commands

has been achieved, where in Kant's own words in *Lectures on Ethics* "we ourselves are judges of the revelation . . .," hence, where morality is a strictly human affair, can we speak of moral philosophy [Kant, 1963a, p. 51, ed.]. And the same Kant, who in his theoretical philosophy was so concerned with keeping the door open to religion, even after having shown that we can have no knowledge in these matters, was equally careful to block all passages which may have led back to religion in his practical or moral philosophy. Just as "God is in no sense the author of the fact that the triangle has three angles," so "not even God can be the author of [the laws of] morality" [Kant, 1963a, p. 52, ed.]. In this unequivocal sense, until Kant, moral philosophy had ceased to exist after antiquity. Probably you will think here of Spinoza who called his chief work *Ethics*, but then you will also remember that Spinoza begins his work with a section entitled "Of God," and from this first part everything else is derived. Whether or not moral philosophy has existed since Kant is at least an open question.

In anticipation of the few questions which will concern us here, let me now point out to you some of the most obvious conclusions: Moral conduct, from what we have heard so far, seems to depend primarily upon the intercourse of man with himself. He must not contradict himself by making an exception in his own favor, he must not place himself in a position in which he would have to despise himself. Morally speaking, this should be enough not only to enable him to tell right from wrong but also to do right and avoid wrong. Kant, with the consistency of thought which is the mark of the great philosopher, therefore puts the duties man has to himself ahead of the duties to others—something which certainly is very surprising, standing in curious contradiction to what we usually understand by moral behavior. It certainly is not a matter of concern with the other but with the self, not of meekness but of human dignity and even human pride. The

standard is neither the love of some neighbor nor self-love, but self-respect.

This comes out most clearly and most beautifully in that passage of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* which everybody knows—and usually knows in a mistaken way. I refer of course to: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heaven above me and the moral law within me.” From which one may conclude by not reading on that these “two things” are on the same level and affect the human mind in the same way. Well, the opposite is the case: “The former view of a countless multitude of worlds annihilates, as it were, my importance as an animal creature . . . The latter, on the contrary, infinitely raises my worth as that of an intelligence by my personality, in which the moral law reveals a life independent of all animality and even of the whole world of sense” [Kant, 1956, p. 166, ed.]. Hence, what saves me from annihilation, from being “a mere speck” in the infinity of the universe, is precisely this “invisible self” that can pit itself against it. I underline this element of pride not only because it goes against the grain of Christian ethics, but also because the loss of a feeling for it seems to me most manifest in those who discuss these matters today, mostly without even knowing how to appeal to the Christian virtue of humility. This, however, is not to deny that there exists a crucial problem in this moral concern with the self. How difficult this problem may be is gauged by the fact that religious commands were likewise unable to formulate their general moral prescriptions without turning to the self as the ultimate standard—Love thy neighbor as thyself, or do not do unto others what you do not want done to yourself.

Secondly, moral conduct has nothing to do with obedience to any law that is given from the outside—be it the law of God or the laws of men. In Kant's terminology, this is the distinction between legality and morality. Legality is morally neutral: it has its place in institutionalized religion and in politics but not

in morality. The political order does not require moral integrity but only law-abiding citizens, and the Church is always a church of sinners. These orders of a given community must be distinguished from the moral order binding for all men, even all rational beings. In Kant's own words: "The problem of organizing a state, however hard it may seem, can be solved even for a race of devils, if only they are intelligent" [Kant, 1963b, p. 112, ed.]. In a similar spirit, it has been said that the devil makes a good theologian. In the political order, as in the religious framework, obedience may have its place, and just as this obedience is enforced in institutionalized religion by the threat of future punishments, so the legal order exists only to the extent of the existence of sanctions. What cannot be punished is permitted. If, however, I can be said at all to obey the Categorical Imperative, it means that I am obeying my own reason, and the law which I give myself is valid for all rational creatures, all intelligible beings no matter where they may have their dwelling place. For if I do not want to contradict myself, I act in such a manner that the maxim of my act can become a universal law. I am the legislator, sin or crime can no longer be defined as disobedience to somebody else's law, but on the contrary as refusal to act my part as legislator of the world.

This as it were rebellious aspect of Kant's teachings is frequently overlooked because he put his general formula—that a moral act is an act which lays down a universally valid law—into the form of an imperative instead of defining it in a proposition. The chief reason for this self-misunderstanding in Kant is the highly equivocal meaning of the word "law" in the Western tradition of thought. When Kant spoke of the moral law, he used the word in accordance with political usage in which the law of the land is considered obligatory for all inhabitants in the sense that they have to obey it. That obedience is singled out as my attitude toward the law of the land is in turn due to the transformation the term had undergone though religious usage where the Law

of God can indeed address man only in the form of a command: Thou shalt—the obligation, as we saw, being not the content of the law nor the possible consent of man to it, but the fact that God had told us so. Here, nothing counts but obedience.

To these two interconnected meanings of the word we must now add the very important and quite different usage made by combining the concept of law with nature. Laws of nature are also, so to speak, obligatory: I follow a law of nature when I die, but it cannot be said, except metaphorically, that I obey it. Kant, therefore, distinguished between “laws of nature” and the moral “laws of freedom,” which carry no necessity, only an obligation. But if we understand by law either commands which I must obey or the necessity of nature to which I am subject anyhow, then the term “law of freedom” is a contradiction in terms. The reason why we are not aware of the contradiction is that even in our usage there are still present much older connotations from Greek and especially Roman antiquity, connotations which, whatever else they may signify, have nothing to do with commandments and obedience or necessity.

Kant defined the *categorical* imperative by contrasting it with the *hypothetical* imperative. The latter tells us what we ought to do if we wish to attain a certain goal; it indicates a means to an end. It is actually no imperative in the moral sense at all. The *categorical* imperative tells us what to do without reference to another end. This distinction is not at all derived from moral phenomena but taken from Kant's analysis of certain propositions in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where you find categorical and hypothetical (as well as disjunctive) propositions in the table of judgments. A categorical proposition could be, for example: This body is heavy; to which could correspond a hypothetical proposition: If I support this body I stagger under its weight. In his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant transformed these propositions into imperatives to give them an obligatory character. Although the content is derived from

reason—and while reason may compel, it never compels in the form of an imperative (no one would tell anybody: Thou shall say, two and two make four)—the imperative form is felt to be necessary because here the reasonable proposition addresses itself to the Will. In Kant's own words: "The conception of an objective principle, so far as it constrains a will, is a command (of reason), and the formula of this command is called an *imperative*" [Kant, 1959, p. 30, ed.].

Does reason then command the Will? In that case the will would no longer be free but would stand under the dictate of reason. Reason can only tell the Will: This is good, in accordance with reason; if you wish to attain it you ought to act accordingly. Which in Kant's terminology would be a kind of hypothetical imperative or no imperative at all. And this perplexity does not grow less when we hear that "the will is nothing else than practical reason" and that "reason infallibly determines the will," so that we must either conclude that reason determines itself or, as with Kant that "the will is a faculty of choosing only that which reason . . . recognizes as . . . good" [Kant, 1959, p. 29, ed.]. It would then follow that the will is nothing but an executive organ for reason, the execution branch of the human faculties, a conclusion that stands in the most flagrant contradiction to the famous first sentence of the work from which I have quoted, *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*: "Nothing in the world—indeed nothing even beyond the world—can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a *good will*" [Kant, 1959, p. 9, ed.].

Some of the perplexities into which I have led you here arise out of the perplexities inherent in the human faculty of will itself, a faculty of which ancient philosophy knew nothing and which was not discovered in its awesome complexities before Paul and Augustine. We will have more to say about this in the following lectures. Here I merely wish to draw your attention to the need Kant felt to give his rational proposition an obligatory character, for, in distinction to the perplexities of

the will, the problem of making moral propositions obligatory has plagued moral philosophy since its beginning with Socrates. When Socrates said it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong, he made a statement which according to him was a statement of reason, and the trouble with this statement ever since has been that it cannot be proved. Its validity cannot be demonstrated without stepping outside the discourse of rational argument. In Kant, as in all philosophy after antiquity, you have the additional difficulty of how to persuade the will to accept the dictate of reason. If we leave the contradictions aside and address ourselves only to what Kant meant to say, then he obviously thought of the Good Will as the will that when told Thou Shalt will answer: Yes, I will. And in order to describe this relationship between two human faculties which clearly are not the same and where clearly one does not automatically determine the other, he introduced the form of the imperative and brought back the concept of obedience, through a back door as it were.

There is, finally, for people with our background of experience, the most shocking perplexity which I merely indicated before: the evasion, the sidestepping, or the explaining away of human wickedness. If the tradition of moral philosophy (as distinguished from the tradition of religious thought) is agreed on one point from Socrates to Kant and, as we shall see, to the present, then that is that it is impossible for man to do wicked things deliberately, to want evil for evil's sake. To be sure, the catalogue of human vices is old and rich, and in an enumeration where neither gluttony nor sloth (minor matters after all) are missing, sadism, the sheer pleasure in causing and contemplating pain and suffering, is curiously missing; that is, the one vice which we have reason to call the vice of all vices that for untold centuries has been known only in the pornographic literature and painting of the perverse. It may always have been common enough but was usually restricted to the bedroom and only seldom dragged into the courtroom. Even the Bible, where all

other human shortcomings occur somewhere, is silent on it as far as I know; and this may be the reason why Tertullian and also Thomas Aquinas in all innocence, as it were, counted the contemplation of the sufferings in hell among the pleasures to be expected in Paradise. The first to be really scandalized by this was Nietzsche [1967, I, 15, ed.]. Thomas, incidentally, qualified the future joys: not the sufferings as such, but as proof of divine justice are pleasing to the saints.

But these are only vices, and religious, in contrast to philosophic, thought tells about original sin and the corruption of human nature. But not even there do we hear of deliberate wrongdoing: Cain did not want to become Cain when he went and slew Abel, and even Judas Iscariot, the greatest example of mortal sin, went and hanged himself. Religiously (not morally) speaking, it seems that they must all be forgiven because they did not know what they were doing. There is one exception to this rule and it occurs in the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, the same who had preached forgiveness for all those sins which in one way or another can be explained by human weakness, that is, dogmatically speaking, by the corruption of human nature through the original fall. And yet this great lover of sinners, of those who trespassed, once mentions in the same context that there are others who cause *skandala*, disgraceful offenses, for which "it were better that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea." It were better that he had never been born. But Jesus does not tell us what the nature is of these scandalous offenses: we feel the truth of his words but cannot pin it down.

We might be a bit better off if we would permit ourselves to turn to literature, to Shakespeare or Melville or Dostoevsky, where we find the great villains. They also may not be able to tell us anything specific about the nature of evil, but at least they do not dodge it. We know, and we can almost see, how it haunted their minds constantly, and how well aware they were of the possibilities of human wickedness. And yet, I wonder if it would help us much. In the depths of the greatest



villains—Iago (not Macbeth or Richard III), Claggart in Melville's *Billy Budd*, and everywhere in Dostoevsky—there is always despair and the envy which goes with despair. That all radical evil comes from the depths of despair we have been told explicitly by Kierkegaard—and we could have learned it from Milton's Satan and many others. It sounds so very convincing and plausible because we have also been told and taught that the devil is not only *diabolos*, the slanderer who bears false testimony, or Satan, the adversary who tempts men, but that he is also Lucifer the light-bearer, a Fallen Angel. In other words, we did not need Hegel and the power of negation in order to combine the best and the worst. There has always been some kind of nobility about the real evildoer, though of course not about the little scoundrel who lies and cheats at games. The point about Claggart and Iago is that they act out of envy of those they know are better than they themselves; it is the simple God-given nobility of the Moor that is envied, or the even simpler purity and innocence of a lowly shipmate whose social and professional better Claggart clearly is. I do not doubt the psychological insight of either Kierkegaard or the literature which is on his side. But is it not obvious that there is still some nobility even in this despair-born envy which we know to be utterly absent from the real thing? According to Nietzsche, the man who despises himself respects at least the one in him who despises! But the real evil is what causes us speechless horror, when all we can say is: This should never have happened.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> Walter Kaufman translates this passage as follows: "Naiyeté: as if morality could survive when the *God* who sanctions it is missing! The 'beyond' absolutely necessary if faith in morality is to be maintained" [Nietzsche, 1968, p. 147, ed.].

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