ETHICS AND GLOBALIZATION (1)

SESSION ONE

I.

**METAETHICS (STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY)**

Metaethics is the attempt to understand the metaphysical, epistemological, semantic, and psychological, presuppositions and commitments of moral thought, talk, and practice. As such, it counts within its domain a broad range of questions and puzzles, including: Is morality more a matter of taste than truth? Are moral standards culturally relative? Are there moral facts? If there are moral facts, what is their origin? How is it that they set an appropriate standard for our behavior? How might moral facts be related to other facts (about psychology, happiness, human conventions…)? And how do we learn about the moral facts, if there are any? These questions lead naturally to puzzles about the meaning of moral claims as well as about moral truth and the justification of our moral commitments. Metaethics explores as well the connection between values, reasons for action, and human motivation, asking how it is that moral standards might provide us with reasons to do or refrain from doing as it demands, and it addresses many of the issues commonly bound up with the nature of freedom and its significance (or not) for moral responsibility.[[1](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/metaethics/notes.html" \l "1)]

Unpack these sentences:

1. Is morality more a matter of taste than truth?

2. Are moral standards culturally relative?

3. Are there moral facts?

4. If there are moral facts, what is their origin?

5. How is it that they set an appropriate standard for our behavior?

6. How might moral facts be related to other facts (about psychology, happiness, human conventions…)?

7. And how do we learn about the moral facts, if there are any?

**II.**

**ALASDAIR MACINTYRE AND CHARLES TAYLOR: A COMPARISON**

CHAPTER 1 THE PHILOSOPHICAL POINT OF THE HISTORY OF ETHICS

(MacIntyre, Alasdair. A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the 20th Century (Routledge Classics) (p. 1-3). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition)

MORAL PHILOSOPHY is often written as though the history of the subject were only of secondary and incidental importance. This attitude seems to be the outcome of a belief that moral concepts can be examined and understood apart from their history. Some philosophers have even written as if moral concepts were a timeless, limited, unchanging, determinate species of concept, necessarily having the same features throughout their history, so that there is a part of language waiting to be philosophically investigated which deserves the title “the language of morals” (with a definite article and a singular noun) [….]

*What is MacIntyre’s target here? How fair is MacIntyre being in this comment, in your opinion?*

In fact, of course, moral concepts change as social life changes. I deliberately do not write “because social life changes,” for this might suggest that social life is one thing, morality another, and that there is merely an external, contingent causal relationship between them. This is obviously false. Moral concepts are embodied in and are partially constitutive of forms of social life. One key way in which we may identify one form of social life as distinct from another is by identifying differences in moral concepts. So it is an elementary commonplace to point out that there is no precise English equivalent for the Greek word *δικαιοσ□νη*, usually translated justice. And this is not a mere linguistic defect, so that what Greek achieves by a single word English needs a periphrasis to achieve. It is rather that the occurrence of certain concepts in ancient Greek discourse and of others in modern English marks a difference between two forms of social life. To understand a concept, to grasp the meaning of the words which express it, is always at least to learn what the rules are which govern the use of such words and so to grasp the role of the concept in language and social life. This in itself would suggest strongly that different forms of social life will provide different roles for concepts to play […]

*Do you agree with MacIntyre’s point here? What is that point? And if you do agree with it, can you give examples from your own experience of how this might be the case? If you don’t agree with it, can you begin to develop an argument against. Is this, for instance, a form of constructivism?*

The complexity [of history] is increased because philosophical inquiry itself plays a part in changing moral concepts. It is not that we have first a straightforward history of moral concepts and then a separate and secondary history of philosophical comment. For to analyze a concept philosophically may often be to assist in its transformation by suggesting that it needs revision, or that it is discredited in some way, or that it has a certain kind of prestige. Philosophy leaves everything as it is–except concepts. And since to possess a concept involves behaving or being able to behave in certain ways in certain circumstances, to alter concepts, whether by modifying existing concepts or by making new concepts available or by destroying old ones, is to alter behavior. So the Athenians who condemned Socrates to death, the English parliament which condemned Hobbes’ Leviathan in 1666, and the Nazis who burned philosophical books were correct at least in their apprehension that philosophy can be subversive of established ways of behaving. Understanding the world of morality and changing it are far from incompatible tasks. The moral concepts which are objects for analysis to the philosophers of one age may sometimes be what they are partly because of the discussions by philosophers of a previous age.

*Does MacIntyre deceive himself here with respect to the influence of philosophy on morality? If he does, then what does influence moral behaviour? If he doesn’t, then what does this tell us about the role of education?*

A history which takes this point seriously, which is concerned with the role of philosophy in relation to actual conduct, cannot be philosophically neutral. For it cannot but be at odds with the view of all those recent philosophers who have wanted sharply to distinguish philosophical ethics as a second-order activity of comment from the first-order discourse which is part of the conduct of life, where moral utterances themselves are in place. In drawing this distinction such philosophers have tried so to define the realm of philosophy that it would be a conceptual truth that philosophy could not impinge upon practice. A. J. Ayer, for instance, has written about one particular ethical theory that it “… is entirely on the level of analysis; it is an attempt to show what people are doing when they make moral judgments; it is not a set of suggestions as to what moral judgments they are to make. And this is true of all moral philosophy as I understand it. All moral theories … in so far as they are philosophical theories, are neutral as regards actual conduct.”1

My quarrel with this view will emerge from time to time in these essays. But what I hope will emerge even more clearly is the function of history in relation to conceptual analysis, for it is here that Santayana’s epigram that he who is ignorant of the history of philosophy is doomed to repeat it finds its point. It is all too easy for philosophical analysis, divorced from historical inquiry, to insulate itself from correction. In ethics it can happen in the following way. A certain unsystematically selected class of moral concepts and judgments is made the subject of attention. From the study of these it is concluded that specifically moral discourse possesses certain characteristics. When counterexamples are adduced to show that this is not always so, these counterexamples are dismissed as irrelevant, because not examples of moral discourse; and they are shown to be nonmoral by exhibiting their lack of the necessary characteristics. From this kind of circularity we can be saved only by an adequate historical view of the varieties of moral and evaluative discourse. This is why it would be dangerous, and not just pointless, to begin these studies with a definition which would carefully delimit the field of inquiry. We cannot, of course, completely avoid viewing past moralists and past philosophers in terms of present distinctions. To set out to write the history of moral philosophy at all involves us in selecting from the past what falls under the heading of moral philosophy as we now conceive it. But it is important that we should, as far as it is possible, allow the history of philosophy to break down our present-day preconceptions, so that our too narrow views of what can and cannot be thought, said, and done are discarded in face of the record of what has been thought, said, and done. We have to steer between the danger of a dead antiquarianism, which enjoys the illusion that we can approach the past without preconceptions, and that other danger, so apparent in such philosophical historians as Aristotle and Hegel, of believing that the whole point of the past was that it should culminate with us. History is neither a prison nor a museum, nor is it a set of materials for self-congratulation.

*How cogent is this view of history in your view? Can we distinguish between the moral calibre or ‘success’ of different historical periods? What saves MacIntyre’s view from being relativistic?*

Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, CUP, 1989, 3-14.

1

INESCAPABLE FRAMEWORKS

1 . 1

I want to explore various facets of what I will call the 'modern identity'. To give a good first approximation of what this means would be to say that it involves tracing various strands of our modern notion of what it is to be a human agent, a person, or a self. But pursuing this investigation soon shows that you can't get very clear about this without some further understanding of how our pictures of the good have evolved. Selfhood and the good, or in

another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes.

In this first part, I want to say something about this connection, before in Parts II-V plunging into the history and analysis of the modern identity. But another obstacle rises in the way even of this preliminary task. Much contemporary moral philosophy, particularly but not only in the English speaking world, has given such a narrow focus to morality that some of the crucial connections I want to draw here are incomprehensible in its terms.

This moral philosophy has tended to focus on what it is right to do rather than on what it is good to be, on defining the content of obligation rather than the nature of the good life; and it has no conceptual place left for a notion of the good as the object of our love or allegiance or, as Iris Murdoch portrayed it in her work, as the privileged focus of attention or will.l This philosophy has accredited a cramped and truncated view of morality in a narrow sense, as well as of the whole range of issues involved in the attempt to live the best possible life, and this not only among professional philosophers, but with a wider public.

So much of my effort in Part I will be directed towards enlarging our range of legitimate moral descriptions, and in some cases retrieving modes of thought and description which have misguidedly been made to seem problematic. In particular, what I want to bring out and examine is the richer background languages in which we set the basis and point of the moral obligations we acknowledge. More broadly, I want to explore the background picture of our spiritual nature and predicament which lies behind some of the

moral and spiritual intuitions of our contemporaries. In the course of doing so, I shall also be trying to make clearer just what a background picture is, and what role it plays in our lives. Here is where an important element of retrieval comes in, because much contemporary philosophy has ignored this dimension of our moral consciousness and beliefs altogether and has even seemed to dismiss it as confused and irrelevant. I hope to show, contrary to

this attitude, how crucial it is.

I spoke in the previous paragraph about our 'moral and spiritual' intuitions. In fact, I want to consider a gamut of views a bit broader than what is normally described as the 'moral'. In addition to our notions and reactions on such issues as justice and the respect of other people's life, well-being, and dignity, I want also to look at our sense of what underlies our own dignity, or questions about what makes our lives meaningful or fulfilling. These might be classed as moral questions on some broad definition, but some are too concerned with the self-regarding, or too much a matter of our ideals, to be classed as moral issues in most people's lexicon. They concern, rather, what makes life worth living.

What they have in common with moral issues, and what deserves the vague term 'spiritual', is that they all involve what I have called elsewhere 'strong evaluation',2 that is, they involve discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged. So while it may not be judged a moral lapse that I am living a life that is not really worthwhile or fulfilling,

to describe me in these terms is nevertheless to condemn me in the name of a standard, independent of my own tastes and desires, which I ought to acknowledge.

Perhaps the most urgent and powerful cluster of demands that we recognize as moral concern the respect for the life, integrity, and well-being, even flourishing, of others. These are the ones we infringe when we kill or maim others, steal their property, strike fear into them and rob them of peace, or even refrain from helping them when they are in distress. Virtually everyone feds these demands, and they have been and are acknowledged in all human societies. Of course the scope of the demand notoriously varies: earlier societies, and some present ones, restrict the class of beneficiaries to members of the tribe or race and exclude outsiders, who are fair game, or even condemn the evil to a definitive loss of this status. But they all feel these demands laid on them by some class of persons, and for most contemporaries this class is coterminous with the human race (and for believers in animal , rights it may go wider).

We are dealing here with moral intuitions which are uncommonly deep, powerful, and universal. They are so deep that we are tempted to think of them as rooted in instinct, in contrast to other moral reactions which seem very much the consequence of upbringing and education. There seems to be a natural, inborn compunction to inflict death or injury on another, an inclination to come to the help of the injured or endangered. Culture and

upbringing may help to define the boundaries of the relevant 'others', but they don't seem to create the basic reaction itself. That is why eighteenth century thinkers, notably Rousseau, could believe in a natural susceptibility to feel sympathy for others.

*In what ways is Taylor’s analysis here different from MacIintyre’s?*

*Can you set out a clear statement of what Taylor has in mind here?*

I D E N TI T Y A N D T H E G O O D

1 .2

I spoke at the outset about exploring the 'background picture' lying behind our moral and spiritual intuitions. I could now rephrase this and say that my target is the moral ontology which articulates these intuitions. What is the picture of our spiritual nature and predicament which makes sense of our responses? 'Making sense' here means articulating what makes these responses appropriate: identifying what makes something a fit object for them and correlatively formulating more fully the nature of the response as well as spelling out what all this presupposes about ourselves and our situation in the world. What is articulated here is the background we assume and draw on in any claim to rightness, part of which we are forced to spell out when we have to defend our responses as the right ones.

This articulation can be very difficult and controversial. I don't just mean this in the obvious sense that our contemporaries don't always agree in moral ontology. This is clear enough: many people, if asked to give their grounds for the reactions of respect for life discussed above, would appeal to the theistic account I referred to and invoke our common status as God's creatures; others would reject this for a purely secular account and perhaps

invoke the dignity of rational life. But beyond this, articulating any particular person's background can be subject to controversy. The agent himself or herself is not necessarily the best authority, at least not at the outset. This is the case first of all because the moral ontology behind any person's views can remain largely implicit….

So over wide areas, the background tends to remain unexplored. But beyond this, exploration may even be resisted. That is because there may be-and I want to argue, frequently is-a lack of fit between what people as it were officially and consciously believe, even pride themselves on believing, on one hand, and what they need to make sense of some of their moral reactions, on the other…

It will be my claim that there is a great deal of motivated suppression of moral ontology among our contemporaries, in part because the pluralist nature of modern society makes it easier to live that way, but also because of the great weight of modern epistemology (as with the naturalists evoked above) and, behind this, of the spiritual outlook associated with this epistemology. So the work I am embarked upon here could be called in large degree an essay in retrieval. Much of the ground will have to be fought for,

and I will certainly not convince everybody.

But besides our disagreements and our temptations to suppress, this articulation of moral ontology will be very difficult for a third reason: the tentative, searching, uncertain nature of many of our moral beliefs. Many of our contemporaries, while they remain quite unattracted by the naturalist attempt to deny ontology altogether, and while on the contrary they recognize that their moral reactions show them to be committed to some

adequate basis, are perplexed and uncertain when it comes to saying what this basis is. In our example above, many people, when faced with both the theistic and the secular ontologies as the grounds for their reactions of respect, would not feel ready to make a final choice. They concur that through their moral beliefs they acknowledge some ground in human nature or the human predicament which makes human beings fit objects of respect,

but they confess that they cannot subscribe with complete conviction to any particular definition, at least not to any of the ones on offer. Something similar arises for many of them on the question of what makes human life worth living or what confers meaning on their individual lives. Most of us are still in the process of groping for answers here. This is an essentially modern predicament, as I shall try to argue below….

1.3

To talk of universal, natural, or human rights is to connect respect for human life and integrity with the notion of autonomy. It is to conceive people as active cooperators in establishing and ensuring the respect which is due them. And this expresses a central feature of the modern Western moral outlook. This change of form naturally goes along with one in content, with the conception of what it is to respect someone. Autonomy is now central to this. So the Lockean trinity of natural rights includes that to liberty. And for

us respecting personality involves as a crucial feature respecting the person's moral autonomy. With the development of the post-Romantic notion of individual difference, this expands to the demand that we give people the freedom to develop their personality in their own way, however repugnant to ourselves and even to our moral sense-the thesis developed so persuasively by J. S. Mill.

Of course not everyone agrees with Mill's principle, and its full impact on Western legislation has been very recent. But everyone in our civilization feels the force of this appeal to accord people the freedom to develop in their own way. The disagreement is over the relation of such things as pornography, or various kinds of permissive sexual behaviour, or portrayals of violence, to legitimate development. Does the prohibition of the former endanger the latter? No one doubts that if it does, this constitutes a reason, though perhaps

not an ultimately decisive one, to relax social controls.

So autonomy has a central place in our understanding of respect. So much is generally agreed. Beyond this lie various richer pictures of human nature and our predicament, which offer reasons for this demand. These include, for instance, the notion of ourselves as disengaged subjects, breaking free from a comfortable but illusory sense of immersion in nature, and objectifying the world around us; or the Kantian picture of ourselves as pure rational agents; or the Romantic picture just mentioned, where we understand ourselves in terms of organic metaphors and a concept of self-expression. As is well known, the partisans of these different views are in sharp conflict with each other. Here again, a generalized moral consensus breaks into controversy at the level of philosophical explication.

I am not at all neutral on this controversy, but I don't feel at this stage in a position to contribute in a helpful way to it. I would rather try now to round out this picture of our modern understanding of respect by mentioning two other, connected features.

The first is the importance we put on avoiding suffering. This again seems to be unique among higher civilizations. Certainly we are much more sensitive on this score than our ancestors of a few centuries ago-as we can readily see if we consider the (to us) barbarous punishments they inflicted. Once again, the legal code and its practices provide a window into broader movements of culture. Think of the horrifying description of the torture and execution of a man who had attempted regicide in mid-eighteenth-century

France, which opens Michel Foucault's *Surveiller et punir*? It's not that comparable horrors don't occur in the twentieth-century West. But they are now seen as shocking aberrations, which have to be hidden. Even the "clean" legal executions, where the death penalty is still in force, are no longer carried out in public, but deep within prison walls. It's with a shudder that we learn that parents used to bring small children to witness such events when they

were offered as public spectacles in earlier times. We are much more sensitive to suffering, which we may of course just translate into not wanting to hear about it rather than into any concrete remedial action. But the notion that we ought to reduce it to a minimum is an integral part of what respect means to us today-however distasteful this has been to an eloquent minority, most notably to Nietzsche.

Part of the reason for this change is negative. Compared for instance to the executioners of Damiens in the eighteenth century, we don't see any point in ritually undoing the terrible crime in an equally terrible punishment. The whole notion of a cosmic moral order, which gave this restoral its sense, has faded for us. The stress on relieving suffering has grown with the decline of this kind of belief. It is what is left over, what takes on moral importance, after we no longer see human beings as playing a role in a larger cosmic order or divine history. This was part of the negative thrust of the utilitarian

Enlightenment, protesting against the needless, senseless suffering inflicted on humans in the name of such larger orders or dramas.

But of course this stress on human welfare of the most immediate kind also has religious sources. It springs from the New Testament and is one of the central themes of Christian spirituality. Modern utilitarianism is one of its secularized variants. And as such it connects with a more fundamental feature to Christian spirituality, which comes to receive new and unprecedented importance at the beginning of the modern era, and which has also become central to modern culture. I want to describe this as the affirmation of ordinary life. This last is a term of art, meant roughly to designate the life of production and the family.

According to traditional, Aristotelian ethics, this has merely infrastructural

importance. 'Life' was important as the necessary background and support to 'the good life' of contemplation and one's action as a citizen. With the Reformation, we find a modern, Christian-inspired sense that ordinary life was on the contrary the very centre of the good life. The crucial issue was how it was led, whether worshipfully and in the fear of God or not. But the life of the God-fearing was lived out in marriage and their calling. The previous 'higher' forms of life were dethroned, as it were. And along with this went frequently an attack, covert or overt, on the elites which had made these forms their province.

I believe that this affirmation of ordinary life, although not uncontested and frequently appearing in secularized form, has become one of the most powerful ideas in modern civilization. It underlies our contemporary "bourgeois" politics, so much concerned with issues of welfare, and at the same time powers the most influential revolutionary ideology of our century, Marxism, with its apotheosis of man the producer. This sense of the

importance of the everyday in human life, along with its corollary about the importance of suffering, colours our whole understanding of what it is truly to respect human life and integrity. Along with the central place given to autonomy, it defines a version of this demand which is peculiar to our civilization, the modern West.

…. The full llife ….

*Sketch a summary of Taylor’s argument.*

*This was written some years ago – what might need to be added here? What might be taken away (or can be judged to have less relevance today than in the past?)*

Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, CUP, 1989, 27-28.

The loss of ‘frameworks’ …

And this situation does, of course, arise for some people. It's what we call an 'identity crisis', an acute form of disorientation, which people often express in terms of not knowing who they are, but which can also be seen as a radical uncertainty of where they stand. They lack a frame or horizon within which things can take on a stable significance, within which some life possibilities can be seen as good or meaningful, others as bad or trivial. The meaning of all these possibilities is unfixed, labile, or undetermined. This is a painful and frightening experience.

What this brings to light is the essential link between identity and a kind of orientation. To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary. I feel myself drawn here to use a spatial metaphor; but I believe this to be more than personal predilection. There are signs that the link with spatial orientation lies very deep in the human psyche. In some very extreme cases of what are described as "narcissistic personality disorders", which take the form of a radical uncertainty about oneself and about what is of value to one, patients show signs of spatial disorientation as well at moments of acute crisis. The disorientation and uncertainty about where one stands as a person seems to spill over into a loss of grip on one's stance in physical space. 1

Why this link between identity and orientation ? Or perhaps we could put the question this way: What induces us to talk about moral orientation in terms of the question, Who are we? This second formulation points us towards the fact that we haven't always done so. Talk about 'identity' in the modern sense would have been incomprehensible to our forebears of a couple of centuries ago.