8 . 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 an4 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. Indeed, it usually does, unless there is some

challenge which forces it to the fore. The average person needs to do very

little thinking about the bases of universal respect, for instance, because just

about everyone accepts this as an axiom today. The greatest violators hide

behind a smoke screen of lies and special pleading. Even racist regimes, like

the one in South Africa, present their programmes in the language of separate

but equal development; while Soviet dissidents are jailed on various trumpedup

charges or hospitalized as 'mentally ill', and the fiction is maintained that

the masses elect the regime. Whether one has a theistic or secular foundation

rarely comes up, except in certain very special controversies, like that about

abortion.

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. A gap like this surfaced in the discussion above,

where some naturalists propose to treat all moral ontologies as irrelevant

stories, without validity, while they themselves go on arguing like the rest of

us about what objects are fit and what reactions appropriate. What generally

happens here is that the reductive explanation itself, often a sociobiological

one, which supposedly justifies this exclusion, itself takes on the role of moral

ontology. That is, it starts to provide the basis for discriminations about

appropriate objects or valid responses. What starts off in chapter I as a

hard-nosed scientific theory justifying an error theory of morality becomes in

the conclusion the basis for a new 'scientific' or 'evolutionary' ethic.s Here,

one is forced to conclude, there reigns an ideologically induced illusion about

the nature of the moral ontology that the thinkers concerned actually rely on.

There is a very controversial but very important job of articulation to be done

here, in the teeth of the people concerned, which can show to what extent the

real spiritual basis of their own moral judgements deviates from what is

officially admitted.

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 un attracted 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.

Where this is so, the issue of articulation can take another form. It is not

merely formulating what people already implicitly but unproblematically

acknowledge; nor is it showing what people really rely on in the teeth of their

ideological denials. Rather it could only be carried forward by showing that

one or another ontology is in fact the only adequate basis for our moral

responses, whether we recognize this or not. A thesis of this kind was invoked

by Dostoyevsky and discussed by Leszek Ko-I'akowski in a recent work:6 "If

God does not exist, then everything is permitted". But this level of argument,

concerning what our commitments 'really amount to, is even more difficult

than the previous one, which tries to show, in the face of naturalist

suppression, what they already are. I will probably not be able to venture very

far out on this terrain in the following. It would be sufficient, and very

valuable, to be able to show something about the tentative, hesitating, and

fuzzy commitments that we modems actually rely on. The map of our moral

world, however full of gaps, erasures, and blurrings, is interesting enough.

1.3

The moral world of modems is significantly different from that of previous

civilizations. This becomes clear, among other places, when we look at the

sense that human beings command our respect. In one form or another, this

seems to be a human universal; that is, in every society, there seems to be

some such sense. The boundary around those beings worthy of respect may

be drawn parochially in earlier cultures, but there always is such a class. And

among what we recognize as higher civilizations, this always includes the

whole human species.

What is peculiar to the modem West among such higher civilizations is

that its favoured formulation for this principle of respect has come to be in

terms of rights. This has become central to our legal systems-and in this

form has spread around the world. But in addition, something analogous has

become central to our moral thinking.

The notion of a right, also called a 'subjective right', as this developed in

the Western legal tradition, is that of a legal privilege which is seen as a

quasi-possession of the agent to whom it is attributed. At first such rights

were differential possessions: some people had the right to participate in

certain assemblies, or to give counsel, or to collect tolls on this river, and so

on. The revolution in natural law theory in the seventeenth century partly

consisted in using this language of rights to express the universal moral

norms. We began to speak of "natural" rights, and now to such things as life

and liberty which supposedly everyone has.

In one way, to speak of a universal, natural right to life doesn't seem much

of an innovation. The change seems to be one of form. The earlier way of

putting it was that there was a natural law against taking innocent life. Both

formulations seem to prohibit the same things. But the difference lies not in

what is forbidden but in the place of the subject. Law is what I must obey. It

may confer on me certain benefits, here the immunity that my life, too, is to

be respected; but fundamentally I am under law. By contrast, a subjective

right is something which the possessor can and ought to act on to put it into

effect. To accord you an immunity, formerly given you by natural law, in the

form of a natural right is to give you a role in establishing and enforcing this

immunity. Your concurrence is now necessary, and your degrees of freedom

are correspondingly greater. At the extreme limit of these, you can even waive

a right, thus defeating the immunity. This is why Locke, in order to close off

this possibility in the case of his three basic rights, had to introduce the notion

of 'inalienability'. Nothing like this was necessary on the earlier natural law

formulation, because that language by its very nature excludes the power of

waiver.

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 mentio,ned, 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.

1 .4

Thus far I have been exploring only one strand of our moral intuitions, albeit

an extremely important one. These are the moral beliefs which duster around

the sense that human life is to be respected and that the prohibitions and

obligations which this imposes on us are among the most weighty and serious

in our lives. I have been arguing that there is a peculiarly modern sense of

what respect involves, which gives a salient place to freedom and self-control,

places a high priority on avoiding suffering, and sees productive activity and

family life as central to our well-being. But this duster of moral intuitions lies

along only one of the axes of our moral life. There are others to which the

moral notions that I have been discussing are also relevant.

'Morality', of course, can be and often is defined purely in terms of respect

for others. The category of the moral is thought to encompass just our

obligations to other people. B.ut if we adopt this definition, then we have to

allow that there are other questions beyond the moral which are of central

concern to us, and which bring strong evaluation into play. There are

questions about how I am going to live my life which touch on the issue of

what kind of life is worth living, or what kind of life would fulfill the promise

implicit in my particular talents, or the demands incumbent on someone with

my endowment, or of what constitutes a rich, meaningful life-as against one

concerned with secondary matters or trivia. These are issues of strong

evaluation, because the people who ask these questions have no doubt that

one can, following onets immediate wishes and desires, take a wrong turn and

hence fail to lead a full life. To understand our moral world we have to see

not only what ideas and pictures underlie our sense of respect for others but

also those which underpin our notions of a full life. And as we shall see, these

are not two quite separate orders of ideas. There is a substantial overlap or,