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.

The roots of respect for life and integrity do seem to go as deep as this,

and to be connected perhaps with the almost universal tendency among other

animals to stop short of the killing of conspecifics. But like so much else in

human life, this 'instinct' receives a variable shape in culture, as we have seen.

And this shape is inseparable from an account of what it is that commands

our respect. The account seems to articulate the intuition. It tells us, for

instance, that human beings are creatures of God and made in his image, or

that they are immortal souls, or that they are all emanations of divine fire, or

that they are all rational agents and thus have a dignity which transcends any

other being, or some other such characterization; and that therefore we owe

them respect. The various cultures which restrict this respect do so by denying

the crucial description to those left outside: they are thought to lack souls, or

to be not fully rational, or perhaps to be destined by God for some lower

station, or something of the sort.

So our moral reactions in this domain have two facets, as it were. On one

side, they are almost like instincts, comparable to our love of sweet things, or

our aversion to nauseous substances, or our fear of falling; on the other, they

seem to involve claims, implicit or explicit, about the nature and status of

human beings. From this second side, a moral reaction is an assent to, an

affirmation of, a given ontology of the human.

An important strand of modern naturalist consciousness has tried to hive

this second side off and declare it dispensable or irrelevant to morality. The

motives are multiple: partly distrust of all such ontological accounts because

of the use to which some of them have been put, e.g., justifying restrictions or

exclusions of heretics or allegedly lower beings. And this distrust is strengthened

where a primitivist sense that unspoiled human nature respects life by

instinct reigns. But it is partly also the great epistemological cloud under

which all such accounts lie for those who have followed empiricist or

rationalist theories of knowledge, inspired by the success of modern natural

science.

The temptation is great to rest content with the fact that we have such

reactions, and to consider the ontology which gives rational articulation to

them to be so much froth, nonsense from a bygone age. This stance may go

along with a sociobiological explanation for our having such reactions, which

can be thought to have obvious evolutionary utility and indeed have

analogues among other species, as already mentioned.

But this neat division cannot be carried through. Ontological accounts

offer themselves as correct articulations of our 'gut' reactions of respect. In

this they treat these reactions as different from other 'gut' responses, such as

our taste for sweets or our nausea at certain smells or objects. We don't

acknowledge that there is something there to articulate, as we do in the moral

case. Is this distinction illegitimate? A metaphysica.l invention? It seems to

turn on this: in either case our response is to an object with a certain

property. But in one case the property marks the object as one meriting this

reaction; in the other the connection between the two is just a brute fact.

Thus we argue and reason over what and who is a fit object of moral respect,

while this doesn't seem to be even possible for a reaction like nausea. Of

course we can reason that it might be useful or convenient to alter the

boundaries of what we feel nausea at; and we might succeed, with training,

in doing so. But what seems to make no sense here is the supposition that we

might articulate a description of the nauseating in terms of its intrinsic

properties, and then argue from this that certain things which we in fact react

to that way are not really fit objects for it. There seems to be no other

criterion for a concept of the nauseating than our in fact reacting with nausea

to the things which bear the concept. As against the first kind of response,

which relates to a proper object, this one could be called a brute reaction.

Assimilating our moral reactions to these visceral ones would mean

considering all our talk about fit objects of moral response to be utterly

illusory. The belief that we are discriminating real properties, with criteria

independent of our de facto reactions, would be declared unfounded. This is ...

the burden of the so-called 'error theory' of moral values which John Mackie

espoused. It can combine easily with a sociobiological standpoint, in which:

one acknowledges that certain moral reactions had (and have) obvious .

survival value, and one may even propose to fine-tune and alter our reactions

so as to increase that value, as above we imagined changing what we feel

nausea at. But this would have nothing to do with a view that certain things

and not others, just in virtue of their nature, were fit objects of respect.

Now this sociobiological or external standpoint is utterly different from

the way we in fact argue and reason and deliberate in our moral lives. We are

all universalists now about respect for life and integrity. But this means not

just that we happen to have such reactions or that we have decided in the light

of the present predicament of the human race that it is useful to have such

reactions (though some people argue in this way, urging that, for instance, it

is in our own interest in a shrinking world to take account of Third World

poverty). It means rather that we believe it would be utterly wrong and

unfounded to draw the boundaries any narrower than around the whole

human race.

Should anybody propose to do so, we should immediately ask what

distinguished those within from those left out. And we should seize on this

distinguishing characteristic in order to show that it had nothing to do with

commanding respect. This is what we do with racists. Skin colour or physical

traits have nothing to do with that in virtue of which humans command our

respect. In fact, no ontological account accords it this. Racists have to claim

that certain of the crucial moral properties of human beings are genetically

determined: that some races are less intelligent, less capable of high moral

consciousness, and the like. The logic of the argument forces them to stake

their claim on ground where they are empirically at their weakest. Differences

in skin colour are undeniable. But all claims about innate cultural differences

are unsustainable in the light of human history. The logic of this whole debate

takes intrinsic description seriously, that is, descriptions of the objects of our

moral responses whose criteria are independent of our de facto reactions.

Can it be otherwise? We feel the demand to be consistent in our moral

reactions. And even those philosophers who propose to ignore ontological

accounts nevertheless scrutinize and criticize our moral intuitions for their

consistency or lack of it. But the issue of consistency presupposes intrinsic

description. How could anyone be accused of being inconsistently nauseated?

Some description could always be found covering all the objects he reacts to

that way, if only the relative one that they all awake his disgust. The issue of

consistency can only arise when the reaction is related to some independent

property as its fit object.

The whole way in which we think, reason, argue, and question ourselves

about morality supposes that our moral reactions have these two sides: that

they are not only 'gut' feelings but also implicit acknowledgements of claims

concerning their objects. The various ontological accounts try to articulate

these claims. The temptations to deny this, which arise from modern

epistemology, are strengthened by the widespread acceptance of a deeply

wrong model of practical reasoning,4 one based on an illegitimate extrapolation

from reasoning in natural science.

The various ontological accounts attribute predicates to human beings-like

being creatures of God, or emanations of divine fire, or agents of rational

choice-which seem rather analogous to theoretical predicates in natural

science, in that they (a) are rather remote from our everyday descriptions by

which we deal with people around us and ourselves, and (b) make reference

to our conception of the universe and the place we occupy in it. In fact, if we

go back before the modern period and take the thought of Plato, for example,

it is clear that the ontological account underlying the morality of just

treatment was identical with his 'scientific' theory of the universe. The theory

of Ideas underlay one and the other.

It seems natural to assume that we would have to establish these

ontological predicates in ways analogous to our supporting physical explanations:

starting from the facts identified independently of our reactions to

them, we would try to show that one underlying explanation was better than

others. But once we do this, we have lost from view what we're arguing

about. Ontological accounts have the status of articulations of our moral

instincts. They articulate the claims implicit in our reactions. We can no

longer argue about them at all once we assume a neutral stance and try to

describe the facts as they are independent of these reactions, as we have done

in natural science since the seventeenth century. There is such a thing as

moral objectivity, of course. Growth in moral insight often requires that we

neutralize some of our reactions. But this is in order that the others may be

identified, unmixed and unscreened by petty jealousy, egoism, or other

unworthy feelings. It is never a question of prescinding from our reactions

altogether.

Moral argument and exploration go on only within a world shaped by

our deepest moral responses, like the ones I have been talking about here; just

as natural science supposes that we focus on a world where all our responses

have been neutralized. If you want to discriminate more finely what it is

about human beings that makes them worthy of respect, you have to call to

mind what it is to feel the claim of human suffering, or what is repugnant

about injustice, or the awe you feel at the fact of human life. No argument

can take someone from a neutral stance towards the world, either adopted

from the demands of 'science' or fallen into as a consequence of pathology,

to insight into moral ontology. But it doesn't follow from this that moral

ontology is a pure fiction, as naturalists often assume. Rather we should treat

our deepest moral instincts, our ineradicable sense that human life is to be

respected, as our mode of access to the world in which ontological claims are

discernible and can be rationally argued about and sifted.

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