



Being Good

A short introduction to ethics

SIMON BLACKBURN

Being Good

‘A slender but rich meditation on why human beings should choose to behave well when the possibilities for doing evil are so abundant . . . Highly accessible, highly rewarding.’

Kirkus Reviews

‘enjoyable and extremely readable overview of philosophical ethics’

The Philosopher’s Magazine

‘a first-rate and accessible guide which tackles the huge, perpetual questions’

Nottingham Evening Post

‘a nifty little guide to the thorny subject of ethics’

Independent on Sunday

Simon Blackburn is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge. Until 2000 he was Edna J. Koury Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and from 1969 to 1990 a fellow and Tutor at Pembroke College, Oxford. His books include *Spreading the Word* (1984), *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (1993), *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (1994), *Ruling Passions* (1998), *Truth* (co-edited with Keith Simons, 1999), and the best-selling *Think* (1999). He edited the journal *Mind* from 1984 to 1990.



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Preface

THIS BOOK WAS initially designed for the series of Very Short Introductions published by Oxford University Press. For this reason it is shorter than *Think*, my other introductory book, to which it stands as a younger sibling. *Think* grew from a conviction that most introductions to philosophy were unnecessarily dry and off-putting; the present volume grew from a parallel conviction that most introductions to ethics failed to confront what really bothers people about the subject. What bothers them, I believe, are the many causes we have to fear that ethical claims are a kind of sham. The fear is called by names like relativism, scepticism, and nihilism. I have tried to weave the book around an exploration of them. But by the end it will be up to each reader to decide whether they have been laid to rest, or whether, if like Dracula they rise again, they are at least de-fanged.

I was invited to write the book by the editor of the series, Shelley Cox, whose confidence and encouragement have been towers of

strength to me. The actual writing was done during the summer of 2000 at the Research School of Social Sciences of the Australian National University, perhaps the most agreeable place in the world to embark on such a project. I owe thanks to Michael Smith for the hospitality of the School. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has always given me marvellous research support, and an equally marvellous critical audience of colleagues and graduate students. Among them, I owe thanks to Adrienne Martin who read the proofs. As always, my principal debt is to my wife Angela, whose editorial and typesetting skills are not usually at the service of an author under the same roof, and so needed matching by her equally remarkable patience and cheer.

24 November 2000

SWB



Contents

ILLUSTRATIONS	ix
INTRODUCTION	1
PART I. SEVEN THREATS TO ETHICS	9
1. The Death of God	10
2. Relativism	19
3. Egoism	29
4. Evolutionary Theory	37
5. Determinism and Futility	43
6. Unreasonable Demands	47
7. False Consciousness	50
PART II. SOME ETHICAL IDEAS	56
8. Birth	57
9. Death	65

· CONTENTS ·

10. Desire and the Meaning of Life	74
11. Pleasure	81
12. The Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number	86
13. Freedom from the Bad	93
14. Freedom and Paternalism	97
15. Rights and Natural Rights	103
PART III. FOUNDATIONS	108
16. Reasons and Foundations	108
17. Being Good and Living Well	112
18. The Categorical Imperative	116
19. Contracts and Discourse	125
20. The Common Point of View	129
21. Confidence Restored	133
APPENDIX. THE UNITED NATIONS' UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS	136
NOTES AND FURTHER READING	145
PICTURE CREDITS	153
BIBLIOGRAPHY	155
INDEX	161



Illustrations

1. Paul Klee, 'Two Men Meet, Each Believing the Other To Be in a Higher Position' 2
2. Hung Cong ('Nick') Ut, 'Accidental Napalm Attack, 1972' 6
3. Smilby, 'This is the wall, Foster . . .' 32
4. Matt Davies, 'The Human Genetic Code, Deciphered' 41
5. William Blake, 'The Soul Exploring the Recesses of the Grave' 67
6. William Blake, 'The Just Upright Man is Laughed to Scorn' 69
7. Richard Hamilton, 'What Is It that Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?' 78
8. William Hogarth, 'The Cock Fight' 84
9. Leunig, 'Gardens of the Human Condition' 87

· ILLUSTRATIONS ·

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 10. Eugène Delacroix, 'Liberty Leading
the People' | 96 |
| 11. George Grosz, 'Waving the Flag' | 99 |
| 12. Francisco de Goya, 'As If They Are
Another Breed' | 115 |

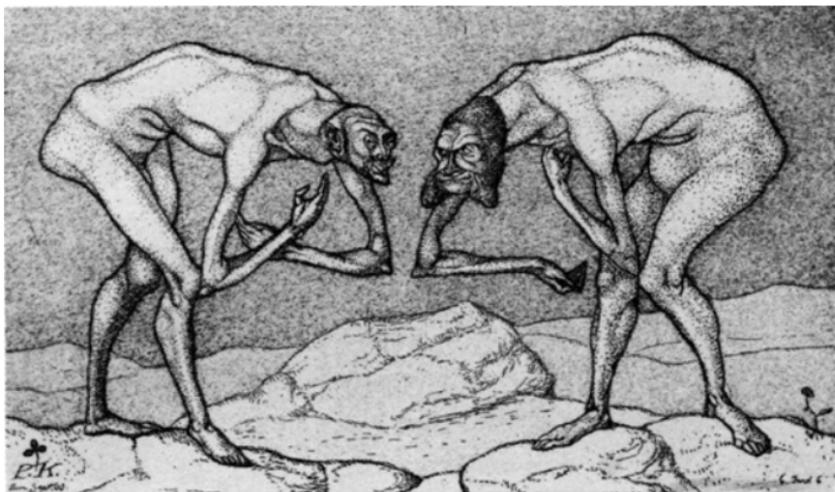


Introduction

WE HAVE ALL LEARNED to become sensitive to the physical environment. We know that we depend upon it, that it is fragile, and that we have the power to ruin it, thereby ruining our own lives, or more probably those of our descendants. Perhaps fewer of us are sensitive to what we might call the moral or ethical environment. This is the surrounding climate of ideas about how to live. It determines what we find acceptable or unacceptable, admirable or contemptible. It determines our conception of when things are going well and when they are going badly. It determines our conception of what is due to us, and what is due from us, as we relate to others. It shapes our emotional responses, determining what is a cause of pride or shame, or anger or gratitude, or what can be forgiven and what cannot. It gives us our standards—our standards of behaviour. In the eyes of some thinkers, most famously perhaps G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), it shapes our very identities. Our consciousness of ourselves is largely or even essentially a consciousness of how we

stand for other people. We need stories of our own value in the eyes of each other, the eyes of the world. Of course, attempts to increase that value can be badly overdone, as Paul Klee shows (below).

The workings of the ethical environment can be strangely invisible. I was once defending the practice of philosophy on a radio programme where one of the other guests was a professional survivor of the Nazi concentration camps. He asked me, fairly aggressively, what use philosophy would have been on a death march? The answer, of course, was not much—no more than literature, art, music, mathematics, or science would be useful at such a time. But consider the ethical environment that made such events possible. Hitler said, ‘How lucky it is for rulers that men cannot think.’ But in saying this he sounded as if he, too, was blind to the ethical climate that enabled his own ideas, and hence his power, to



1. Paul Klee, ‘Two Men Meet, Each Believing the Other To Be in a Higher Position.’ A comment on the servility often involved in the ambition for respect.

flourish. This climate included images of the primordial purity of a particular race and people. It was permeated by fear for the fragile nature of this purity. Like America in the post-war McCarthy era, it feared pollution from ‘degenerates’ outside or within. It included visions of national and racial destiny. It included ideas of apocalyptic transformation through national solidarity and military dedication to a cause. It was hospitable to the idea of the leader whose godlike vision is authoritative and unchallengeable. In turn, those ideas had roots in misapplications of Darwinism, in German Romanticism, and indeed in some aspects of Judaism and Christianity. In short, Hitler could come to power only because people *did* think—but their thinking was poisoned by an enveloping climate of ideas, many of which may not even have been conscious. For we may not be aware of our ideas. An idea in this sense is a tendency to accept routes of thought and feeling that we may not recognize in ourselves, or even be able to articulate. Yet such dispositions rule the social and political world.

There is a story about a physicist visiting his colleague Niels Bohr, and expressing surprise at finding a good-luck horseshoe hanging on the wall: ‘Surely you are not superstitious?’ ‘Oh, no, but I am told it works whether you believe in it or not.’ Horseshoes do not, but the ethical climate does.

An *ethical* climate is a different thing from a *moralistic* one. Indeed, one of the marks of an ethical climate may be hostility to moralizing, which is somehow out of place or bad form. Thinking that will itself be a something that affects the way we live our lives. So, for instance, one peculiarity of our present climate is that we care much more about our rights than about our ‘good’. For

previous thinkers about ethics, such as those who wrote the Upanishads, or Confucius, or Plato, or the founders of the Christian tradition, the central concern was the state of one's soul, meaning some personal state of justice or harmony. Such a state might include resignation and renunciation, or detachment, or obedience, or knowledge, especially self-knowledge. For Plato there could be no just political order except one populated by just citizens (although this also allows that inner harmony or 'justice' in citizens requires a just political order—there is nothing viciously circular about this interplay).

Today we tend not to believe that; we tend to think that modern constitutional democracies are fine regardless of the private vices of those within them. We are much more nervous talking about our good: it seems moralistic, or undemocratic, or elitist. Similarly, we are nervous talking about duty. The Victorian ideal of a life devoted to duty, or a calling, is substantially lost to us. So a greater proportion of our moral energy goes to protecting claims against each other, and that includes protecting the state of our soul as purely private, purely our own business. We see some of the workings of this aspect of our climate in this book.

Human beings are ethical animals. I do not mean that we naturally behave particularly well, nor that we are endlessly telling each other what to do. But we grade and evaluate, and compare and admire, and claim and justify. We do not just 'prefer' this or that, in isolation. We prefer that our preferences are shared; we turn them into demands on each other. Events endlessly adjust our sense of responsibility, our guilt and shame and our sense of our own worth and that of others. We hope for lives whose story leaves us looking

admirable; we like our weaknesses to be hidden and deniable. Drama, literature, and poetry all work out ideas of standards of behaviour and their consequences. This is overtly so in great art. But it shows itself just as unmistakably in our relentless appetite for gossip and the confession shows and the soap opera. Should Arlene tell Charlene that Rod knows that Tod kissed Darlene, although nobody has told Marlene? Is it required by loyalty to Charlene or would it be a betrayal of Darlene? Watch on.

Reflection on the ethical climate is not the private preserve of a few academic theorists in universities. After all, the satirist and cartoonist, as well as the artist and the novelist, comment upon and criticize the prevailing climate just as effectively as those who get known as philosophers. The impact of a campaigning novelist, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Dickens, Zola, or Solzhenitsyn, may be much greater than that of the academic theorist. A single photograph may have done more to halt the Vietnam war than all the writings of moral philosophers of the time put together (see next page).

Philosophy is certainly not alone in its engagement with the ethical climate. But its reflections contain a distinctive ambition. The ambition is to understand the springs of motivation, reason, and feeling that move us. It is to understand the networks of rules or 'norms' that sustain our lives. The ambition is often one of finding system in the apparent jumble of principles and goals that we respect, or say we do. It is an enterprise of self-knowledge. Of course, philosophers do not escape the climate, even as they reflect on it. Any story about human nature in the contemporary climate is a



2. Hung Cong ('Nick') Ut, 'Accidental Napalm Attack, 1972'.

result of human nature and the contemporary climate. But such stories may be better or worse, for all that.

Admiring the enterprise, aspiring to it, and even tolerating it, are themselves moral stances. They can themselves flourish or wither at different times, depending on how much we like what we see in the mirror. Rejecting the enterprise is natural enough, especially when things are comfortable. We all have a tendency to complacency with our own ways, like the English aristocrat on the Grand Tour: 'The Italians call it a *coltello*, the French a *couteau*, the Germans a *Messer*, but the English call it a knife, and when all is said and done, that's what it is.'

We do not like being told what to do. We want to enjoy our lives, and we want to enjoy them with a good conscience. People who disturb that equilibrium are uncomfortable, so moralists are often uninvited guests at the feast, and we have a multitude of defences against them. Analogously, some individuals can insulate themselves from a poor physical environment, for a time. They may profit by creating one. The owner can live upwind of his chemical factory, and the logger may know that the trees will not give out until after he is dead. Similarly, individuals can insulate themselves from a poor moral environment, or profit from it. Just as some trees flourish by depriving others of nutrients or light, so some people flourish by depriving others of their due. The western white male may flourish because of the inferior economic or social status of people who are not western, or white, or male. Insofar as we are like that, we will not want the lid to be lifted.

Ethics is disturbing. We are often vaguely uncomfortable when we think of such things as exploitation of the world's resources, or the way our comforts are provided by the miserable labour conditions of the third world. Sometimes, defensively, we get angry when such things are brought up. But to be entrenched in a culture, rather than merely belonging to the occasional rogue, exploitative attitudes will themselves need a story. So an ethical climate may allow talking of 'the market' as a justification for *our* high prices, and talking of 'their selfishness' and 'our rights' as a justification for anger at *their* high prices. Racists and sexists, like antebellum slave owners in America, always have to tell themselves a story that justifies their system. The ethical climate will sustain a conviction that *we* are civilized, and *they* are not, or that *we* deserve our better

fortune than *them*, or that *we* are intelligent, sensitive, rational, or progressive, or scientific, or authoritative, or blessed, or alone to be trusted with freedoms and rights, while *they* are not. An ethic gone wrong is an essential preliminary to the sweat-shop or the concentration camp and the death march.

I therefore begin this book with a look at the responses we sometimes give when ethics intrudes on our lives. These are responses that in different ways constitute threats to ethics. After that, in Part II, we look at some of the problems that living throws at us, and in particular the clash between principles of justice and rights, and less forbidding notions such as happiness and freedom. Finally, in Part III we look at the question of foundations: the ultimate justification for ethics, and its connection with human knowledge and human progress.



PART ONE

Seven Threats to Ethics

THIS SECTION LOOKS AT ideas that destabilize us when we think about standards of choice and conduct. In various ways they seem to suggest that ethics is somehow impossible. They are important because they themselves can seep into the moral environment. When they do, they can change what we expect from each other and ourselves, usually for the worse. Under their influence, when we look at the big words—justice, equality, freedom, rights—we see only bids for power and clashes of power, or we see only hypocrisy, or we see only our own opinions, unworthy to be foisted onto others. Cynicism and self-consciousness paralyse us. In what follows we consider seven such threats.