Hard Atheism & the Ethics of Desire

An Alternative to Morality

JOEL MARKS

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Preface

Other people can seem so mysterious, so strange, so stubborn, so wrong-headed. Why must they mess things up? Why must they complicate everything? Why can't they see the error of their ways? Don't they understand that they are just making trouble for themselves as well as for everybody else? Their own lives could be so much easier, and happier. Why all this unnecessary busy-ness? Et cetera et cetera et cetera. The most startling revelation of life is that all of these questions apply to oneself as well. Indeed, they manifest in the very asking of these questions about other people, for it is surely the most "unnecessary busy-ness" of all to be worrying about such things.

Buddhism provided me with the first liberation from that worrying. I now accept people as they are. Perhaps I still have not yet learned to accept *myself* as *I* am, but at least I know that is the goal. Buddhism taught me that we are all comprised of desires. We are comprised of other things too, such as beliefs; for example, there are people who believe that evolution – or "*evil*ution," as they think of it – is a delusion and the work of the devil. I myself think it is those people who are deluded. But what turns this into a *problem* is that we all *care* so much about the issue. And the heart of this caring is some desire or other, whether it be the anti-evolutionist's desperate clinging to a good God in heaven who will forgive us all our sins and make the rough ways smooth and reunite us with our departed loved ones and ensure that justice

prevails forever and ever, or the evolutionist's gut-level revulsion to aggressive and arrogant benightedness.

When we experience other people's or one another's beliefs and desires as not only different from our own but also insufferably intransigent, the result is endless and escalating strife.[1] This is overdetermined because both our perception and behavior reinforce the original strength of our respective desires; the strength of my desire causes me to see another person's action or utterance as intolerable, and the actions I am thereby motivated to take further inflame the other person's resistance with resentment, and my own resistance with the need to justify what I have done. This is a law of nature, which like the universal sway that gravity holds over the apple falling from the tree in the backyard all the way to the planets speeding in their courses, applies from the domestic setting of constant bickering all the way to the world setting of constant bloodletting.

I for one desire that the bickering and the bloodletting stop. (Not everyone does, but I would like to think that most do.) Fortunately, therefore, the desire basis of our contending implies two further things whose recognition can ameliorate it. One is that we are all bound to be different, since desires arise from countless sources that vary from person to person (from nation to nation and era to era and moment to moment, etc.). The other is that we are not likely to change, since desires are natural, causal, and probably material phenomena that become entrenched through habit and circumstances and may sometimes even be "hard-wired." To realize these things is liberating, therefore, since striving to alter what is inevitable and unalterable is pointless.

Here is a much-used analogy, although usually in the context of knowledge rather than desire.[2] The human situation is like a group of prisoners chained to all the walls of a dark dungeon and all staring at the single piece of furniture in the middle: a table. One prisoner will just

[1] When, out for a walk, I see someone chastising their dog for being fractious, I feel I am observing the essence of all *human* contention.

[2] Although it presumes the desire to know, which Aristotle attributes to our essential nature. (See the opening line of his *Metaphysics*.)

make out an object with an oblong shape spread out before him. Another will hazily discern a narrow surface disappearing into the distance. Yet another will see only a thick straight edge. A fourth observes a rectangle, a fifth a parallelogram. And let's not forget the rat in the room, who will look up from underneath and see a huge canopy overhead. And so on for all the denizens.

As with perception, so with desire: Each of us is fastened to a point of view and hence each desires something different. Some of us may realize or suspect that our desires are based on an incomplete picture, and perhaps we can experience some sense of the common reality. But none of us can grasp that total reality because of the essential limitation of our perspective, whether due to circumstances (immovable location and low illumination) or our very nature (human being versus rodent).

Liberation consists not in release from our shackles or escape from the prison (for I am certainly not preaching either mystical revelation or religious salvation) but in refraining from endless squabbling with everyone else as to which perspective is the *right* one. The fundamental error of life and cause of grief in the world is to assume that the way one sees things is the way things are.[3] This egotism spreads out from the individual to friends, groups, cultures and traditions, nations and religions, who value and appreciate the same things we do. For in this sharing is the preservation and enhancement of the faux-objectivity of what we value in our individual subjectivity. The self is thereby secured by securing the world. It is the ego's striving to sustain itself, therefore, that makes bigots and proselytizers of us all. And therefore as well, less anger (and less "guilt") and more fruitfulness is likely to be attained by recognizing the perspectival or "relative" nature of everyone's point of view and engaging in a cooperative venture to piece together a larger truth or accommodation. It suggests a middle way, between the despair of pointless strife and the ideal of complete agreement.

Note, then, that this realization does not counsel quietism. After all, it does not remove one's own desires, whether it is the desire simply to know (the shape of the table), or the more urgent one with which I began this

[3] I owe this essential insight to my late friend and colleague David Morris.

discourse: the desire that people change. Hitler's victims and ISIS's victims never cease(d) to desire that their persecutors stop wanting to exterminate them; and I will not cease to wish and want those persecutions never to have happened and not to be happening. Therefore even the wisdom that people do not change does not prevent our desiring that they do, since, its being true, one's desire that people change also remains intact.

The fact of our desire nature suggests an ethics that I have accordingly dubbed "desirism." Formulated as a maxim, it is this: Figure out, by rational inquiry, what you want, and then figure out how to get it, consistently with your rationally vetted desires. How does this help with the perceived stupidity and cussedness of other people (and oneself and even "the world")? It helps by directing one's efforts to what can realistically be accomplished in the furtherance of one's deepest desires. Moreover, I see this attitude as working out well (as I conceive "well") for society as a whole, because it will have a moderating effect on both ends and means, thereby reducing strife. I dare to imagine that it might even preclude the existence of Hitlers and ISISes. Thus I have really given two responses to the objection that desirism would leave us helpless against such people: Resistance to Hitlers would continue to exist insofar as Hitlers existed, but maybe there would be no more Hitlers.

Another way to say this is that desirism is not Buddhism, even though it has been inspired by Buddhism; or at least it is not Buddhism as interpreted at face value. For Buddhism is commonly understood to advise the elimination of desire (and ultimately the illusion of desirer or self), since it revealed that desire is the source of our woes. But this would seem as well to strip us of the possibility of happiness (as the satisfaction of desire) and action (as motivated by desire). That cannot be right, since genuine Buddhists seem perfectly capable of both enjoyment and resolve.[4] So "desire" must have a special meaning in this context, such that desire's elimination is compatible with both satisfaction and motivation. For example, it might be shorthand for *selfish* desire

[4] Buddhist thinkers have offered nondesire-based accounts of the enlightened person's feelings and actions, but the present study does not take its inspiration therefrom. Perhaps that is because I am not enlightened. At any rate I do not wish to defend an ethics I cannot vouch for in my own experience. I hope this is a benign ad hominemism.

or else *disproportionate* desire, leaving other desires intact. Just so, desirism is intended to modify our desires, but not necessarily eliminate them; and this modification, induced by rational inquiry, could well be expected to result in some desires (such as compassion) *increasing* in strength, or even coming into being, and not only some desires (such as selfishness) moderating or going out of existence. It would depend on the desire and on the situation.

Dedication and Acknowledgments

A host of good friends and colleagues have stimulated and guided my thinking and writing, for this book as for all previous. But one of this steadfast crew has really been put through his paces this time, namely, Mitchell Silver. He has been exceedingly responsive and generous with his precious time. In fact we have been writing (opposed? complementary?) books in tandem. My critique of morality has been a constant spur to (thorn in the side of?) Mitchell's defense of morality, and likewise for his critique of my critique. The very reason this book came into being was my felt need to address Mitchell's many objections to my previous work. And yet we are also so simpatico that we can finish each other's sentences (indeed, we start them); for me there would be no such thing as philosophical dialogue without Mitchell as my interlocutor. Therefore I cannot help but dedicate this book to him. *Better Silver dissatisfied than a fool satisfied*. With deepest thanks, Mitchell. May our dialogue continue indefinitely.

Yet neither would this book have come into being without the support of Richard Garner. No fool he either, even though he shares none of Silver's reservations about amoralism and all of my enthusiasm for it. Richard is the closest to a completely congenial thinker on these matters that I know of, even though, of course, we do have our differences of detail. I would feel very alone in the philosophical world without Richard's existence. But it is in a practical way that he has

helped me with the present book by assuming sole responsibility for another book. For some time we had discussed bringing out a collection of essays by fellow amoralists. But when the time seemed ripe, I begged off coediting in order to do my own writing. Richard has valiantly carried on that project and put his own stamp on it. I very much look forward to the fruit of his labors, and thank him very much for allowing me this indulgence.

Similarly indulgent and supportive have been my colleagues at Yale University's Interdisciplinary Center for Bioethics, and in particular, Susan Kopp and Stephen Latham.

I have also been aided, and blessed, by a number of thoughtful reviews of my previous monograph on this subject, *Ethics without Morals* (Marks 2013d). In all cases the reviewers were friendly but incisive in their criticisms. I have addressed herein (as noted) various issues raised by Russell Blackford, Steven Johnston, James McBain, Bill Meacham, and Timothy Schroeder. May they view the present book as making progress and not just digging a deeper hole!

In addition I have been sustained by ongoing dialogues with Robert Bass, Maxim Fetissenko, Rob Irvine, William Irwin, and Ian Smith. All have been completely supportive even when we disagree, and I consider them friends.

Also invaluable has been the opportunity to discuss the matters dealt with in this book but on a nonprofessional basis with several close friends (including one cousin) in countless conversations. I thank Huibing He, Allan Saltzman, Pamela Stang, and Melanie Stengel for their patience and wisdom.

The publisher has been a pleasure to work with, most especially in the person of my editor, Grace Jackson. The comments from two anonymous reviewers were also very helpful. The exigencies of publishing oblige me to submit the final copy before I will become acquainted with and therefore could properly thank the unsung professionals of this book's subsequent production.

All of the ideas in this book got their start in *Philosophy Now* magazine, where I was so fortunate to be able to discuss whatever I pleased in a column that appeared in every issue over a period of 13 years. My unceasing gratitude goes to editors Rick Lewis and Anja Steinbauer for their unceasing

encouragement and tolerance. Two milestones were my sudden amoral turn, which is represented in the present volume by the columns they have graciously permitted me to reprint, and my decision to stop writing for them regularly so that I could devote full-time to books such as this one.

Finally I want to recognize a long-ago professional acquaintance whose long-term influence I have only recently appreciated. Laura Duhan Kaplan was very supportive of my early efforts to teach philosophy to my college students by means of their own storytelling. At some point – I don't recall if in correspondence or in person – she made a remark to me to the following effect (as I recall it): The stories may be more important in themselves than their use as a teaching aid or as case studies for philosophical analysis. It only occurred to me in the final editing of the present book, wherein I employ extended examples of personal experiences as "evidence" for my claims, that the stories themselves had assumed at least equal importance with their methodological function. So in a way this is two books in one, and I wish to acknowledge Kaplan's insight for sparking it in me.

Contents

Introduction: Starting Off on the Wrong Foot – The Fundamental Error in Ethical Theory

Most contemporary ethical theory begins with the assumption that ethics is about morality. This assumption is so fundamental that it is unspoken and certainly undefended. (It is probably a holdover from the theism that secularists purport to spurn.)[5] Meanwhile, my understanding of *philosophy* is that it is inquiry into our most fundamental assumptions. (This is how I interpret Socrates' implicit claim that the unexamined life is not worth living.) Therefore (if *that* "assumption" is correct) it is most apt that I challenge the discipline of philosophical ethics to examine its own starting assumption. Indeed, I claim that its starting assumption is mistaken. I take ethics to be *inquiry into how to live*, and more particularly, what to do (on particular occasions or in various kinds of circumstances or possibly even at all times), what kind of person to be, and so forth.

The moralist's assumption that this question must be understood as "How *ought* we to live?" is what I call starting ethics off on the wrong foot. It is the wrong question. It also merely *presumes* an answer to *my* question, that answer being, "The way to live is to do what one *ought* to do." I think that is only one possible answer. I am convinced that ethics is not about *ought* at all. I question whether the concept of *ought* even

[5] Cf. Anscombe (1958).

makes sense. But sensical or no, I don't believe there is any such thing in reality; nor is there the corresponding *categorical imperative* to do the right thing.[6] Naturally a moralist could question whether *my* notion of "what to do" is intelligible if it does not mean "what one *ought* to do."[7] The present book is largely an effort to demonstrate the possibility, and reality, of this option.

I see the furious and pained moralizing of ethicists to be both laughable and tragic. For all of that ingenious theorizing and arguing certainly uncovers insights that could help us achieve what we are all looking for. But the moralist imperative to undergird these insights with an *ought* pushes their potential efficacy into the background. There is a push and urge to go *one step further* and explain not only, say, why cultivating an attitude of respect for all sentient beings as ends-in-themselves has much to recommend it, but also – and here's the rub – that we have an *absolute obligation* to adopt this as the ultimate basis for *all* of our behavior. Thus, lying to the Nazi soldier who is asking us if any Jews are hiding in the attic would be *wrong*, since it would involve treating the Nazi merely as a means to obtaining what we desire, which is the safety of the Jews we are hiding in the attic.[8] Ludicrous. Horrible.

But even when some moral conclusion does conform to a commonsense intuition, it goes beyond what is necessary to make the case . . . unless there is no case to be made, in which case it provides the pretense of one. Thus, one so often hears this kind of final flourish to arguments about what to do or not to do: "And it's the right thing to do" or "And it would be wrong." The "And" is an implicit acknowledgment that the assertion does not follow from the argument given, since in that case the appropriate word would be "Therefore." I call this "moral punctuation" because it adds no content but only signals an end to the peroration. It is found most conspicuously in the speechifying of politicians.

[6] "Ought" and its ilk can also be used in hypothetical contexts, as I discuss (and also discourage) in Marks, forthcoming. Cf. also "Morality Is More" and "Functions of Morality" in Chap. 2 below.

[7] Mitchell Silver, for one, has lodged this objection (personal communication).

[8] The locus classicus for this type of arguing is Kant (1993).

Religion is another locus of the kinds of excess I find in morality. Indeed, I originally mistook morality for a form of religion, but now I see it as its historical offspring – with much family resemblance, to be sure, but without God. Both morality and religion (at least of the Abrahamic sort) deliver absolute commandments from On High, and yet are also alike in having mundane manifestations that offer diverse and conflicting prescriptions and proscriptions. These are the conditions for the perfect ethical storm: opposing yet categorical imperatives. I see this as the basis for much, possibly most of the strife and grief in the world. And so this is what lends urgency to my efforts to expunge not only religion but also its secular stepchild, morality. I call the combined enterprise "hard atheism."[9] But there is a related parallel, which, while of less import, is especially salient to me, a philosopher, namely, between moral *theorizing* and *theology*. In these scholastic enterprises I see similar "moves" being made all the time. There is endless debate about meanings and issues that I have come to see as themselves without meaning (in a different sense). So that is another reason to consign morality, like religion, to the scrapheap.

But I still believe that it makes perfect sense to inquire into *how to live* and *what to do* and *what kind of person to be,* etc. And I have come up with a different answer from the moralist's (and a fortiori, the theist's), which is what the rest of this book details. In a nutshell it is the *recommendation* that we figure out what we (individually or collectively) want and then figure out how to get it. And my main *argument* is that this answer will better help us with the real work that needs to be done. Moral theorists assume that the real work is to figure out what we ought to do. I reply that there is no point in figuring out what people ought to do if people still won't do it because they don't want to or don't care.[10] The moral theorist replies that knowing what we ought to do provides precisely the motivation that is needed (to get us to turn aside from

[9] See Marks (2013d), pp. 20–21.

[10] I may seem to be contradicting myself since, in the Preface, I noted that sometimes caring is the problem. But it is caring *too much*, but also sometimes too little, that is the problem, and so my general prescription is to vet our desires rationally.

doing what we may want to do however immoral). I reply that the task of figuring out what we *ought* to do will be forever without resolution, so the practical upshot of that inquiry is nil or maintaining the status quo.[11] People will just continue to do what they want anyway *but call it* the right thing to do. For all these reasons I believe that an *amoral* motivation that is based on recognizing the actual desires that move us would be more effective in bringing about the kind of world that moralists and amoralists alike would prefer if we all reflected on the matter.

In a way, then, I am suggesting that we replace normativity with psychology, since I would have us replace *ought* with *would*. For example, in place of, "You ought to help your parents," I *predict* that, if you reflected on the matter rationally, you *would*, other things equal, be disposed to help your parents. In other words, I would like us to replace an intense preoccupation with what we ought to do, with an intense curiosity about why we do what we do. What does "ought" add to "would"? My answer: Only obfuscation and infinite opportunities for hypocrisy and self-delusion and egotism and irresolvable conflict. Hence I do not even want to *parse* "ought" as *would*; I simply want to get rid of it. Nevertheless, I think my alternative counts as an *ethics* and not a psychology per se, since it does not *postulate* simply that we do what we want, which could even seem a truism, but rather *recommends* that we do what we *would* want *after we had reflected on the matter rationally.*

The ethics I favor, therefore, points up two ways in which people can be mistaken in how they live their lives. One is to moralize their desires, while the other is to desire what they would not rationally desire. A person who makes the first mistake I call a moralist. A person who makes the second mistake I call a wanton.[12] I call these mistakes because I

[11] Religion supposedly has the advantage of providing plenty of reason to care and be motivated, namely, God's wrath and/or God's eternal reward. But due to religion's diversity and similar incapacity to resolve differences that both have no foundation in reality and yet brook no compromise (the "perfect storm" previously alluded to), the practical upshot is the same as for morality: no sure guidance but endless strife.

[12] This may be a pun since the standard word "wanton" apparently has a different root from "want."

believe the moralist is factually in error to believe or assume that morality exists,[13] and the wanton is factually in error to believe or assume that his or her spontaneous desires would ipso facto, i.e., simply in virtue of being his or her desires, withstand rational vetting. Even so, however, I myself would be a moralist if I condemned the moralist and the wanton for making these mistakes. I just wish they wouldn't (for such reasons as I will present in this book), and so I recommend that we not be moralists or wantons. Furthermore, I claim (or at least hope) that most of us would accept this recommendation *if we were to reflect on the matter rationally.* This book is intended to be an occasion for such reflection.

[13] Naturally, like any factual assertion, its truth or falsity depends on its meaning. The morality whose existence I deny is what Blackford (2016) has called "inescapable practical authority." I gave my own account in Marks (2013d), Ch. 1, and it is further characterized throughout the present book.

1

The Story Thus Far

Desirism: First Pass. Anti-Epiphany

This book begins *in medias res* – in the midst of a discussion that began in a series of columns I wrote for *Philosophy Now* magazine, which introduced my "counter-conversion"[1] from moralism to amoralism, and continued in journal articles and three other books. It is appropriate, therefore, that I review the earlier material at the outset. The columns, written in relatively nontechnical language for a wide audience,[2] will serve nicely to orient the reader of the present book to the more detailed and technical investigation to follow.

Hard Atheism

For the last several years I have been reflecting on and experimenting with a new ethics, and as a result I have thrown over my previous commitment to Kantianism. In fact, I have given up morality altogether.

[1] To borrow William James' term for the loss of religious belief.

[2] Adapted and with some deletions and additions for inclusion in this book.

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This has certainly come as a shock to me (and also a disappointment, to put it mildly). But this philosopher has long been laboring under an unexamined assumption, namely, that there is such a thing as right and wrong. I now believe there isn't. How did I arrive at this conclusion? The long and the short of it is that I became convinced that atheism implies amorality; and since I am an atheist, I must therefore embrace amorality. I call the premise of this argument "hard atheism" because it is analogous to a thesis in philosophy known as "hard determinism." The latter holds that if metaphysical determinism is true, then there is no such thing as free will. Thus, a "soft determinist" believes that, even if your reading these words right now has followed by causal necessity from the Big Bang thirteen billion years ago, you can still meaningfully be said to have freely chosen to read it. Analogously, a "soft atheist" would hold that one could be an atheist and still believe in morality. And indeed, the whole crop of "New Atheists" are softies of this kind. So was I, until I experienced my shocking epiphany that many religious believers are correct that without God, there is no morality. But they are incorrect, I still believe, about there being a God. Hence, I believe, there is no morality. (So I call this my "anti-epiphany.")

The New Atheism is interestingly, and perhaps tellingly, like another "new" movement, namely, the New Theology (or one version thereof). For the latter strives to preserve God even while embracing the scientific worldview, as the former strives to preserve *morality* while embracing the scientific worldview (and eliminating God). But the God and morality thus preserved are curiously etiolated because they have lost their metaphysical pith. Meanwhile, the remaining husks can be noxious. As an amoralist, therefore, I now see the New Atheism – and indeed mainstream analytic ethics – as an apologetic rhetoric, whose mission is to "save the phenomena" of ("that Old Time") morality.[3] So amoralism is to the New Atheism as atheism is to the New Theology. The point of both critiques – atheism and amoralism – is to eliminate, as unhelpful and even baneful, the language (and all its attitudinal and other empirical concomitants) along with the metaphysics of theism and/or moralism.

[3] Cf. Silver (2006)'s critique of the New Theology.

Why do I now accept hard atheism? I was struck by salient parallels between religion and morality, especially that both avail themselves of imperatives or commands, which are intended to apply universally. In the case of religion, and most obviously theism, these commands emanate from a Commander; "and this all people call God," as Aquinas might have put it. The problem with theism is of course the shaky grounds for believing in God. But the problem with morality, I now maintain, is that it is in even worse shape than religion in this regard; for if there were a God, His issuing commands would make some kind of sense. But if there is no God, as of course atheists assert, then what sense could be made of there being this sort of commands? In sum: While theists take the obvious existence of moral commands to be a kind of proof of the existence of a Commander, that is, God, I now take the nonexistence of a Commander as a kind of proof that there are no Commands, that is, morality.

Note the analogy to Darwinism. It used to be a standard argument for God's existence that the obvious and abundant design of the universe, as manifested particularly in the elegant fit of organisms to their environments, indicated the existence of a divine designer. Now we know that biological evolution can account for this fit perfectly without recourse to God. Hence, no Designer, no Design; there is only the appearance of design in nature (excepting such artifacts as beaver dams, bird nests, and architects' blueprints). Just so, there are no moral commands but only the appearance of them, which can be explained by selection (by the natural environment, culture, family, etc.) of behavior and motives ("moral intuitions" or "conscience") that best promote survival of the organism. There need be no recourse to Morality any more than to God to account for these phenomena.

But what is it like to *live* in a world without morality? Is such a life even viable? I was reeling – much as, I imagine, a religious believer whose whole life has been based on a fervent belief in the Almighty would find herself without bearings or even any ground to stand on if suddenly that belief were to vanish, no matter whether by proof of just by *poof*! Just so, morality has been the essence of my existence, both personally and professionally. Indeed,

morality has been my God, that being the point of the hard-atheism thesis.[4] Now that God is dead.

I have had, therefore, to learn how to live life all over again, like a child learning to walk. And just as a child growing up discovers one fascinating thing after another about the "new" world she is exploring, so a dazzling array of new possibilities is spread out before me.

What Is Morality?

I claim that morality does not exist. But what is morality? It is not possible to settle any existential claim without knowing the nature of the entity in question. Clearly there is a sense in which morality *does* exist; for example, defined as a code of behavior whose violation is considered to merit punishment (legal, social, or psychological), morality is to be found in every society. So when I assert that morality does not exist, I must have something else in mind. And certainly I do, namely, morality conceived as a universal injunction external to our desires. Thus, for example, even if the code of our society deemed homosexual behavior as such to be morally permissible, and even if you personally wished to engage in it, morality might pronounce it wrong. The morality I now reject is, therefore, a metaphysical one, as opposed to the sociological kind; the latter is a fact of our empirical environment, while the former is a figment of our wishful or fearful imagination.

For all that, metaphysical morality is widely accepted as real. (That is itself an empirical claim about people's beliefs. I would be happy to have the hypothesis tested by experimental philosophers or moral psychologists. If it turns out *not* to be a nearly universal belief but is perhaps typical only of some cultures or personality types, then my complaint would be limited to them.) But why not, then, simply propose a reinterpretation of the word "morality," as well as its attendant terminology, such as "right" and "wrong"? Why do I feel compelled to banish that entire way of speaking?

[4] And hence the title of the memoir I have written about this period of my life – *Bad Faith* (Marks 2013c).

So my suggestion could instead be along these lines: Morality should be understood, not as a metaphysical absolute, but instead as a code of conduct generally agreed upon by (a given?) society.

However, I am still for the elimination of morality, even though I approve the idea of bounded codes. I wouldn't want to call them "morality" (or "moralities") because of the heavy baggage that terminology lugs along with it.[5] Precisely because moral talk of the absolutist ilk is so ingrained (if my empirical speculation is correct, or at least in those folks for whom it is correct), I think it is unlikely that people could make the switch to a different attitude if they continued to use the same language. Words bring meaning in their tow. To attempt to supplant one meaning with another is much more than stipulating the change. Meanings form countless associations with other words besides the ones they explicitly define, and these become part of the meaning itself, extending it beyond denotation to connotation. Words as prominent as "moral" and "wrong" in the moral sense help constitute the fabric of our whole world. It won't be possible just to snap one's fingers and have them mean something else, however much Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty might demur.

I feel that the new understanding of morality as more myth than reality is important enough to warrant the inconvenience of dropping our accustomed ways of speaking and thinking about it and learning new ones. This is for two reasons. First is the value of truth itself. If it is true (or, more modestly, rational to believe) that metaphysical morality does not exist, then that in itself is reason for us to believe it. Of course this presumes that one is rational. I grant that, in the end, truth and rationality may be matters of subjective value or desire as well, for some people may not care very much about them, or at least not place paramount importance on them, if, say, the alternative were happiness. Think blue pill in *The Matrix*. So my first argument is addressed only to those who would take the red pill.

My second reason or argument for preferring the elimination of morality to the reinterpretation of morality is stronger as an appeal to your concurrence: I believe that the resultant world would be more to

[5] My initial impulse was to call them *schmorality* as a way of calling attention to their artificiality.

our liking. That is a big claim, I grant. I think it is testable, but I will leave that to the professionals. As an armchair philosopher trusting mainly to my own intuitions and experiences, I am satisfied at least that I myself would prefer to live in a world where nobody believed in either God or morality but instead habitually engaged in observation, study, conversation, introspection, and reflection. This could be an idealistic streak in myself – wishful thinking – and the cynicism that can be read into Voltaire's statement be fully justified: "I want my lawyer, my tailor, my servants, even my wife to believe in God [and morality – JM], because it means that I shall be cheated and robbed and cuckolded less often." But I put it to you to assess by your own lights.

In the Mode of Morality *or* I, Socrates

I have relinquished the mantel of the moralist since I no longer believe there even is such a thing as morality. How, then, shall one live? One thing to note is that in asking that question I am able to retain the title of *ethicist*, for ethics is just the inquiry into how to live. But I would also like to suggest at the outset of this undertaking that, even though an amoralist, I can still engage in moral argumentation . . . and in good conscience (so to speak).

Consider that for the foreseeable future I will be living in a society that continues to pay homage to morality and believe in its reality implicitly. So I am likely to be confronted time and again by a question like, "Do you believe *x* is wrong?" It would usually be hopeless to attempt to refashion the question into an amoralist mode of speaking; at the very least this would change the subject from the particular issue under discussion, say, vivisection, to an abstract issue in meta-ethics, namely, whether there is such a thing as wrongness. But there is still a way I could answer the question both honestly and effectively. Thus, I could reply, "Vivisection is wrong according to morality as I conceive it." For the quoted sentence is *not* asserting that vivisection is wrong, only that, according to morality (as I conceive morality) it is wrong. In the abstract this has no more force than if one were to say, "Unicorns are a type of horse (according to the common conception of unicorns)." There is no implication that unicorns actually exist.

Note further that it is possible to *argue* about these things whose existence is not being asserted. Thus, I could say, "Vivisection is wrong (in my conception of morality) because it involves treating sentient beings merely as means." This is of course a kind of Kantian justification for my claim. And I would offer it as an argument that I believe to be perfectly sound because (1) it articulates the analysis of morality that I consider to be the correct one, namely, Kant's categorical imperative (suitably modified to accommodate nonhuman animals), (2) it characterizes vivisection in a way that I consider to be correct, namely, as violating the Kantian imperative, and (3) it logically draws its conclusion therefrom. Again this would be just as if I had argued, "Santa Claus could not possibly be mistaken for Popeye because Santa Claus has a big beard while Popeye is barefaced."

Thus, I have become like the father in this joke – courtesy of my lawyer's rabbi – about a Jewish boy from a liberal family who attends the neighborhood parochial (Christian) school:

One day Isaac comes home in great puzzlement about what he had been taught in school that day; so he goes to his father and asks him about it.

"Father, I learned that God is a Trinity. But how can there be three Gods?"

"Now get this straight, Son: We're Jewish. So there is only one God . . . and we don't believe in Him!"

Just so, I no longer believe in morality (like God in the joke), but I would still insist that the nature of morality is Kantian (monotheism in the joke) rather than utilitarian (Trinitarianism in the joke).

Now, if I were to employ this technique without elaboration, it could easily be part of a deceptive strategy, since it is likely that people would assume I was defending something outright rather than only hypothetically. A statement like "If *anything* is wrong, *this* is" is naturally interpreted as a rhetorical emphasis of just how wrong the speaker considers *this* to be. But if I, as an amoralist, were to say "If anything is wrong, vivisection is," I would mean it literally, not rhetorically; that is, the "if" would have real force for me, even suggesting that I do *not* believe that anything is wrong

(since morality does not exist): all the more, that I do not believe that vivisection is wrong. (Of course that does not mean I think vivisection is *right* or even *permissible*, since those are moral notions also. I just *want it to stop*.) So my intention in making the utterance would be at variance with the impression it would leave in my listener's mind; and knowing this, I would be a deceiver.

However, if I were only trying to persuade a Kantian vivisectionist of the error of her ways, its usage, it seems to me, would pass muster even morally. I would be using reasoning to show my interlocutor that what she was doing violated *her own* moral/theoretical commitments. My own view of morality itself would be irrelevant; my interlocutor can assume what she likes about my meta-ethics. It would be exactly as if I were conversing with a religious believer about the proper treatment of other animals: Whether or not the believer knew I was an atheist, it would be perfectly proper for me to try to convince her that there is Biblical support for a benign "stewardship" of other animals – would it not? I need not believe in the concept of stewardship myself, nor in its divine sanction, in order to invoke it undeceivingly when arguing with someone who does. Just so, it seems to me, morality.

Rather aptly, I now realize, I have been led to a sort of Socratic mode of moral argumentation. Socrates was notorious for interrogating his interlocutors rather than asserting and defending theses himself. Similarly, I am suggesting, I will continue to be able to hold forth as a critical moral reasoner, even though I no longer believe in morality, so long as I confine myself to questioning the inferences of others (and gingerly deflect their questions about my own moral commitments by speaking *in the mode of* morality, as above).[6] It is true that I would

[6] Feyerabend (1995) appears to have gone a step further and employed *rationality* as a "mode." Thus he wrote:

> Most critics [of his book *Against Method*] accused me of inconsistency: I am an anarchist, they said, but I still argue. I was astonished by this objection. A person addressing rationalists certainly can argue with them. It doesn't mean *he* believes that arguments settle a matter, *they* do. So if the arguments are valid (in their terms), they must accept the result. It was almost as if rationalists regarded argument as a sacred ritual that loses its power when used by nonbelievers. (p. 145)

thereby fail to be completely forthcoming about my own meta-ethics whenever doing so would be disruptive to the dialogue; but I do not think I would be doing anything that is considered unkosher even when moralists are arguing among themselves. After all, my meta-ethics could be mistaken; maybe there is such a thing as morality. So my "suspension of disbelief" could be conceived as an expression of intellectual humility, and my arguments considered in themselves by the intellectual light of my interlocutor.

The bottom line for me, as both a philosopher and the possessor of a particular personality, is that I do not "suffer fools gladly." This has always been true of me, but it used to be supplemented by a belief (or assumption) in morality. Now that I have turned the philosophic eye on my own largely unexamined assumption (that morality exists), I see that I have been a moral fool. But I retain my belief (or assumption) in Truth as such, as well as my pig-headed allegiance to it. Thus, I shall henceforth apply a skeptical scalpel to the moral arguments of all, unsparing even of the ones I have been sympathetic to as a moralist, since all of them, I now believe, are premised on a bogus metaphysics. For it is intellectual dishonesty or naïveté that I am most temperamentally disposed to dislike, even as I retain my passionate preferences for certain "causes," such as animal liberation.

Postscript. In the fullness of time I have come to question my original blithe confidence that moral modishness is harmless (to my considered goals). Thanks largely to the prodding of Richard Garner (personal communications), although I have now surpassed even him in this regard, I have become wary of the trap of embroilment in any argument that is based on false premises. Dialectally wrangling with a theist or a moralist on theistic or moralist grounds is a tar baby, precisely because, in the realm of fantasy, anything goes . . . hence there can never be a resolution. That's fine if one's main goal is the fun of dialectic. But if it is genuine progress on some particular practical issue that is being debated, such as the treatment of nonhuman animals, this method aids and abets the enemy by putting off the day of reckoning indefinitely.[7]

[7] Cf. Marks (2013b).

How Amorality Works

I have explained how an amoralist, such as I have become, could still continue to argue in the mode of morality. Although this risks being deceptive and hypocritical (not to mention counterproductive to my general promotion of amoralism), it can also be done aboveboard because the amoralist could be appealing to his or her interlocutor's (or reader's) moralism. This is analogous to how a native speaker of English might nonetheless, with some knowledge of other languages, be able to point out a grammatical mistake being made by someone speaking in French. Thus, if I were conversing with someone who, say, believed that meat-eating is morally good because it promotes the greatest good of the greatest number, I could point out that this utilitarian credo is supposed to apply to all sentient beings and not only to human beings; so that if one tallied up the net pleasure and pain being experienced not only by the human meat-eaters but also by the animals being bred and slaughtered for eating under the current regime of factory farming, one would likely conclude that eating meat does *not* lead to the greatest good and hence is wrong. Meanwhile, I myself, as an amoralist, believe meat-eating is neither right nor wrong; but I would have done nothing dishonest in convincing my interlocutor that it is wrong, that is, by her lights.

But why would I even care whether I was being honest or not? Isn't that, again, something an amoralist would be indifferent to? Strictly speaking, yes. But an amoralist still has a compass, a "guide to life," an *ethics*, or so I would argue; and it can be a match for anybody's morality. Thus, consider that in purely practical terms, honesty may still be the best policy. A reputation for truth-telling will likely make one a more attractive person to do (literal or figurative) business with, which will enable one to thrive relative to one's less scrupulous competitors. Thus, "survival of the fittest" could naturally promote honesty as a prevalent trait even in the absence of any moral concern.

There I am, then, honestly discussing particular issues with opponents, and justifying *my* positions to them by *their* moral lights. But how do I justify them *to myself,* since I have no moral lights anymore? For example, on what basis would *I myself* be a vegetarian?

The answer, in a word, is desire. I *want* animals, human or otherwise, not to suffer or to die prematurely for purposes that I consider trivial, not to mention counterproductive of human happiness. For many, maybe most human beings in the world today, meat-eating is a mere luxury or habit of taste, while at the same time it promotes animal cruelty and slaughter, environmental degradation, global warming, human disease, and even human starvation (the latter due to the highly inefficient conversion of plant protein to animal protein for human consumption). For whatever reason or reasons, or even no reason, these things matter to me. Therefore I am motivated to act on the relevant desires.

But what if I were conversing with another amoralist: How would I convince *her* of the rightness of my desires? Well, of course, I wouldn't even try, since neither of us believes in right, or wrong. But what I could do is take her through the same considerations that have *moved* me to my position and hope that her heartstrings were tuned in harmony with mine. If the two of us have grown up in the same culture, we will certainly have many desires in common. For example, we may both be averse to animal suffering and to cruelty to animals. But even within the same society, there can be large differences in *knowledge*. I speak from personal experience regarding even my own knowledge, for, to stay with my example, I was blissfully unaware of factory farming until only a few years ago. Most people in my society continue to be, even though the institution has been prevalent for the last fifty years. Thus, there is a good chance that I would be able to influence my interlocutor's carnivorous desire and behavior simply by introducing her to the relevant facts. The absence of a moral context, therefore, need not be harmful to my hitherto-moral project of honestly promoting vegetarianism.

But what if my amoral interlocutor were just as versed in the facts of factory farming as I but still did not care about animal suffering, or simply loved eating meat *more than* she loved animals?[8] At this point the dialogue

[8] By the way, I do not mean to suggest that nonfactory animal agriculture is benign. But factory farming is worse, and the dominant form of animal agriculture at present; so it is easier to make the case against it.

might serve no purpose. But that certainly would not mean that I had no further recourse, even honest recourse. For example, I could try to bring around as many *other* people as possible to my way of seeing (and feeling) things so that ultimately by sheer force of numbers we might reduce animal suffering and exploitation by our purchasing practices and voting choices. In this effort I could join with others to employ standard methods of marketing, such as advertising campaigns and celebrity endorsements. These things are not inherently dishonest simply in virtue of being strategic. (And of course if I did not value honesty, additional tactics would become available to me.)

I conclude that morality is largely superfluous in daily life, so its removal – once the initial shock has subsided – would at worst make no difference in the world. (I happen to believe – or just hope? – that its removal would make the world a *better* place, that is, more to our individual and collective liking. That would constitute an argument for amorality that has more going for it than simply conceptual housekeeping. But the thesis – call it "The Joy of Amorality" – is an empirical one, so I would rely on more than just philosophy to defend it.) A helpful analogy, at least for the atheist, is sin. Even though words like "sinful" and "evil" come naturally to the tongue (of a member of my society, including myself) as a description of, say, child-molesting, they do not describe any actual properties of anything.[9] There are no literal sins in the world because there is no literal God and hence the whole religious superstructure that would include such categories as sin and evil. Just so, I now maintain, nothing is literally right or wrong because there is no morality. Yet, as with the nonexistence of God, we human beings can still discover plenty of completely naturally explainable internal resources for motivating behaviors that uphold the benign functioning of society, which is what I naturally care about on reflection.

[9] Blackford (2016, p. 7) suggests that "evil" may have become tame enough to be acceptable in secular society. Yet the damage done by G. W. Bush's "Axis of Evil" talk makes me skeptical that it has lost its religious force.

What Amorality Is Not

As a defender of amorality, I am continually challenged by two allegations: egoism and relativism. But both are bogies. Let me explain why.

That an amoralist would be an egoist seems to follow from the idea that morality is precisely a check on our selfish tendencies. Morality's main reason for being is group cohesion, without which most personal endeavors could not even get off the ground. All of us depend on the viability of our group; hence we must imbibe very strong motives "with our mother's milk" to favor the group over our personal ego, if only for our personal good in the long run. Furthermore, my own way of speaking about amoral motives suggests an egoism, for I believe that, in the final analysis, we are moved solely by desire. The bottom line is what we want. Is that not egoism pure and simple?

No. The above arguments conflate egoism with other things. The first argument reduces egoism to selfishness. But egoism is much farther-seeing than selfishness. Long-term self-interest is egoism's goal, and its rational pursuit a component of its charge. A hefty dose of other-concern would plausibly be part of any true egoist's makeup since his or her own prospects depend on others'. Even so, however, an amoralist is neither necessarily nor essentially egoistic. This is because one's fundamental desires could be for anything. Just because a desire is one's own does not mean that what one desires is only one's own welfare. You could just as deeply desire the welfare of your neighbor as the welfare of yourself, and even more so, such that you would sacrifice yourself for her. Thus, when I say that an amoralist is motivated solely by desire, I do not mean to imply any sort of egoism whatever.

It remains an empirical question whether or to what degree human beings or any particular human being is egoistic. It might even be true that all of us are thoroughgoing egoists. I doubt it, but I cannot prove that is false since we sometimes have hidden motives. But suppose it were true. This would still not put amorality at any *moral disadvantage* since "ought implies can." That dictum is a presumption of morality's: There cannot be a moral obligation to do something that is impossible to do, like jump to the Moon. So if we really were egoists, then it would be impossible for us to be moral. Therefore morality, in the sense of our obligations toward others for their own sake, could only be a sham.

Amorality, then, would at least have the "moral" advantage of being honest (however inadvertently).

But I do not believe that we are thoroughgoing egoists or even predominately egoists. After all, it is eminently plausible that evolution would have favored those individuals whose desires were largely group-oriented since this would presumably have served various functions that enhanced the odds of their genes' survival. Thus, even without reflection but simply by instinct, we often behave as the moralist would enjoin us to do. What really is the difference, then, between the amoralist and the moralist? Just that the latter believes in an external source of moral imperatives, whereas the former recognizes only desires, which have been shaped by the interaction of beings having the characteristics of our ancestors or ourselves with the physical and social exigencies of our respective environments past and present.

Out of the frying pan of egoism, therefore, and into the fire of relativism? For if there are only desires that are responsive to the environment, won't desires vary according to different environments? Yes indeed. However, there are still two ways to parry this possibility. First is to point out that human environments, whether natural or cultural, are both like and unlike. So we can count on there being uniformities across all boundaries as well as diversity. And it is surely the same with morality: for while it may be universal that, let us say, one should never torture a child, it is also respectably moral to permit or even require, say, killing human beings in some circumstances (such as to protect a child from being tortured) and to prohibit it in others.

My denial of moral relativism, however, rests mainly on the unintelligibility of the charge. "Moral relativism" seems to me an oxymoron; for morality in its very concept and essence is supposed to be universal and absolute. Thus, even in the example I just gave: Morality's take on the morality of killing would be that a single imperative underlies the difference due to circumstances, namely, "Thou shalt not kill the innocent" or something of that sort. Moral relativism, therefore, is a straw person to begin with. But it is downright question-begging as an objection to amorality, since it assumes what the position denies, namely, morality. Amorality cannot be guilty of moral relativism any more than your neighbor could be a goblin. That there are differences of desire, however, is a commonplace.

Monotheorism *or* a Kantian Recants

A philosophical moralist, such as I have been, justifies right actions or permissible actions or prohibitions on actions (wrong actions) by reference to a moral theory. For example, it is wrong to lie because lying violates the categorical imperative. The latter term names a theory, which, spelled out, asserts that one ought never to treat any person merely as a means. The whole justification can be laid out in argument form, containing, typically, a statement of the theory, a statement of a definition, a statement of a fact, and an inference to the conclusion, thus:

(1) One ought never to treat any person merely as a means. (Theory)
(2) Lying is an act of asserting something that you believe to be false for the purpose of misleading somebody else to believe it is true. (Definition)
(3) Asserting something that you believe to be false for the purpose of misleading somebody else to believe it is true is an instance of treating a person merely as a means. (Fact)
(Therefore) Lying is wrong. (Inference)

Any of the components of an argument can be contested. For example, an objector could deny Premise 3 above by arguing that *asserting something that you believe to be false for the purpose of misleading somebody else to believe it is true* sometimes involves solicitude for the person being treated in this way – such as sparing someone from painful news – and so is *not* necessarily an instance of treating that person merely as a means. But sooner or later one hopes to find an argument that is sound in every respect – all true premises and a valid inference – in which case one will have proven one's conclusion or moral claim to be true.

My bread and butter, as a so-called applied ethicist, has consisted of constructing such arguments in defense of my own views and critiquing the arguments of people who held opposing views. Key to my work as an ethicist, however, has been the theoretical premise, for it addresses the question of what is right or wrong or permissible in the most general terms. It turns out that there are several main

theories in the running, which are presumed to generate different answers to at least some particular moral questions. For example, the theory known as utilitarianism, according to which one ought always to do what will maximize the good, would seem, at first blush anyway, to justify removing the organs of a perfectly healthy person in order to save the lives of five persons who desperately needed transplants; whereas the categorical imperative, also known as Kantianism after its propounder Immanuel Kant, would deny this because that action would involve treating the healthy person merely as a means to the recovery of the five ill persons.

So which ethical theory is the correct one? That is the question that the discipline known as normative ethics seeks to answer. I myself was a consistent defender of Kantianism over utilitarianism and other theories. Here again arguments would be deployed, this time to show that one theory was superior to all the others, often by showing that the other theories, but not one's own favorite, would "justify" absurd conclusions, such as that it is morally permissible or even obligatory to kidnap healthy individuals for the purpose of "harvesting" their organs for transplants.

Thus I spent my professional career conscientiously defending my preferred theory of Kantianism against all-comers and then defending particular conclusions about all and sundry issues, such as promise-keeping, homosexual marriage, academic cheating, vegetarianism, and so forth, on the basis of Kantianism. All the while, however, I was neglecting (or *bracketing* in philo-speak) an even more general level of argument and analysis called meta-ethics. Meta-ethics seeks to characterize morality as such; thus it differs from the various theories of normative ethics in somewhat the way a genus differs from species. For example, meta-ethics would point out that morality is inherently prescriptive, while a normative theory would try to spell out the precise content of the moral prescription, such as, "Maximize the good," or "Never treat anybody merely as a means," or "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

But meta-ethics had never "grabbed" me, perhaps because it dealt with issues that I could not begin to take seriously, such as moral relativism. To me it was the most obvious thing in the world that moral issues were matters of objective fact, so I was very concerned only to establish what was

right or wrong and not bother about the "purely speculative" matter of whether there even were such a thing as right and wrong in the objective sense. As one of my graduate school professors once put it, "Which is more certain: that it is wrong to torture a baby or that quarks have charm?"[10]

I sometimes had to admit to myself, though, in the very back of my mind, that I could not quite make out what sort of things right and wrong were. They didn't seem to be like protons and planets because physics had nothing to say about them. They also didn't seem to be like numbers and other such nonphysical realities, whose truths could be discovered by thought alone, since there was nothing comparable among ethicists to the amount of consensus one finds among mathematicians. But the only remaining alternative seemed to be that they were merely psychological phenomena, mere beliefs or "intuitions" pointing to nothing beyond themselves – like the *taste* of a strawberry or a radish, which is surely in the palate and not in the fruit or the root. For in that case, just as one person could prefer strawberries to radishes and another vice versa, so one person could feel strongly that, say, vivisection is monstrous and another that it is perfectly permissible, and there would be no way to decide between them: hence moral relativism.

But then came my anti-epiphany and counter-conversion to amorality. So I did not stop with moral relativism but went all the way to moral eliminativism, finding it more apt and more useful simply to say that morality does not exist (other than as a myth). Thus, normative ethics is as pointless a pursuit as theology, inasmuch as both seek to determine the truths about a fictitious entity. And the diagnosis is similar in the two cases: both suffer from "mono." What I mean is that in assuming there is morality or God, they infer that there is a truth about them: What is *the* nature of (the one) morality? What is *the* nature of (the one) God? But the result is Procrustean since in fact there are distinctive conceptions of morality just as there are distinctive conceptions of God; so there is no place for (moral) monotheorism (or "monomoralism") any more than for monotheism. (In reality, anyway.) All of us harbor Kantian as well as utilitarian as well as egoist etc. intuitions, most likely depending on the

[10] I believe I am quoting John Troyer.

type of circumstances we find ourselves in, just as all of us imagine a loving God, a jealous and demanding God, a law-giver, a merciful one, a father, a mother, and so on. And, although presumably they perform some function in the evolutionary scheme of things, insofar as we take any of these intuitings and imaginings to signify a reality beyond themselves, we are just day-dreaming.

Thus this Kantian recants. (Whether I shall someday reKant remains to be seen.)

Shoulda Woulda Coulda

I used to be a moral man, but now I am a material man. It has been a staggering experience to realize how much drops out of one's picture of the world on this account. At the top of the list would be the notion of "should" – that is, "should" *tout court* – in other words, what one ought to do "in the last analysis" or "all things considered." Moralists fondly refer to this feature of morality as "the highest *telos*," from a Greek work referring to the end of a goal-directed process; thus, morality is supposed to override all other factors, especially selfish ones, in any deliberation about what to do. Immanuel Kant postulated a special psychological faculty of will, responsive to the dictates of rational conscience, to serve the purpose of wresting self-control from our inclinations or desires. The latter are mere motives of behavior, but the former provide us with genuine reasons for action; thus, morality is based on justification rather than causation.

Bunkums, I now declare. There is only cause and effect. Determinism reigns, not reason. We cannot do other than we do. There is no *should*; there is only what we *will* do, or what we *would* do if in such-a-such condition under so-and-so circumstances. That is all we ever *could* do. Granted, sometimes we are motivated by beliefs about what we should do. But this is no different from being motivated to say "Thank you" by the belief that Santa Claus is noting whether you are naughty or nice. False beliefs can surely be motivators as much as true beliefs can. So my point is that the salient feature of these situations is the causal nexus

between a psychological state, such as a belief, and an action, such as saying "Thank you."

Furthermore, the motivating belief, whether true or false, can be a reasoned one. In the case of a false belief, however, the reasoning will of necessity be unsound, since sound arguments have true conclusions. And the most obvious candidate of unsoundness in any moral deliberation will be the falsity of the moral premise, since . . . there is no such thing as morality.

World without Anger

All emotions are inherently rational, albeit in a pared-down and merely logical sense. For example, you might be angry because you believed that somebody had insulted you, and you (naturally) desired not to be insulted. This is rational, as opposed to being angry because somebody has been kind to you, which, without further explanation, would appear irrational. But an emotion that was rational in this minimal, conceptual sense could still be irrational in an ethical sense. Thus, you might well be angry because somebody had insulted you, but perhaps everybody's life would be better off if such things did not make you angry.

I would now like to examine emotion, and anger in particular, in the context of my investigation of amorality. One objection to amorality is that morality is pervasive in a very deep sense. The claim is that we not only have frequent resort to explicitly moral notions, such as doing the wrong (or the right) thing or blaming someone or being outraged by something, but we also continually make implicit reference to morality in attitudes and actions that appear overtly nonmoral. The worry, then, is that normal life and society would become unsustainable because they would become *unintelligible* if we were to abandon morality. Notice how this is different from, and more extreme than, the more accustomed objection to amorality, which is that human existence would become unsustainable because "everything would be permitted." But an example of this new objection is that the notion of "person" is claimed to be morally imbued. On this account, a person is not just a certain kind of biological organism or a certain sort of

functioning system but is specifically an entity having inherent worth that makes it merit moral respect. This is one reason why so much controversy surrounds the issue of whether human fetuses are persons.

Without attempting to resolve now whether *person* is a moral concept, I would like to argue herein that morality can be found in a less-accustomed place, namely, anger. At first blush this seems plainly mistaken. We do have an explicitly moral notion of anger, which we call indignation. In fact, a strong case could be made for a conceptual linkage between anger and morality in "the other direction"; that is, a great deal of our moral repertoire, including its essential core, seems to be composed of angry responses.[11] Thus, there is not only indignation but also outrage, condemnation, accusation, denunciation, offense, and so on. But the hypothesis I am entertaining now is that *every* type and instance of anger contains some moral component. Is that true?

Consider: what is anger? Anger does not always arise when somebody hurts or frustrates or slights you or somebody else you care about. In order for this emotion to occur, an additional element is required, it seems to me: that you believe that the person has done the deed *deliberately* (or at least carelessly), in other words, that there has been a particular type of intention (or else inattention) that is malign (or at least blameworthy). In a word, anger is the feeling that a *wrong* has been committed. If this is so, then *all* anger is a form of indignation, that is, all anger is moral anger. Thus, *all* anger would disappear from an amoral world.

That, at any rate, is my hunch that an amoral world would be a world without anger. And this seems to me to be a happy conclusion, for two reasons: I like the idea of a world without anger, and I believe that amorality is true. Therefore, it would not only be correct to believe that morality does not exist, but would also have a result that I like. Of course even if it were true that anger goes by the boards if (belief in) morality does, it would not follow without further argument that amorality is a good thing. Certainly there are those who are prepared to argue that anger is at least sometimes valuable, and that human life would, on balance, be worse off without it. Furthermore, even if the case

[11] I credit Prinz (2007) with opening my eyes to this.

could be made that the end of morality portended the end of anger, and the end of anger would be a good thing overall, amorality might bring other ills in its wake that outweighed this benefit. And finally, even if an amoral world would be a world we all *preferred* to a moral one, that would not show amorality to be *true*. I will, however, continue to argue both that it is true (that morality does not exist) and that most people would favor a world in which it were believed to be true.

Moral Pornography

A local murder trial has revealed depths of depravity that are hard to comprehend. But the more gruesome the death (of our neighbor), the more we salivate over the details. How else to explain the unrelenting news coverage? A novelty this time has been the *tweeting* of developments from inside the courtroom by reporters and other observers. Clearly this story has been milked for its entertainment value.

Lest I be accused of doing the same, let me quickly relate the murder narrative (whose truth is known only to the perps, who are alleged to be the defendants) and then get on with my philosophical parsing. Two lowlifes entered the suburban home of a local physician and his family at night through an unlocked door. They beat the doctor with a baseball bat and tied him up in the basement. They proceeded to the bedrooms of his wife and two daughters, aged 17 and 11. By the time they left the house seven hours later (whereupon they were immediately apprehended by the police) one or the other of the intruders had raped and strangled the doctor's wife, sexually abused the 11-year-old (and taken pictures on his cell phone), tied the girls to their beds, *poured gasoline on them* and throughout the house, and then set the whole place on fire. Of the victims, only the doctor escaped.

These lurid episodes pass through our imaginations and our nightmares, sometimes distressing, but sometimes titillating. That's what sells newspapers and keeps people glued to their televisions and their smartphones. Although I myself don't even want to think about these events because the images are so painful to me (and for such reasons do not even have a television), I am not going to hold my nose about other people's responses,

having become an amoralist. Anyway, it is a commonplace that human beings are both repelled by and attracted to "human interest" stories of the criminal kind. What I do find novel from my new perspective, however, is that such stories also enable another kind of indulgence, the cultivation of another kind of distasteful taste, which I call *moral pornography*.

Consider that besides the horror, the sympathetic grief, the disbelief, and even the illicit pleasure that onlookers derive from such spectacles, there is also a strong component of disapproval, condemnation, *j'accuse*. After all, how often does the world present us with an example of unalloyed evil? Although life is filled with events that elicit moral responses, these events are frequently ambiguous. There often seems to be some exonerating feature ("He stole the money, but he was under threat of his life"), or some uncertainty about the relevant facts ("Was she too drunk to give her consent?"), or even an irresolvable difference about what matters, what is valued ("The human embryo is just a bunch of protoplasm!"). But in an open-and-shut atrocity, society can vent all of its pent-up frustrations about the pervasive moral inconclusiveness of existence. Here at least, at last is *wrongness* pure and simple: Let us despise it with all of our moral might.

Further magnifying this effect is that the perpetrators are under lock and key. They are completely in our power. So our feelings are able to find the most concrete and satisfying expression imaginable. Not only can we call these men by whatever "names" we please . . . we can, and do (in letters to the editor and blogs), call for their death, even by torture.

Perhaps you begin to see why I call this a kind of pornography. There is vicarious pleasure to be found in the verbal and virtual stoning of these monsters. As for the "moral" component, it seems to me now, looking through the eyes of one who no longer believes in right and wrong, that it is either a delusion or a pretext. Just as "newsworthiness" serves as a cover for the dissemination and enjoyment of rape and murder stories, so "justice," "indignation," and "outrage" nicely disguise and embellish our desire to *get back at* the world for all the slings and arrows we must normally endure. It is not really the criminals we will be killing: It is our boss, our neighbor, our parents, our spouse, our children . . . all of the people who have hurt us in one way or another, but whom we dare not "hurt back" because of deep ambivalence, societal constraints, or knowledge that they did not hurt us intentionally.

In addition, by focusing on the behavior of extreme malefactors, we are able to *minimize* the significance of *our own* shortcomings. Just as patriotism is "the last refuge of a scoundrel," righteousness diverts attention from run-of-the-mill wrongdoing. We can claim innocence, even feel innocent, by comparison to the miscreant. Dare I say that we thereby enact the salvation story: the lifting of our guilt by its imposition on another (who is, furthermore on the amoralist account, in fact without sin)? More: the catharsis of denunciation is a source of self-satisfaction that makes us feel morally superior.

But what is the alternative? My suggestion is that we recognize that criminals are no more morally guilty than our boss, neighbor, family, or self . . . because there is no such thing as morality to begin with. Everyone does what they do because of a chain of cause-and-effect that began at the Big Bang. If we truly took that worldview to heart, we would have, not anger, but perhaps profound sadness – profound because on behalf of both victim and perpetrator, neither of whom is to be envied if both are robots who end up in pain. And we might also then resolve to find ways to cause the world to be the way we want it to be. This might still lead us to lock up people who do things we deeply dislike, and for some of the usual reasons, such as protection from the danger they may pose, and deterrence to others who might otherwise be motivated to behave similarly. But it would preclude the manufacture of both moral vilification and moral egotism, which by their effects only add to the sum total of misery.

Some Like It Hot

A very sad thing about relationships is that they not uncommonly degenerate into continual bickering.[12] Furthermore, try as they may, a couple will find themselves unable to stop, even as they perceive the accumulating damage done. The real problem, I now believe, is that each person feels *justified* to complain about the other. So no matter how

[12] I have also reproduced this essay in Marks (2013e) since it is a favorite.

much they may want to end the arguing because of its bad consequences, they will always be swimming against the tide if an inner voice keeps counseling that the other person is doing something *wrong*. In such cases it is clear that the desire to *chastise and punish for wrongdoing* is stronger than the desire for domestic harmony.

The way out of this, I submit, is to have a certain attitude, and that attitude, or at least one such attitude, would be what I have been calling amorality. An amoralist (of the sort I have in mind) would not judge people or their character traits or their actions to be good or bad or right or wrong (in the moral sense of these terms, for of course someone could still be *wrong* that the earth is flat, etc.). Indeed, an amoralist would not judge a *moralist* to be in the wrong *for being a moralist* (although, again, someone might be a moralist for a wrong, i.e., *false*, reason, such as believing that certain actions lead to eternal damnation). Nor does an amoralist believe in objective values, such as the goodness of health or the badness of pain; however much we might *desire* or *be averse* to these things.

So consider how this works out in a particular case. My solitary living arrangement has given me total control of the indoor temperature, such that in the New England winter, with the right combination of layers of clothing in the daytime and blankets and quilt at night, alternation of fireplace and furnace, timed thermostat settings, open and closed ducts and doors, etc., I can enjoy both personal comfort and low heating bills. But suppose a partner were to enter the scene: Would she not be a potential monkey wrench (and mutatis mutandis for my moving in with her)? The chances are slim that a newcomer would either share the elaborate set of preferences in place or readily adapt to them (especially so for folks in my age cohort, since we tend to be set in our ways). Suppose, in particular, that she had a strong preference for a warm indoor environment, whereas mine is closer to the brisk. What now?

One "solution" is continual bickering, which seems to be a surprisingly common component of close relationships. But I suggest that the root cause is *not* the difference of preferences per se but is rather a *shared moralism*. For each party would typically believe not only that he or she had a given preference (for warmer or cooler), *but*

also that his or her preference was *morally right*. Thus, I might say to my partner that she *should not* be so "delicate"; but she could reply with her own disapproval, thus: "A home *should be* a refuge from the out-of-doors and not an extension of it. We are not wild animals!" So then I might up the moral ante by adducing external consequences: "But keeping the temperature down is indicative of good environmental stewardship, which would help not only to sustain finite resources but also to prevent future wars." But she would be ready with a retort: "Our biggest problem now is unemployment, and a booming energy sector would help ameliorate that." I might then point out that lower heating bills would enable us to donate more money to charities, while my partner could reply that charities are what you give to after you have satisfied your own basic needs, one of which is shelter from the elements. "But look," I'd respond in exasperation, "when inside you can just put on a sweater." "Or you," she'd return, "could strip down to your shorts, for all I care!"

Round and round we go. Nobody could "win" this, unless eternal bickering counts as winning . . . which it probably does for some couples, and that would therefore be OK by amoralist lights. But for myself (and I hope my partner) I'd prefer almost anything to bickering.

Here is how I diagnose the general problem. When another person has a preference or desire that conflicts with one's own, especially when we have things "just so" to our own liking, we tend to experience the other's as an *imposition* or an *intrusion*. This is because we attribute a very special kind of quality to the other person: free will. We naturally assume that a human being is unlike a stone in that the former can act of her own volition. We therefore further assume that a person can be responsive not only to the way things are, such as the local pull of gravity, to which a stone is also responsive, but also to the way things *ought to be*, to which a stone is insensitive. And by an amazing coincidence (wink wink nudge nudge), what we ourselves desire coincides with how they ought to be, and what the other person desires does not. Therefore we expect the stone to ignore our wishes but another person to conform to them because what we wish is right. Indeed, even a sympathetic or "chivalrous" accommodation to the other is ruled out, since it would make oneself complicit in wrong-doing.

It turns out, then, that although morality is commonly touted to be the nemesis and antidote to selfish desire, in actual practice morality aids and abets it. For the most natural deployment of morality is as a check on somebody else's behavior rather than on one's own.[13] And the explanation of this turnabout is that morality has no absolute basis that could act as a *universal* constraint. Thus, if it really were Writ On High that *one shalt not*, then it would be wrong not only for thine "enemy" to do it but also for thyself; yet hardly anybody accepts this. We ourselves are the universal exception (to coin an oxymoron) to every moral rule. And even in the one-in-a-million case of a bad conscience, the pull of morality is typically so weak that the prohibited act may go forward anyway.[14]

So I would like to urge an alternative conception of ethics. According to this, there is only the way things are and there is no ought-to-be, and what sets us apart from stones is only that we have desires. In other words, instead of a presumed moral fact that the situation ought to be such-and-so, there is only the psychological fact that *we would like it* to be such-and-so. The latter is an empirical matter, just like the local pull of gravity. Thus, if my partner opposed my setting the thermostat low, this would be in the same metaphysical ballpark as a bunch of stones tumbling down a mountainside and heading my way. In both cases I would face a fact which threatened to frustrate my own desire, in the one case to keep things cool, in the other case to avoid being pummeled.

But in *neither* case would there be a question of whether the person or the rock was *morally wrong* to be so preferring or behaving. The *only* question would be how to deal with a practical situation. There is no "easy win" over the person by declaring her to be violating some presumed objective moral principle.[15] Her opposed desire is just as implacable as the landslide (which is to say, as implacable as *my own*

[13] Batson (2016) provides some empirical backing for this claim in Ch. 7, "Moral Combat."

[14] I do also offer an alternative account of guilt as supremely powerful and aversive and perhaps even pervasive, enough so to motivate millions of church-goers to seek and believe they have received absolution from their sinful nature, and most of us to shift the blame to another at every opportunity. (Cf. the story of the dropped camera in "Metaphysics and Justification" in Chap. 3.) But the bottom line is the same: We ourselves are not guilty.

[15] Cf. "Incantation" in Chap. 4.

desire, which I can no more change by an act of will than halt a landslide). The only operative objective principles are laws of nature, whether physical or psychological. When the question is what temperature to keep in the home, a person who is no longer living alone would need to add to his or her list of considerations the needs and desires and beliefs (whether true or false) of another person. What is overlooked in the singling out of a newcomer as *intruder* is that it has *never* been a case of things being "just the way I like them" – some personal Golden Age before the arrival of the benighted other – but was always *under a set of constraints*, such as the type of heating system in the house, the layout of rooms, one's financial resources, etc. The newcomer's desires simply add to this set. To see her or him as a *moral agent* is implicitly, and ignorantly, and to everyone's disservice, to deny this.

Realizing these things has been, for me at least, a source of great relief, for I am no longer fighting unnecessary battles in a purely mythical realm of *oughts*. My partner wants it hot; I want it cold. How do we work this out? That is the question, not "Who's right?" It is a joint project for true partners, not a unilateral initiative against an adversary. Thus, instead of attempting to instill moral guilt in the other (almost always a doomed effort), each of us could moderate our language and tone of voice. Furthermore, some of the reasons we have given for our respective positions are probably bogus to begin with; would I really be invoking the environment and she unemployment if we did not first have preferences on other grounds? I don't mean that we are not also concerned about those other things; only that they are decidedly secondary to the matter at hand, and addressing them won't resolve it.

Of course I would still be free to try to persuade my partner of any error in her thinking (and she in mine), or she to coax me into greater empathy for her discomfort (and I for mine), and so forth. But I (and, I hope, she as well) would now be dealing with reality and not invoking a mythical god of morality to make the rough ways smooth. What we need to figure out is how best to accommodate our respective considered preferences. "Would it work to place a space heater in the room where you spend most of your time during the day, but otherwise leave the house thermostat set low?" We would also have the whole picture before us, which is to say in this case, not just the matter of temperature, but also our relations with each other.

Maybe I would decide in the end to suffer the heat in order to warm up her affections . . . or just because I love her. Or we might part after all on grounds of irreconcilable differences. It's all one big system and not a set of commandments. That's what I mean by amorality.

What Is the Value of Humanity?

The end is nigh . . . possibly. On any given day the Minor Planet Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, might notify the world that a newly discovered asteroid or comet, the size of the one that wiped out the dinosaurs and ended the Mesozoic Era (the Age of Reptiles), is bearing down on Earth. This could foretell the imminent end of the current, Cenozoic Era (the Age of Mammals). Only if the discovery were early enough to allow the space-faring nations time to mount an effective deflection mission (which could require decades), or if they had been prudent enough to build a deflection infrastructure prior to any such discovery, would humanity have a hope of continued survival.

I think about that scenario a lot, as someone knowledgeable about astronomy and planetary defense. I have argued that our efforts to date, while impressive, remain absurdly inadequate to protect our species from extinction.[16] "Absurdly" because, for the first time in the history of the planet, it is well within the means of Tellurians (aka Earthlings) to ward off this ultimate catastrophe, yet we dither due to widespread scientific illiteracy and the vagaries of politics and so forth. Analogous situations exist for climate change and other natural or human-made perils. Shouldn't it be obvious that meetable threats to human extinction trump just about any other concern human beings might have? Thus have I assumed in my arguments for humanity's embarking on a more robust (and costly) planetary defense.

But when I replace my policy analyst's hat with a philosophical one, I realize that my assumption has been – to use a Socratic word – unexamined. Does it really make sense to assume that the value of

[16] See for example Marks (2015b).

humanity is, for all practical purposes, infinite, and hence humanity's demise would have infinite negative value? A moment's reflection reveals that it does not. Think of the analogy of personal death. Since death ends *everything* for a human (or other living) being, we might suppose that it too has infinite negative value, if only for that person (since we seem far more cavalier about the deaths of others). Yet it is a commonplace that many (most? all?) human beings value other things more highly than even their own continued existence. "Give me liberty or give me death," proclaimed Patrick Henry. And I, for one, am convinced that I would readily choose my own death in preference to wasting away in a nursing home. Thus, we may value supremely an abstract ideal, or the life or happiness of a loved one, or a *state* of our own existence, and so on, over (our own) existence itself.

But when it comes to species extinction, is not something more (and besides sheer quantity) at stake? Indeed, is not one reason for our personal death being acceptable to us precisely the thought that humanity as such will perdure? During the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union were poised to annihilate each other and everybody else, Jonathan Schell in an article in the *New Yorker*[17] coined the notion of a "second death." For not only would every living human being be killed in the envisioned nuclear holocaust, but, as a further consequence, countless billions of descendants would never come to be.

But this is not the whole of it, since it has anyway been the case that countless billions of (potential) descendants have been pre-empted by other descendants who were born instead. (As I never tire of pointing out, hardly any of us alive today would have been born had not Hitler existed. But billions of others might have been born instead.) So more to the ethical point of a second death is that the elimination of *all* descendants degrades our own *present* existence by denying us a heritage and the continuation of countless projects we value.[18] It is in this sense that the extinction of *Homo sapiens* would be the *second* death of any individual human being who died, for not only would that person cease

[17] Subsequently published in Schell (1982).

[18] Cf. Scheffler (2013).

to exist but their memory and their influence and the objects of their love and concern would perish as well.

Still, this does not clinch the case for the infinite value of humanity. For one thing, note that the value in question is wholly relative. Humanity has no value as such, for the simple reason that nothing does. So-called objective value is a fantasy. For there to be such a thing, we would have to imagine either a *supreme being* who somehow assigned values ("and God saw that it was good"), although even then such valuations would only be relative to him, since a different supreme being might have found different things pleasing to her taste; or else value inheres in things simply in virtue of what they are. And it does seem natural to conceive of value in the latter way; for example, the music of Beethoven is glorious "in itself," and not merely because some people happen to like it.

But the longer I ponder such phenomena, the more difficult it becomes for me to comprehend what it could mean for something to be valuable in itself. Mackie (1977) famously called the idea "queer." As difficult as it may be to put aside one's own preferences, such as for Beethoven's music, it is nevertheless possible to understand that human beings belonging to a different culture, not to mention extraterrestrial aliens constituted wholly differently from ourselves, would fail to find value in Beethoven's music or might even disvalue it. Just so, humanity: The value of our species is there *for us*, but it is not to be expected that our species has value "in itself," nor even for other species or beings. All the more can this be said about our supposed *infinite* value.

On the contrary, *Homo sapiens* is easily enough seen to be the scourge of the Earth. Single-handedly we are bringing about an epochal extinction of other species, as Kolbert (2014) explains,[19] and we torture and kill tens of billions of domestic animals every year solely to satisfy our palates. Not only that, but we are *our own* worst enemy, bringing untold suffering on our own species through every manner of physical and psychological torment or neglect. If humanity did have infinite value, it would more likely be negative value.

[19] And as she put it so aptly in Wiener (2014): "Scientists say now we're the asteroid."

So does humanity have value, and if so, of what kind and in what sense? The question is not merely academic. For me it has had quite practical significance, since I am an active advocate for two relevant "causes": animal rights and planetary defense. So on the one hand I decry the cruelty of humanity and strive to protect other animals from humanity's inhumanity, and on the other hand I strive to protect humanity from extinction by space rock. This conflict is made even more acute by my sense that humanity will *never* stop exploiting other animals (not to mention other humans), and in fact will keep doing so to a greater and greater extent (due both to our ever increasing numbers and to our ever increasing appetites facilitated by our ever more powerful technologies). So how could I possibly justify my involvement in a campaign to preserve our species?

It might be supposed that preventing an asteroidal or cometary impact would also be good for nonhuman animals since many, even most of them, would also be eliminated by such an impact. But given that humanity itself is equivalent to such an impact in our dire effects on other animals, I think it is arguable that our removal would give other species a fighting chance to regroup. Furthermore, the disappearance of *domestic* species would for the most part be a blessing to *them*, who languish in factory farms and meet their end in slaughterhouses. So the question remains: How can I justify wanting to save the very species that is only tormenting and destroying the other species I care so much about?

The simple answer is: I cannot *justify* this contradiction of motives at all. But, curiously, this no longer bothers me in the slightest. The reason is analogous to what I have said about the objective value of humanity, that is, that humanity has no such value because nothing does. Similarly, I cannot justify my collection of commitments because *no* commitment can be justified in this way. Just as there is no value as such in the universe, so there is no justification about motives as such in the universe. Whatever values and justifications for actions there are will always be relative to some desire.

Now, desires can themselves be justified or unjustified in a sense, namely by reference to the rationality of relevant beliefs.[20] For example,

[20] This discussion resumes in "Explanations and Reasons" in Chap. 3.

if I desired an ice cream sundae because I believed it would help me to lose weight, and that belief was due to my having uncritically accepted the bald claim of some huckster, then my desire would hardly be justified. But if I desired an ice cream sundae *despite* my complete understanding of its possible effect on my weight, and of all other considerations relevant to an everyday dietary choice – even including the sundae's dependence on exploited cows – then my desire would be rational . . . and hence also my eating the sundae. But, again, this does not make eating ice cream sundaes *inherently* justified, since one could easily imagine a rational desire *not* to do so.

So no action or commitment is justified, or unjustified, as such, and hence there is no absolute or objective contradiction in being committed to courses of action that are in opposition to each other. What could be more natural than having conflicting desires, even, as I've argued, rational ones? It is probably impossible *not* to have such desires, since any non-identical desires will have opposed implications for action. Thus, if you love your father and your mother, it may come to pass that you want things that conflict, for example, if your dying parents live on opposite ends of the Earth and you want to see both of them one last time.

This, then, is how I conceive my commitments to animal rights and planetary defense. I desire both, and quite rationally, I believe; yet this duo of desires motivates actions with opposing tendencies or consequences, since the one causes me to strive to protect nonhuman animals from human depredations, while the other causes me to strive to protect humanity from extinction and thereby helps preserve the status quo of animal exploitation.

Why do I continue to harbor both desires even after becoming aware of this absurdity? Simply because I am a psychological being, whose mental composition is the result of numberless contingencies. Perhaps my strong desire to liberate animals from human exploitation has its roots in nature documentaries I watched on television as a child, combined with studying philosophy and reading Peter Singer at an impressionable age, etc. Meanwhile, my strong desire to lobby for planetary defense likely derives from a lifelong fascination with all things astronomical, beginning with childhood trips to the planetarium with my uncle, as well as from vivid appreciation of countless achievements of

human genius, nobility, daring, and passion, like flying to the Moon, hiding Jews from the Nazis, the works of Darwin, van Gogh, Kant, Gödel, and, yes, Beethoven, and, finally, from an acute awareness of the preciousness of human consciousness and intelligence in light of its possible uniqueness in the universe (as is suggested by the so-called Fermi Paradox).

Thus, I feel no imperative to reconcile my disparate desires; that would be to "adore" a "foolish consistency," in Emerson's phrasing. So long as contradiction is avoided in their factual bases, the desires that result from our reflections pass rational muster; and whatever contradictory tendencies result therefrom in turn, are easily explained by the random sources of our deepest desires.

Where does this leave the value of humanity? Again, the preservation of our species (or of the polar bears) has no value as such. But for me, and I suspect for most of my readers, it has, despite deep misgivings about human rapacity, a very high value. However, the Copernican process has not reached its end. For just as the heliocentric hero demoted us from the center of the universe, and ethical ponderings have cast further doubt on our worth, humanity may fare yet more poorly even in the purely subjective realm of arbitrary and conflicting values. For contrary to what my latest remarks about impressive human achievements might suggest, a respectful appreciation of humanity's uniqueness does not guarantee a high valuation relative to other things.

Indeed, if I myself valued humanity as much as my awe and admiration might suggest, wouldn't I be making far greater efforts or sacrifices on behalf of planetary defense than I already am? It's true that I devote considerable time to trying to raise people's consciousness about the impactor threat; but have I put aside everything else? Certainly not. For one thing, of course, I still devote considerable time to promoting animal rights. But even that gives the wrong impression, for although I think of myself as passionately committed to *both* causes, my life remains filled with far more mundane pursuits and pastimes, such as reading novels purely for pleasure, or spending time with friends, unlike what we might expect of the driven monomaniac (aka tireless advocate). It is also the case

that the *manner* in which I pursue my favorite causes is tightly constrained, since I opt to focus on writing about them, an occupation I love, rather than giving speeches or making media appearances, which would disrupt my relaxed and productive routine. That writing is at the fore rather than astronomical threats or animal exploitation is also attested by my spending at least as much time writing about the subjectivity of value – witness this very book – out of sheer fascination for the topic.

And there is more (or less). Continuing from my earlier observation that we humans do not place infinite value on our individual lives, it seems pretty clear, once you think about it, that we often value our own lives very little indeed. How else to interpret the priorities that characterize so much of everyday life, with poor diets and other unhealthful habits the norm? Just so, our valuation of humanity as such. It is not only that we might prefer Armageddon to an endless regime of tyranny and deprivation if that were the only way to assure an effective planetary defense (by directing all possible resources to attempting to accomplish it, analogous to but exceeding the totalitarian mobilizations of World War II). I feel confident to assert that the world populace would be unwilling to allow even for their income tax to rise by a mere 5 percent in order to construct the requisite infrastructure ahead of time that would assure our ability to deflect an extinction-size asteroid or comet should one ever be discovered heading our way with little advance warning.[21]

In sum: It is hard to exaggerate the absurdity of human priorities if one assumes that there are objective values in the universe. But if one gives up on that fantasy and attends instead to human psychology and the evolutionary forces that brought our psychology into being, our priorities make perfect sense. Thus, the value of humanity is swallowed up by human nature. There certainly is no "*should*" about prioritizing planetary defense over a tax break, nor the suffering of nonhuman animals over the human pleasure of consuming a juicy hamburger.[22]

[21] This surely came as a surprise to me when a former colleague first pointed out the obvious. Thank you, Ted Roupas.

[22] Nor of pushpin over poetry (TOTH to Jeremy Bentham, and *pace* John Stuart Mill).

Any of these values are whatever we make of them; and if one wants to increase the value of humanity, or of animality – that is, in human eyes – the only sure route is to understand the way human minds work and then try to steer them in the direction you desire.

Desirism: Second Pass. Distinctions

The columns I wrote for *Philosophy Now* magazine presented my rejection of morality and moralism (after having written ten years of columns promoting it!) and adumbrated a new ethics to replace it. Although I spoke a great deal about desire, I only mentioned "desirism" in passing. And even more fundamentally, I did not clearly distinguish two very different meanings of "morality." So the *amoralism* on which desirism is premised was correspondingly ambiguous. Clarifying this was the main task of my first published book on the subject, *Ethics without Morals*, which (like this one) was also intended for a more academic and professional readership.

The two types of morality I have in mind are what I call metaphysical morality and empirical morality. Metaphysical morality comprises standards of right and wrong, good and bad, responsibility and desert, praise and blame, virtue and vice, and so on, that are presumed to have absolute, objective authority over us regardless of our concurrence, analogous to the way facts about the physical world do. It is what the most literal sort of moral realist believes in. It is morality simpliciter. It is what the basic amoralist denies the existence of. I count myself an amoralist of this sort . . . but not only of this sort, as shall become apparent.

Curiously, among ethical philosophers there are also many moralists and even self-styled moral realists who are amoralists in this sense. In fact, it would probably be startling to the average layperson or lay philosopher (and even the occasional professional philosopher, like the me of yore) to discover that hardly any philosophical ethicist believes in metaphysical morality – that is, qua theorist; qua person, I tend to think that most of them still do. Thus, in *Ethics without Morals*, I considered the positions of moral naturalists, moral constructivists,

moral relativists, and moral fictionalists, all of whom reject metaphysical morality, but all of whom want to retain a place for morality in our lives.

It does need to be noted that "moralist" is a vexed term in yet another way. There are certainly many moralists who decry moralism, where the latter is taken to refer to the vaunting of one's embrace of morality. Another term for this is "moralizing." I am using "moralist" or "moralism" in the simple sense of embracing morality . . . and in either or both of the senses of "morality" I am characterizing in this section. However, I do happen to believe (and as several examples I will give are intended to illustrate) that a moralist in this basic sense will, as a matter of empirical fact, tend to manifest the qualities of the moralizing kind of moralist; so I tend not to worry much about the ambiguity.[23] Indeed, this practical equivalence is one of my reasons for forswearing morality in the second sense to follow.

This brings me to empirical morality. This comprises, in its standard incarnation, the *belief in* metaphysical morality. A belief is of course an empirical phenomenon – something that can be studied by science, such as (scientific) psychology. A polltaker could compare the belief in evolution with how many years of schooling people have had.[24] But, beliefs being what they are, it is perfectly possible to believe in something that does not exist. Hence, even if metaphysical morality is a phantasm (as I believe it is), it could be, and certainly is, believed in by many. But this also implies that such a belief *does itself* surely exist. Therefore an amoralist of the basic sort, who disbelieves in metaphysical morality, can consistently believe that morality exists in the sense of *empirical* morality. And of course we all do believe that, amoralist or not.

Meanwhile, all the variety of moral theorists I mentioned above recognize not only that empirical morality exists but also strive to rationalize it in some way or to some degree. In other words, these ethicists are not attempting to *explain* why so many people possess a false belief in metaphysical morality,

[23] See "Mora a Mora" in Chap. 4 for more on this.

[24] Strictly speaking the polltaker would only be counting oral or written responses rather than actual beliefs, but he or she would be using equally indirect methods to determine years of schooling, for example, written records. This does not disqualify either schooling or beliefs as empirical phenomena.

but rather are attempting to *justify* our retaining *some such* belief. Thus, the moral relativist may hold that right and wrong *do exist*, but that they may differ from group to group or even individual to individual. This would appear to make sense of so many people believing in right and wrong and yet disagreeing about which things are in fact right or wrong. It is intended to ward off the simple dismissal of right and wrong themselves due to the absence of unanimity in their application or even meaning. Alternatively, the moral fictionalist asks us to retain a *semblance* of belief in right and wrong because it is useful to do so.

In *Ethics without Morals*, I refuted all of these amoralist moralities on various grounds, but the common denominator was that none of them provides morality with the *absolute authority* it is presumed to have to rule over our lives.[25] In other words, once God is removed from the picture, there simply is no satisfactory substitute.[26] Hence my term "metaphysical morality" to indicate that only some presumed truth or imperative woven into the very fabric of reality would seem to do the trick. And, if truth be told, probably not even that, since the notion may be incoherent. But in any case, we have no decisive evidence for such a thing, this being the conclusion of the positive argument I gave for amorality – an instance of the so-called argument to the best explanation. The idea is that science has provided a convincing sketch of a purely[27] material universe, in which there is no mention of a metaphysical morality. All of the phenomena of

[25] McBain (2013) suggests that I was guilty of overkill here in that these meta-ethics are not attempting to rescue this authority. He may be right about that. Nevertheless, as my introducing the notion of empirical morality is intended to show, retention of the *language* of morality is likely to haunt us with the ghost of this authority. In any case, McBain is surely correct that my "refutation" was too quick. So I am happy to report that Blackford (2016) has now done a thorough job of debunking the claims to objective authority of this array of morality candidates. However, he himself goes on to defend a "concessive" morality that does not pretend to objective authority. He makes an elegant case, but I do feel he relies a little too much and a little too sanguinely on the linguistic intuitions of that notoriously undefined "we" (e.g., on page 104) about whom experimental philosophers counsel being wary.

[26] Which is not to say that God would help matters either, this being the upshot of Socrates' argument in Plato's *Euthyphro*.

[27] Well, not purely. It's notoriously unclear how concepts and consciousness and whatnot fit into the picture. But the point is, sufficiently to account for all moral phenomena.

empirical morality, and in particular the belief in metaphysical morality, can be explained in a straightforward way without postulating the existence of metaphysical morality.

So empirical morality surely exists, but I don't believe it can be *justified*. This makes me an amoralist in a second sense, then, since not only do I deny the existence of metaphysical morality, but I *recommend* that we put *empirical* morality to rest alongside it. This latter position has been called "moral abolitionism." I prefer "moral eliminativism," since I have no program or desire to *abolish* (whatever that might even mean) the practice of morality, but I would like to see it eliminated. The point is, it is distinct from amoralism in the sense of moral irrealism. I am therefore defending two distinct theses. The argument I gave for amoralism understood as moral irrealism was, as noted, an argument to the best explanation. My argument for amoralism in the sense of moral eliminativism is a pragmatic one: I believe a life without (the belief in and corresponding attitudes and practices of) morality has more to recommend it than a life with morality.

My use of "pragmatic" here is not quite right, however, since what I really mean is that my reason for preferring the elimination of empirical morality to the retention of it is a *desirist* one. But before I explain that, let me first briefly fill in the particulars of what I am talking about. In *Ethics without Morals* I explained my preference on the following grounds. (The belief in) morality tends to make us angry, hypocritical, arrogant, imprudent, intransigent, and just plain silly, whereas the divestment of morality will tend to make us guilt-free, tolerant, and compassionate. Moreover, an amoral regime would make life simpler and therefore more intelligible and therefore more interesting – more interesting because it replaces sterile (because impossible of resolution and hence unproductive except of heated opposition) discussions of what "ought to be done" with vibrant accounts by diverse individuals of what they care about and why – while a moralist regime makes the world downright dangerous.

But note that I am not giving an *argument* here so much as an *explanation* of why I prefer amoralism. It was appropriate for me to *argue* for amoralism in the sense of moral irrealism since I was claiming it is *true* that metaphysical morality does not exist. But when it comes to amoralism in the sense of moral eliminativism, I am defending a value claim – that

"the world" *would be better* without empirical morality. And this is something that cannot be true, or false – this being one of the central claims of moral irrealism.[28] Strictly speaking I am now talking about something broader than morality; morality is a stand-in for objective value. Here I follow Mackie (1977), whose classic defense of amoralism begins with the sentence, "There are no objective values." Thus, when I "argue" for the "pragmatic" superiority of moral eliminativism, all that I could actually be doing consistently with my moral or value ("axiological") irrealism is *explaining* why I (think that I) myself would *prefer* a morality-free world.

And this at last brings us to desirism, the name I have given to the positive ethics I espouse. I call this a positive ethics because up till this point the project has been mainly negative – *anti*-morality: to rid us of both the theoretical belief in morality and any empirical manifestation of that belief in life and society. But then we need a replacement. For I do not intend to leave humanity without an ethics, without a guide to life. One of the great fears of a regime of moral nihilism has always been that wantonness and chaos would reign. I don't want that. And I have also implicitly denied the inevitability of that by expressing (as above) my empirical "hunches" about the differential consequences of the opposing regimes (and counted on readers sharing my preferences for the ones consequent on the amoral regime).[29] These hunches have been based on my observations, some scientific backing, and a general sense of human nature. But I also single out for special cultivation, as the fundamental buffer to wantonness and chaos, our innate rationality. Thus the formula of desirism: Figure out what you desire, by rational inquiry, and then figure out how to get it, consistently with your rationally vetted desires. It is precisely the folks who think they are *not* acting on behalf of their own desires when they "do the right thing" who worry me.

[28] I hope this explanation goes some way toward assuaging my friendly critic, Johnston (2013), who writes of me that "he has jettisoned belief in one system of certainty and seeks to supplant it with another" (p. 314). My sense is that Johnston has conflated my anti-realist project with my eliminativist project.

[29] The other great fear has been that a regime of amoralism would sap us of necessary motivation for (heretofore morally) important projects. My emphasis on desire has been intended to counter precisely that, and indeed to tap into our most basic source of motivation.

The point suggested above is that my defense of desirism itself involves employing the desirist method. For a desirist regime is itself something that *I desire after years of rational inquiry.* It is not something that is, *or could be, true*. It is an *ethics*. And of particular note: Neither is it *the right thing to do* (or the right way to live), since my most fundamental claim – as asserted in the present book's Introduction – is that ethics is not about morality but about how to live. I make no prescriptions, but only predictions – that you too *would* prefer a desirist regime if you had reflected on it as I have. So I *recommend* desirism to you, but I do not declare that you *ought* to be a desirist. And my effort to help my prediction come true is to write books like this one.

Also to write books like *It's Just a Feeling*, which came after *Ethics without Morals*. For the first book is a scholarly monograph, but naturally I want to reach a wider audience. So I then wrote a more "accessible" book for lay readers (whom I had already "primed" with my columns in *Philosophy Now*). *It's Just a Feeling* is a further working out of the philosophy of desirism by putting it into the plainest and practical everyday terms, with many examples of how I have implemented it in my own life.

Desirism: Third Pass. Fine Points

In the present book I return to a more specialist treatment of the subject, since the earlier books left ever so many fine points to be worked out. But I again employ many personal examples, and this time with even greater detail. This is because I have used my life as the main laboratory for testing my theory. This method comes with the usual pitfalls (discussed further in Chap. 4), but with no greater pitfalls than any other method, I dare say. Its chief advantage is that I am able to provide exhaustive analyses of real events that are described with as much richness as I can muster.[30] Thus, I avoid resorting to thought experiments that presume "we" will all react with the same intuitions. Furthermore – and herein of course also lies a risk – I often write

[30] Kaplan (1998) paved the way for this in my professional experience.

about things I really care about, am grappling with, which I think helps assure the seriousness of the inquiry. In other words, I am not simply writing a treatise on the philosophical question of how to live but also, in parallel with that, trying to figure out how to live *my* life.

No doubt many, maybe most, other ethicists have the same double intention. But I am carrying it out in a way that is overt. I like to think that the justification for this method is not only the vividness and verity I mentioned above, but also form reflecting content. For my central claim is that ethics is not about something objectively true but about subjective preferences. In that very spirit, then, I am employing what could be called rhetoric as much as argument.[31] I am not so much defending a thesis as explaining a preference and promoting a lifestyle – attempting to persuade more than to prove.[32] Nor do I want just to convince you to believe something, but to move you to change your attitudes and take certain actions. By using examples of how morality and its opposite have played out in my own life, I am trying to walk the talk, albeit with a particular way of "talking" (writing). Yet neither will this be, I hope, a display of *mere* rhetoric, but rather of rhetoric which receives warrant from its reliance on reasoning about facts and experience, and, as suggested, from manifesting a personal quest for ethical guidance.

In the end, however, it is not the specificity, and certainly not any uniqueness, of my personal experience that would vindicate my method, so much as its eliciting recognition in *your* experience. Therein would lie whatever practical value it may have.[33]

The story thus far: I take as established, or at least assumed for the purposes of the present inquiry, the following claims:

1. Many, perhaps most, perhaps all human beings believe there is such a thing as metaphysical morality.

[31] Maxim Fetissenko has helped me to appreciate the important role of rhetoric in ethics. Of course Aristotle was a precedent.

[32] See further discussion of this sort of method and style in "Metaphysics and Justification" in Chap. 3.

[33] To quote a favorite passage from Wittgenstein, "The work of the philosopher consists in marshalling reminders for a particular purpose" (*Philosophical Investigations* 127).

2. Many, perhaps most, perhaps all human beings would come to deny the existence of metaphysical morality if they had the opportunity to reflect on the matter.
3. Many, perhaps most, perhaps all human beings would recognize, if they had the opportunity to reflect on the matter, that, absent metaphysical morality, the rational refinement and pursuit of desire – in a word, the ethics of desirism – would be a satisfactory basis for life and society.

Note that all of these are empirical claims – not your usual philosophical modus operandi. But this is in keeping with the commendatory rather than obligatory nature of desirism. If I were feeling particularly bold, I might at this point try to construct an actual argument by adding the following:

4. Reading this book provides an exceptional opportunity to reflect on ethics.
5. Therefore, after reading this book, you stand a good chance of becoming a desirist.

But I'm not that brash (or naive). I do hope at least to plant more seeds if not reap a crop of converts. Here is an outline of what is to come.

Chapter 2. None of the Above: What Desirism Isn't (and Is)

The new ethics I propose, desirism, needs to be precisely distinguished from all of the moralistic forms of ethics, with which it is almost irresistibly confused by laypersons and ethicists alike because it is so damned difficult to wrap one's mind around a conception that goes against a conception that may possibly even be "hard-wired" in us. Analogous to the old saw that there are no atheists in fox holes, there may be no amoralists on the barricades. Indeed, although I myself have, I think, rid myself of the explicit belief in morality (of the "metaphysical" sort I consider to be prevalent), I do not doubt that the attitude remains

pervasive in my soul. I draw the analogy of experiencing a dizzy spell while sitting in a chair; you can know very well that you are stock still, but you will feel you are whirling about all the same. I will discuss some practical and theoretical problems of assimilating amoralism in Chap. 4. In Chap. 2, I look at various explicit conceptions of morality that are known from the literature of both meta-ethics and normative ethics, and describe in detail the ways in which desirism is and is not like them.

Chapter 3. Desire and Reason

Ethics is usually conceived as the effort to justify our actions and life choices. Why is x the right thing to do? What makes y good? Why be moral at all? Desirism wants nothing to do with justification of the moral sort, simply because there is nothing moral that needs justifying. It is analogous to how there is no need to justify the ways of God to man, since there is no God. Nevertheless, desirism does not leave our lives to be decided willy nilly. For that matter, the adoption (or recommendation) of desirism itself is not intended to be a matter of mere whim. Therefore it is necessary to characterize the precise manner in which this ethics proposes that we go about figuring out what to do, how to live, what sort of person to be, etc. It turns out that reason remains inextricably and crucially involved with this ethics as with characteristically moralistic ones. But desirism's namesake desire is equally involved, so its meaning in the present context also needs to be clarified.

Chapter 4. It's Just a Feeling

The ultimate test of any ethics must be a practical one. Chap. 4 takes a long look at some of the difficulties that can arise in the effort to make desirism a part of living. Difficulties can arise even in the effort to demonstrate that it is desirism, and not some form of morality instead, that is what we are living when we think we are living as desirists. Having registered these caveats, the book then concludes with additional illustrative examples of desirism in action.

2

None of the Above: What Desirism Isn't (and Is)

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I have proposed a new ethics, which I call desirism. But there is already a multitude of ethics out there, and some critics have claimed that desirism is not really distinct from one or another of them. An additional complexity is due to there being not only different ethics but also different types of ethics, or perhaps better put, different senses of "ethics." The main distinction of the latter sort is between meta-ethics and normative ethics. Meta-ethics is the inquiry into what sort of thing ethics is; for example, is ethics purely a product of biology or is it something that was handed down by God? Normative ethics is the inquiry into the general content of ethics; for example, are we advised or commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves, or instead to strive to bring about the best world, or instead to seek our own best interests, or instead to become a virtuous person? (There is also the realm of so-called applied ethics, which derives answers to particular moral questions on the basis of one or another normative theory; e.g., assuming that we are all obligated to strive to bring about the best world, what should be our stance on abortion?)

J. Marks, *Hard Atheism and the Ethics of Desire*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-43799-6_2

I will discuss various ethics throughout this book, but there are a few in particular that desirism tends to be confused with. So as a preliminary let me explain[1] why desirism is *not* any of those. And of course preliminary to that it will be helpful for me to say what desirism *is*. Desirism, as noted, is an ethics, which is to say that it is offered as an answer to questions like "How shall one live?" and "What kind of person do I want to be?" and more particularly on various vexed occasions, "What shall I do?" The general answer that desirism gives is: "Figure out what you want, all things considered (or by means of rational inquiry), and then figure out how to get it, consonantly with your considered desires." It is easy to misunderstand what that means.

The first confusion is to mistake desirism for a form of egoism. Egoism, or more formally, ethical egoism, enjoins us to put ourselves ahead of everyone else as our ultimate concern when we are trying to figure what to do or how to live. Our personal (or sometimes group) welfare or interests *or desires* are the most important thing in the universe, as far as each one of us is concerned. And this is asserted not (only) as a (presumed) fact about our psychology but (also) as a fact about what really matters. Here egoism blends into egotism. The former is strictly speaking concerned with our well-being, whereas the latter has to do with our importance. Thus, someone who simply cared most about her personal welfare would be egoistic (if going about it rationally; otherwise, just selfish); but so-called ethical egoism, in *justifying* our putting our own well-being ahead of everyone else's, is in effect *egotistic*. That is a curious thing, which I only note in passing, since a person who was egotistical might jeopardize her own well-being; for example, other people might refrain from befriending her for being so stuck up. But similarly parading one's *egoism* could work counter to one's interests. Therefore *ethical* egoism may rationally advise disguising both its nominal and its justificatory bases.

But despite the emphasis on desires in egoism, desirism is utterly unlike this. One big difference is that desirism does not place any objective importance on desires, even on one's own desires. In fact desirism is

[1] In finer detail than in my "First Pass" in Chap. 1.

premised on the rejection of there being any such thing as objective importance or "importance period" or importance "as such" or importance *tout court* (all different ways of saying the same thing). So one's own desires in particular have no objective (or we also say "absolute") importance.

The other main way that desirism differs from egoism is that it does not presume that we are *psychological* egoists, that is, what we care about most or exclusively is our personal (or group) well-being. In fact it is premised on the denial of that; for if we were incorrigible psychological egoists, then desirism would indeed look very much like ethical egoism. It would then lack only the *imperative* to be and act egoistically. One might even question *that* difference, since why would the *ethics* of egoism have to involve a command or an obligation to be egoistic if that's what we already were? The answer is that what psychological egoism actually maintains is that we are basically self-interested, not that we are egoistic in the technical sense of ethical egoism. The latter sense of egoism implies the pursuit of so-called *enlightened* self-interest. It is clear that the kind of self-interest people usually or often pursue is quite unenlightened, for example, when we overeat, or when we overspend on ourselves, or when we ignore the desires of others (to our own detriment). Therefore ethical egoism has a goal that is different from much of our everyday self-interested goals; and so ethical egoism enjoins us to be different from what we are, even though we are in a narrower sense already egoistic. But desirism too has a goal that is different from much of our everyday goals, and if our everyday self were in fact largely self-interested, then desirism's goal would indeed be similar to ethical egoism's, namely, to satisfy our *rationalized* (cf. "enlightened") self-interested desires. Still, desirism declines to *require* that we become enlightened egoists and only *recommends* this.

This sort of requirement or prescription or imperative has always been the mystery of any moralistic ethics, and is one of the chief grounds for amoralism. What could be the source of normative authority? When a moralist enjoins another person to do or not to do something, a natural response is, "Says who?" At this point a moralist, say, a parent, is likely to let the moralist mask drop and reply, "Says me!" (A minister might say, "Says God!" To which a natural response would be, "Who says God says that?") A standard justification for being egoistic is that if everyone were, the society as

a whole would, "as if by an invisible hand," be better off. But this is not *ethical* egoism since the justification is not the betterment of oneself but rather the betterment of society, for which the betterment of oneself serves only as a means. A true ethical egoist would claim that one *ought* to serve one's personal best interest *for its own sake*. "But why?" then becomes a pressing, and I think unanswerable, ethical question (and not only for ethical egoism but for any moral theory).

But a desirist is quite comfortable with taking ownership of an ethical *recommendation* because he or she has no need to *justify* a *command* (since none is being given). The desirist will be happy to provide his or her reasons, but these will not be conceived as justificatory in the normative sense but only explanatory.[2] In effect the desirist is making a prediction that the advisee would, if he or she reflected on the matter, and other things equal, do what the desirist is recommending. So ethics becomes a matter of causal law rather than moral law. Similarly, the desirist herself, other things equal, would do whatever her considered examination of her own desires led her to do.[3] No further "authority" is needed.

Still it must be conceded that in the case of desirism vis-à-vis ethical egoism, this could be a distinction without a difference if we were not only self-interested animals but also rational ones. The notion of our being rational animals would now be understood to mean, not that we "automatically" think and behave rationally, but that when presented with a rational case for doing x, we will, all other things equal, do x. This is in fact an assumption of desirism. Therefore, if we were (psychological) egoists, then desirism would be, in practical terms, equivalent to ethical egoism. There remain other possible grounds for distinguishing desirism from ethical egoism, but not ones I care to quibble about, since I think the crux is whether we are psychological egoists. But let me mention for the record that desirism denies ethical egoism's assumption that there is an *objective* "good" that defines what is

[2] And perhaps also rhetorical and pragmatic in an effort to convince someone. More on this in "Reasons and Causes" in Chap. 3.

[3] Here the "would" is analytic: A desirist will, by *definition*, do whatever is the *causal* result of reflecting rationally on her desires.

in our personal best interest, and hence a fortiori denies that we have an obligation to *maximize* that good.[4]

So it becomes crucial for me to argue that psychological egoism is false if I want to maintain desirism's distinction, not to mention superiority, as an ethical theory. And I do argue that. It seems to me that human beings quite naturally desire all sorts of things, including of course our own well-being but certainly not exclusively so. Indeed, I think it is obvious that we are capable of desiring things that quite eclipse concerns about our own well-being. Take for example various drug addictions, which can involve a craving that destroys us, and which can govern our behavior even when we know it is destroying us, but we may just not care. We can also imagine benign self-denying desires, such as for the welfare of our children, which can take precedence even over personal survival. And in the vast middle area there are desires for this, that, and the other – to make money, to care for the elderly, to study astronomy, to collect stamps – which we pursue regardless of their impact on our well-being, nor necessarily out of self-indulgence, but simply by being drawn to do so – "for its own sake," as we say.[5]

A classic mistake of reasoning is to think that a desire is egoistic or selfish simply because it is *one's own* desire. By this rendering, even the whole-hearted desire to help others at whatever personal sacrifice becomes selfish. But this is absurd, and simply not what "selfish" or even "self-interested" means. It is the so-called intentional object of our desire that determines whether or not it is selfish.[6] A desire to feather one's own nest at whatever cost to others is selfish. A desire to help others feather theirs is not, other things equal; if "other things" were not "equal," for example, the desire to help others were not intrinsic but only instrumental and for the purpose of currying favor with others who could benefit oneself, then it might be selfish. But there is nothing in either everyday experience or evolutionary logic to suggest that all of our desires must be selfish in this way.

[4] See the following section on "The Good" for more on desirism's relation to objective good.

[5] More on this in "Intrinsic Desire and Morality" in Chap. 3.

[6] Irwin (2015) demurs on conceptual grounds.

Desirism is *like* ethical egoism, as we have seen, in that both advise acting rationally. But egoism advises employing one's reason in order to maximize one's own well-being, whereas desirism advises employing one's reason in order to vet one's desires and then figure out how to satisfy the vetted desires. And this is one of the very ways that desirism strives to separate itself from egoism, since, at least to my mind, the more we reason about certain problems and situations, the more we are likely to place certain nonegoistic desires ahead of our egoistic ones.[7] But the hold of egoism on some thinkers is so strong that some construe *rationality* itself to be essentially egoistic. To them it seems self-evident that a rational person would ipso facto want to do what (he or she believed) was in his or her self-interest. But why accept that? Why couldn't there be something that it is rational for an egoist to want to do, and something wholly different for, say, an altruist to want to do? I see no reason, other than the unfounded speculation that we are incorrigibly egoistical and hence *incapable* of wanting to do anything other than what we believed to be in our self-interest.

Let me relate a recent personal episode of the sort that has convinced me – quite dramatically in this instance – that neither rationality nor motivation must be self-interested. For the first time in a decade I was heading overseas. The occasion was a scientific conference on planetary defense against impacts by comets and asteroids, which happens to be an interest and concern of mine, to the point that I have become somewhat of an expert and, even though not a scientist, got a poster paper on the program. Indeed, perhaps suffering from delusions of grandeur, I felt I had a crucial contribution to make to saving *Homo sapiens* from extinction.[8] But as long as I was making the schlep I figured I might as well tack on a holiday, since it was all at my own expense and I felt I could splurge since I travel so rarely these days. So I invited a friend along and began making the preparations.

[7] Bear and Rand (2016) come to exactly the opposite conclusion on empirical grounds . . . alas. So I concede that this empirical question at least remains moot. I imagine it could turn out to be perennial.

[8] Read all about it: Marks (2015d).

As time went by, however, I was finding the preparing to be more and more onerous, and particularly as regards the "holiday" part. The travel world had changed enormously since my last trip, and so had I. Unlike many of my colleagues who view (so-called) retirement as the opportunity to become permanent tourists, my inclinations have made me a homebody, who loves to do what I am doing at this very moment (writing this book). So "personally" I not only had no "need" to make this voyage but was finding it downright intrusive on my fulfilling routine. Also, frankly, the upsurge of airplane terrorism had been having its psychological effect, so that I felt a mild depression at the prospect of flying. Then to top it off, a medical crisis arose out of the blue, requiring urgent albeit routine surgery just before the scheduled departure. It all became too much for me, and I sadly but relievedly informed my friend that I was canceling the trip, but would make it up to her somehow. I felt a tremendous load had been taken off my shoulders and returned to my writing.

A couple of days later, and just one week before the conference was to begin, another friend called me to chat about philosophy. I mentioned that I had canceled the trip, and of course he was surprised and disappointed on my behalf. So I explained my reasons, but he, in good dialectical fashion, pointed out some weak points in the argument. Still, I thought my decision made sense. But shortly after hanging up, the review of pros and cons began to have its effect; and then it hit me. During the trip preparations, I had become so preoccupied with planning the post-conference itinerary that I had quite "forgotten" the original purpose of the trip, which was . . . to save the world! And as soon as I realized this, without even needing to "make a decision," my mind changed of its own accord. I instantly recovered my resolve to go, and furthermore lost all of my inhibitions. I became positively exuberant.

Well, everything went swimmingly.[9] The airplane did not explode, my conference objectives were met beyond my wildest dreams, the holiday was not only pleasant but profoundly moving, there have been

[9] Or so I thought, but see "Metaphysics and Justification" in Chap. 3 for the rest of the story.

abundant professional follow-ups, and I have memories to cherish for the rest of my life. I shudder to think about how close I came to having only regrets instead. Moral of story? No morality, and no egoism either. Just a selfless desire to save humanity. My personal happiness as a result of "mission accomplished" does not show that I was being selfish all along; on the contrary, I would have nothing to be happy about if I had not sincerely desired the welfare of my species over the welfare, that is, the purely personal desires, of myself. And, to wrap up my reason for telling the story, was I not also acting rationally? So rationality does not have to justify in self-interested terms; in the present instance what justified my change of mind was purely other-directed concern.

OK, not "purely." Mixed motives are the norm. I grant that my telling of the tale has a just-so-story air about it. It is amusing that I am seeking to avoid both the shoal of Scylla and the whirlpool of Charybdis. For on the one hand, as a desirist, I want to deny that it was moral scruples that motivated the last-minute reprieve, while on the other hand, as a desirist who rejects egoism, I want to deny that what moved me in the end were self-interested considerations. No doubt what finally determined my action was a combination of altruism, atavistic moralism, and self-interest. There certainly is a case to be made for the egoism of the trip, even though when I probed my phenomenological heart, I found myself kicking and screaming not to go; but the latter was clearly brought on by short-sighted self-indulgence rather than enlightened self-interest. Still, I make that acknowledgement mainly to offset the charge of self-blindness. Analytically I see no need to do so. I even have a strong argument for the *immorality* of saving humanity, since our continued existence may bring more grief into the world than would our elimination.[10]

Once again, therefore, I look to our desires as definitive of our attitudes, and not solely to our self-interested desires. I continue to boggle at why some thinkers insist that the satisfaction of a desire is always to be construed as a matter of self-interest. If my heart's desire is solely to help the poor at whatever cost to myself, how is it a matter of self-interest, rather than a matter of the poor's interest, that my desire be satisfied? If, as

[10] Recall "What Is the Value of Humanity?" in Chap. 1.

in the egoist's favorite type of example, helping the poor will make me a millionaire, or nourish a benign egotism, or assuage my anxieties about my destination in the afterlife, then, yes, its satisfaction would be a matter of self-interest (and even then *also* but not exclusively so). But nothing makes this sort of motive inevitable. So I say to the theorist who thinks otherwise: "why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?" (Matthew 7:3, KJV).

Another main confusion is to think of desirism as a form of morality. But, as was noted in the Introduction, morality is precisely what desirism is not. The original inspiration of desirism was my conviction that morality is a myth: There is no such thing as right or wrong or even good or bad in the moral sense. This statement is itself a source of confusion, as was explained in Chap. 1, since there is a derivative sense of "morality" in which morality surely does exist. This is the social institution of morality that is based on the belief in morality proper. I call the institution "empirical morality" because it is the kind of phenomenon that can be studied by science. I sometimes call morality proper "metaphysical morality"; but usually I refer to it simply as "morality."[11]

Desirism is premised on the assumption that morality does not exist. Thus, it is not true that, say, murdering people for fun is wrong, even though many people believe that it is wrong to murder people for fun. But it is crucial to understand that amoralism also holds that it is not true that murdering people for fun is the right thing to do. And, more subtly but equally crucially, amoralism holds that murdering people for fun is not permissible. It is neither permissible nor impermissible (= wrong). All of these categories are moral categories and hence mythical, just as Zeus's anger or Zeus's love or even Zeus's indifference is mythical. It is not true that Zeus is angry at people who murder for fun; but it is also not true that Zeus approves it or is even indifferent to it. There is no Zeus. Just so, it is not right or wrong or even permitted to murder, because morality does not exist.

[11] The disavowal of metaphysical morality is also notably explicit, albeit sometimes with one or another qualification, in Mackie (1977), Hinckfuss (1987), Garner (1994), Joyce (2001), Moeller (2009), Irwin (2015), and Blackford (2016) among others, and with obvious historical debts to Hume and Nietzsche among others.

So if a desirist *urged* people not to murder for fun, the desirist would *not* be asserting that it is *wrong* to murder for fun. Or if a desirist *urged* people to murder for fun, the desirist would *not* be asserting that it is *right* or even *permissible* to murder for fun. This is the most common way people misunderstand desirism. It is natural to be confused because we are so used to thinking in terms of right and wrong and should and should not, etc. A desirist thinks in other terms entirely, just as all of us today think in other terms than Zeus loves this or Zeus hates that.

The final main confusion about desirism is related to the above, namely, conceiving desirism as a form of relativism. Desirism does have relativistic implications, but not in the sense of "relativism" that people have in mind when leveling this charge. For "relativism" usually connotes *moral* relativism. And since desirism is not a form of morality, it is, a fortiori, not a form of moral relativism. Desirism may very well result in different individuals or groups (or even the selfsame individual) having different and even opposing desires, so in this sense it is certainly relativistic. But in no case would desirism *prescribe* those desires, so two desirists could never believe they *ought* to do conflicting things even though they might *desire* to. And indeed this is one of its great strengths, it seems to me, since, however strong opposing desires may be, they still fall short of the implacable opposition of opposing moral dictates. Conflicting desires are more likely than conflicting moral dictates to allow for negotiation, compromise, tolerance, mutual accommodation, etc. And I prefer that outcome. Don't you?

Curiously, one of the strongest arguments for moral relativism seems to deny the premise of my argument for preferring desirism to moralism.[12] This is actually an interesting flip-flop-flip. The lazy person's view of moral relativism is that it is a more tolerant philosophy, since it seems to amount to "Live and let live." But this drives most analytic ethicists up a wall, as when a philosophy teacher asks his or her students, "Was it right for Hitler to try to exterminate the Jews?" and they reply, "It was right for *him*." So the philosopher explains, "In fact moral relativism is not tolerant

[12] The argument I am about to relate comes from Feldman (1978), pp. 171–172.

at all. Since moral relativists believe that there are no objective moral values, there is no way that they can assert that tolerance is good, that is, objectively good. Hence while any individual moral relativist might be tolerant, he or she cannot complain if other people are not. Only the moral absolutist could do that. Only the moral absolutist could assert that tolerance is good or an obligation because only the moral absolutist believes in objective values."

For decades I was that philosopher who thought that was a knockdown refutation of my students' moral relativism. Now of course I am no longer a moral absolutist, that is, not a moralist at all; so what was the problem with that refutation of moral relativism, since I myself disbelieve in objective values? I think it exemplifies a type of arguing that analytic philosophers love but which has more recently become highly suspect even by many of that ilk (including myself), namely, to draw conclusions about the actual world from the implications of concepts.[13] Thus, it surely does follow logically from the concepts of moral absolutism and moral relativism that only the former could coherently espouse tolerance as an objective value. However, in the "real" or "empirical" world, it may simply be a fact that people who embrace a relativistic morality are more likely to be tolerant of others' values and moralities.

There is some question begging in my argument regarding the labeling of those more tolerant folk as moral relativists since there remains much confusion and disagreement about what moral relativism is to begin with. And in any case my concern is not to defend moral relativism as inherently more tolerant than moral absolutism but conative relativists as usually more tolerant than moral absolutists.[14] So let me explain how I would now go about dealing with the refrain, "It was right for Hitler." Very simply, by avoiding the situation that elicits it. I would not ask (even rhetorically) whether it was right for Hitler to attempt to exterminate the Jews. I might ask instead, "Do you wish he had not made that attempt?" And I would expect much less "relativism" in the answer.

[13] A locus classicus for this is Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God.

[14] This is also backed up by what I gather is the consensus of social science that moralists are more likely to be intolerant; see Wright et al. (2014).

Of course there would still be some who would answer (or think) "No." (Some Holocaust deniers might even reject the premise.) Presumably many of the folks who would like to see the state of Israel wiped off the map wish Hitler had been even more successful (and might so wish even after all of the rational reflection I could reasonably ask of them). Even so, I believe, the resultant differences of desire would hold out more hope of some kind of practical resolution of the Israeli/Palestinian impasse than the current clash of moral (and divine) imperatives.

But another way that my claim could be questioned is in its assumption of there actually being moral objectivists: Is it true that even moralists proper (as opposed to moral relativists) believe or assume that there are objective, moral truths that apply to everyone? In other words, are most moralists (not to mention, all; not to mention, any) nonrelativist? It has always seemed obvious to me that the standard meaning and form of morality was absolutist, including the kind I myself espoused. But this has recently been questioned by some experimental philosophers, who claim to have uncovered a definite pluralism in our conception of what we are thinking or assuming when we make moral judgments.[15] This issue is not going to be settled any time soon. So I will conclude by modestly asserting that desirism holds open the promise of reducing counterproductive tensions and conflicts in the world by removing one kind of moralism (and which I believe is the predominant kind), namely, that which subscribes to objective values.

The Good: Another Myth

Morality is not only about right and wrong. Some thinkers may believe it is, such as those who equate morality with duty or obligation, for example, Immanuel Kant and other so-called deontologists. But the very lack of consensus about morality's basic nature is the basis of the amoralist's attack

[15] See e.g., Sarkissian et al. (2011). I would also like to thank Thomas Pölzler for helpful discussion of this issue.

against it, so it is not surprising that other thinkers see morality as all about good and bad. What is the difference between these two moralities? The name of the second camp says it all: "consequentialists." Those who champion good and bad claim that the consequences of our actions are what determine whether we should do something or refrain from doing it, whereas nonconsequentialists, and in particular deontologists, claim that it is a property of the act itself that decides the question.[16] Thus, a consequentialist like John Stuart Mill would argue that one ought not to torture a child because this would have very bad consequences for the child and probably society as well,[17] whereas Kant (as formerly I) would sniff that one need not concern oneself about the consequences because the act itself is simply wrong – that is, we have an absolute obligation not to do it – even if it were to result in net good, such as a large online audience of sadistic video-spectators enjoying themselves immensely at the child's expense.

This is the kind of debate that keeps the discipline of normative ethics going on forever . . . and one that the amoralist happily refrains from entering, just as the atheist does not worry about whether God has a single nature or is three natures in one, since there is neither God nor morality. However, it would be helpful to the amoralist's case to clarify that, indeed, *both* types of morality – those that prioritize right and wrong and those that prioritize good and bad – are being consigned to the scrapheap; for a number of critics of amoralism, and seemingly even some of its defenders, get tripped up on this score.[18] Thus, a prominent amoralist[19] like Joyce (2001) appears to presume that prudence or personal good is an objective

[16] "Good" and "bad" have several other uses in morality. For example, the very act that Kant would label inherently wrong might also be called bad (or evil). Also, a person who would do such a thing could also be called bad (or evil). Also, the character trait that such an act might manifest, say, sadism, could be called bad (or evil or a vice). Meanwhile, Blackford (2016) argues persuasively and at length for the utility (and moral relevance) of a nonmoral sense of "good" and "bad," as in "a good car." I will focus on the one sense of "bad" and "good" I have described in the body of the text since I am only using it as an illustration of a more general point about the extent of the amoralist critique.

[17] Or strictly speaking, worse (or less good) consequences than would any alternative action.

[18] Meacham's (2014) otherwise simpatico portrayal of desirism falters here, I feel.

[19] Amoralist in the metaphysical sense, for Joyce defends the retention of some of morality's empirical trappings.

feature of the world, since he defends retaining the "pretense" of morality in our lives, even though morality itself is a "myth," precisely because this would be useful for promoting "one's own interests" (p. 181) or "long-term prudence" (p. 183). He also speaks of "the benefits of moral beliefs" (p. 180) and of "desirable actions" (p. 181), which are also objectivist terms. A subjectivist would only speak of what happens to be "desired" by someone, without suggesting that such things were "desirable" or "benefits" in and of themselves. Joyce thus appears to take (whatever is in one's) self-interest *as such* to be an objective good. The pretense of morality is thereby justified because it provides us with (pretend) categorical injunctions that can override the "weakness of will, passion, accidie, etc." (p. 184) that could block our acting on behalf of this objective good. In other words, Joyce, despite his explicit denial of the *equivalence* of morality to ethical egoism (e.g., on p. 31), appears to me to be an out-and-out ethical egoist. But this is itself moralism in the Mackiean sense I intend because it presumes an objective value, namely, prudence or personal good.

My take on this is of course the desirist one, that, so to speak, only desiring makes it so. More precisely, all value is based in desire and hence is subjective. I do also recommend that we vet our desires/values rationally (which preference itself I have arrived at by rationally vetting my desires). And here it is relevant to note that the same tendency to objectify the good or bad crops up again in many thinkers' assessments of what is *rational*. For example, it is common to hear fear of flying put down as irrational because, as the saying goes, you are more likely to die on the drive to the airport than in a plane crash. But what is actually going on in this argument? Let us accept the statistical basis. But how would that show that fear of flying is irrational? Does the argument not presume that the only relevant factor is dying, and that dying overrides anything else? This to me smacks of objective valuation, for it seems to me that dying is clearly *not* the only relevant factor.

I for one don't care about dying; I care about how I die. As I picture the two modes of dying, in a traffic accident and in an airplane disaster, I find that only the latter image consistently fills me with dread. These two modes of dying are not equivalent! Granted, I may be mistaken in my imaging. I have a good friend who sees nothing horrific at all in the prospect of falling out of an airplane to his death; the fall would be a

thrill, and the death would be instantaneous. Also, I have certainly experienced the occasional horrific reverie of death by traffic accident, not instantaneously slamming into a tree but instead helplessly pinned down in an automobile-da-fé. But the general point remains: Some risk experts may be mistaking the objectivity of their statistics for the objectivity of their judgments of risk. But risk would only be objective if not only the probability of x's occurring were objective but also the estimation of x's awfulness. And the latter, it seems to me, is a matter of desire. So the person who is afraid of flying may simply find the prospect of dying in an airplane disaster to be much much more awful than the prospect of dying behind the wheel of a car. The risk expert's assumption that death per se is all that matters suggests to me an objectification of death's value.

Saying What You Mean: The Language of Ethics

A very basic problem with morality is understanding just what someone (including oneself) means when they say "x is right (or obligatory)" or "x is wrong (or prohibited)" or "x is permissible (neither obligatory nor prohibited)." Here I am talking about the use of the words "right" and "wrong" and "permissible" in the moral sense, for we can also use them to indicate that something of a nonmoral nature is correct or incorrect, such as a behavior of etiquette or an answer to a math question or to a history or science or other factual question. That the moral meaning is ambiguous at best and obscure or unintelligible at worst is illustrated by the following annotated list of ways in which an expression like "x is (morally) wrong" is commonly used. Please note also that I am casting the net widely to include both meta-ethical or definitional and normative or contingent "meanings." It is as if different people understood water to be liquid or solid or consist entirely of hydrogen and oxygen or nitrogen and carbon. In the end it's one big mishmash.

"X is wrong" can mean that *doing x will not have the best consequences of all available options.* Example: It would be morally wrong to donate money to your local art gallery when you could instead donate the money to

cancer research. Problem: Who would ever be able to determine whether donating money to cancer research would have the best consequences of anything you could do with your money in any given instance or even in general? Problem: Different people have different conceptions of what constitutes the good that is supposed to be maximized by this definition of morality; for example, is a world without cancer but also without art better than a world with art but also with cancer? Problem: Even if we agreed on what would be the best consequences and could know which actions would lead to them, we might still prefer to privilege other things; for example, even if we knew that the best possible world overall and in the long term would result from all of us today submitting to impoverishment, or, alternatively, to torturing a single child to death, some of us might deem it wrong to do so.

"X is wrong" can mean that *doing x is prohibited by God.* Example: It is wrong to work on Sunday because God commanded us not to. Problem: God does not exist. Problem: "God" is just as ambiguous as "wrong." Problem: Different religious traditions (and sometimes even one and the same religious tradition) tell us that God has commanded different and sometimes conflicting things. Problem: Some traditions tell us that God commanded things that we ourselves believe are morally wrong, such as God's command to Abraham to kill his son Isaac.

"X is wrong" can mean that *a truly virtuous person would never do x.* Example: It is wrong to be vengeful because Jesus would never have sought revenge but instead would have turned the other cheek. Problem: Different cultures have different models of the virtuous person, for example, in one society a warrior, in another a peacemaker. Problem: "Virtuous" (or "vicious") is just as ambiguous as "wrong."

"X is wrong" can mean that *x is inherently forbidden or bad.* Example: It is wrong to torture a child, not because this might land you in jail or because it fails to maximize some good thing, but just because it's wrong "*tout court*" or "in itself." Problem: Isn't this just question begging? Isn't it just saying that "It's wrong" means "It's wrong"? Or if not literally tautological, is it not at least an instance of *obscurum per obscurius*, explaining the obscure (wrong) in terms of the even more obscure (inherently forbidden)? Have we really been given any further enlightenment as to what "It's wrong" means? Problem: What conception of the universe

would offer us objective values of this sort, such that, for example, kicking a dog just for fun were not only painful to the dog and enjoyable to the kicker but also *wrong*? The painfulness and enjoyment seem to be empirical facts, as are also of course the kicking and its causal role. But what sort of fact would be the *wrongness* of the kicking? Problem: There is disagreement about which things are inherently wrong. How could this disagreement be resolved in a manner that was itself universally agreed upon?

"X is wrong" can mean that *we don't like x.* Example: Homosexuality is wrong because we don't cotton to it in these here parts. Problem: Who are "we"? Different people like and dislike different things. Obviously, for example, homosexuals will have different feelings on the matter of homosexuality than homophobes.

"X is wrong" can just mean *I was always told that "x is wrong."* Example: "Bad, bad. You told a lie. Lying is wrong, Billy!" Problem: What does this mean? Neither you nor the person scolding you may have any idea at all of any further meaning other than that someone might wield the word "wrong" at someone else like a slap on the face for doing (or apparently doing) x. Tone of voice etc. indicate that it is probably an expression of disapproval or other dislike. But dislike of what sort of thing may be vague. Back to Square One.

And so it goes. I think the minimal message here is that we would be well-advised to say exactly what we mean rather than continue to use an obscure expression like "x is wrong." So, for example, say:

> "So far as I or we can tell, x will have such-and-such overall consequences, whereas not doing x or doing y instead will have so-and-so consequences."
>
> or
>
> "I, or the folks in our community, just do not want to do or permit x."
>
> or
>
> "x would violate God's law."
>
> And so on.

But then what? The moralist might say, "Isn't that just how we go about determining what is right or wrong in the first place? How is this supposed to be a *substitute* for morality?" My answer is twofold.

First, the ambiguity of "x is wrong" would be removed so that everybody knew exactly what claim or claims were being made and knew if all were speaking in the same language and about the same thing or not (God or consequences or inherent value or whatever) . . . or, indeed, about *anything at all*. The suspicion that morality sometimes has no content whatever is aroused by its frequent invocation as a rhetorical flourish, such as "And furthermore it's the right thing to do."[20] For example: "Letting in more refugees will actually improve our economy. And furthermore it's the right thing to do." Here "the right thing to do" either means something like "God has commanded us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us" or it is vacuous.

My second reason for putting forward the above assertions as replacements for rather than interpretations or parsings of morality is that, given the problems outlined above with each and every one of them *when they are taken to be explications* of "x is wrong," I conclude that it would be unwarranted to draw any *moral* conclusion from any of them. Instead I would have us left with an assertion of one sort or another (x will have such-and-such consequences, God commands x, etc.), which could be judged or debated on the merits, and then each individual or group would act according to their resultant motivation or accepted decision procedure (such as voting). Period. No one would be presuming to decide what is "right" or "wrong," as if the decision carried some absolute and universal authority. People would simply be deciding what to do, or just doing it, not that they "ought to."[21]

Morality Is More; Desirism Is Less

Desirism can be characterized as morality minus something. Morality as I conceive it is an overlay of judgment, in the sense of a certain kind of assessment, on top of a relatively unadorned description or rational preference or recommendation. Thus, a certain action could be

[20] The aforementioned "moral punctuation."

[21] Thereby pre-empting any Moorean open question.

described as a lie; but morality would add to that that the lie is absolutely forbidden (= morally wrong), or else absolutely mandatory or obligatory (= morally right), or else absolutely permitted (= neither right nor wrong). The "absolutely," by the way, may denote either under any and all circumstances (as we might suppose torturing a child is forbidden) or else in the given circumstances (as we might suppose a lie could be mandatory when the objective is to hide the Jews in the attic). An amoralist would observe an instance of lying, and be able to give a complete description of it as, say, the utterance of a statement believed to be false by the speaker but intended to deceive the listener, and might even wish (or strongly desire), after due reflection, that the lie were not being uttered; but the moralist would go beyond all of that and also declare (or at least believe) that the lie was *wrong*.

Morality could be pictured, then, as like the color we experience when we normally sighted observers look out at the world, whereas an amoralist would be like someone who is completely color blind. And of course I am suggesting that this does not necessarily put the amoralist at a disadvantage; on the contrary. Even in the case of the analogy, the loss of color could be a net gain. I think of how my artistic avocation as a photographer went downhill after I switched to color from black and white; the colors just seemed to me to be decorative and superfluous and, worse, to obscure and even obliterate both the subtle discriminations and the striking contrasts of light and dark, which for me had the greater aesthetic value.[22]

What is the moralist's addition to the lie? I offered various common interpretations of it in the previous section. One interpretation would even be identical to the amoralist's conception of what is taking place, namely, that someone is uttering a statement believed to be false by the speaker but intended to deceive the listener. The difference, though, is that the amoralist does not take this to be an analysis of what is *wrong* with the lie . . . even if were added a rational desire that the lie were not being uttered. The lie is no more wrong than it is sinful, for (stop me if you've heard this before) there are no sins (since there is no God, etc.), or

[22] Cf. also Marks (2004).

than it is hated by Zeus (for there is no Zeus), etc. But just as the theologian could provide some elaborate explanation of why disobeying God or displeasing Zeus makes something wrong, so the moralist could provide an elaborate explanation of why uttering a statement believed to be false by the speaker but intended to deceive the listener is wrong (at least under the given circumstances), such as that deceiving violates the categorical imperative never to treat a person merely as a means, or that deceiving violates the absolute rule not to do unto another as you would not have done to yourself, or that deceiving, by putting at risk the ground of trust essential for communication, fails to maximize the good, etc.

Note, however, that the desirist could incorporate even one or more of these into an explanation of why he or she has the preference she does or is making the recommendation he is;[23] for example, "I won't lie because I would not like to be lied to and I like the principle of treating others as I would like to be treated." But this would still fall short of the moralist's use of this reason to *justify* the implicit claim that, therefore, lying (at least in the circumstances) is *verboten* – that it has some inherent feature that makes it, objectively speaking and not just as a matter of one's preference, even one's rationally considered preference, something not to be done. It is all that excess that amorality and desirism lop off.

And there is more (and less). For not only does the moralist add this *judgment of the act* in question, such as a lie, and this *justification* of the judgment, to the desirist's description and explanation, but s/he may also *judge the person* who is performing the act, in this case, the liar. So just as the act might be deemed wrong, the agent might be deemed *bad* or even evil. And that's not all either. The agent might also be judged to merit or *deserve* some negative regard or treatment, such as contempt, even punishment. There is an entire cohort of concepts that are exclusive to the moral outlook, just as there is for the religious outlook and so forth. Desirism counsels tossing them all in the junk heap.

Frankly I have been surprised at how easy this has turned out to be in actual practice. I did not know a priori that it would even be possible to

[23] More on this in the next section.

dispense with moralist terminology and still be able to function in normal life and work.[24] Granted, as with any form of so-called political correctness, there will be awkward moments, and sometimes compromise called for. Thus for example there are various inspiring exemplars of oratory and literature and the like that belong in (i.e., that I would choose to keep in) the canon despite their moralism . . . as sometimes also their sexism and theism, etc. I don't propose to censor or amend "We hold these *truths* to be self-evident, that all *men* are created equal, that they are endowed by their *Creator* with certain *unalienable Rights*, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." Rhetoric aside, however, I might "translate" it as "Those of us who affix our signature to this document desire and intend that all persons shall have equal claim to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness under the laws of the land."

But in the normal run of cases, it has proved easy enough to replace "x is wrong" with "I really don't like x (and hope you won't either after hearing my reasons)," and "A deserves a jail term" with "Alas, I think the only way to prevent A from doing more things most of us really don't like, and/or to inhibit others from doing the same, is to limit her freedom for a while," etc. To me this is simply a matter of saying what we mean . . . in accordance with both what seems to me, after a great deal of study and discussion and reflection, to be reality, and the kind of world I would prefer to live in. It is a simpler world than the one that has been handed down to us, which contains gods and objective values *in addition to* the reality and preferences I want us all to retain after my own prolonged rational inquiry into ethics (and everything else).

Note, however, that this simplification of which I speak is not merely a matter of changing and reducing[25] vocabulary. In one sense, of course, it is a lot more than that in that it has implications for a vast number of human practices in addition to speaking and writing. Just as the universal adoption of atheism could mean the physical elimination of entire institutions, such as the church (not, according to my preferences, in the

[24] But not so easy to eliminate moralist attitudes or at least to interpret attitudes. More on this in Chap. 4.

[25] Of course sometimes *more words* might be needed.

imposed manner of Russian and Chinese communism, but rather as a natural outcome, in the same way we have stopped using rotary telephones), so the adoption of amoralism could presage the elimination of . . . war and the military?? But I will not venture to speculate; to paraphrase Newton, *praedictiones non fingo* (although of course such considerations are very much a part of my reason for preferring desirism over morality). The main additional simplification I now have in mind is that of our psychology: Under a desirist regime we would lose many attitudes we are accustomed to carrying around in our head,[26] such as blame (and approval), guilt (and pride), contempt (and esteem), satisfaction at someone's receiving their just desert (and frustration at their not), and of course the kind of judgment with which I began this chapter. This would be a significant amount of clutter removal.

In fact if we could really eliminate those attitudes, we would not even need the linguistic reform I have proposed. We would all "know what we mean" when we said things like "That is wrong." We would all know that all we meant was, "We really don't like that and don't want anyone else to like it either." The linguistic reform is, therefore, only a means to attitudinal reform. Well, not "only," since the attitudinal reform also serves the purpose of reforming our actual behavior – so that we don't go around haranguing people who do things we don't like and exacting retribution for their doing those things, etc. But I for one also dislike moralist attitudes intrinsically; for example, I am highly averse to the egotism I sense in so many pronouncements of moral condemnation, which for me is like hearing fingernails scraping over a blackboard. So, in my view, attitudinal reform is an intrinsic end of linguistic reform as well as a means to further behavioral reform.

But now comes the rub. I doubt very much that it is possible for most, if not all, of us to eliminate moralist attitudes from our psyche. So even if we were to eliminate all moralist language,[27] I believe we would still carry around within us moralist attitudes. The clearest sign of this is also to be found in language. For in addition to explicitly moralist words like

[26] Although there are nonmoralist forms of some of these as well.

[27] Not to mention if we retained it under more benign imputations, which is the intent of thinkers like Joyce (2001) and Blackford (2016).

"right" and "wrong" and "good" and "bad,"[28] there is a vast lexicon of descriptive terms that are *thick*. This means that their denotation is descriptive, but they have a strong moralist connotation; they are imbued with a moral stain (or bloom), so to speak. The example of lying is a case in point. To say someone is lying or call someone a liar is implicitly to judge them (negatively) and not merely to describe their action (as the utterance of a statement believed to be false by the speaker but intended to deceive the listener) or their proclivity to acting in that way. One hardly needs to perform an inference, such as,

He lied;
Lying is wrong;
Therefore he did something wrong,

in order to determine that the person acted wrongly. "Lying" seems to carry the import of doing wrong in its very meaning. We give a liar the deficit of the doubt, you might say.

But "lying" does *not mean* that the action is wrong.[29] Otherwise we would not be able to say things like, "She felt it was her moral obligation to lie to the Nazis about the Jews hidden in the attic." An example of morality as part of the strict or *denotative* meaning of a partially descriptive term might be "sadism,"[30] which descriptively means "enjoyment in carrying

[28] Or explicitly moralist *usage* of such words, since, as previously noted [and see Hinckfuss (1987) and Blackford (2016)], these words, at least in English, are not *exclusively* moralist (unless we consider, e.g., "right" in "the right thing to do" and "right" in "the right answer," or "good" in "a good person" and "good" in "a good car," to be not the same word but homonyms). However, I have elsewhere (Marks [Forthcoming]) gone so far as to recommend avoiding as much as possible use of such words even in nonmoralist contexts, just as one might advise not using certain terms even in jest lest the habit spill over into offending and hurtful situations.

[29] Although "*liar*" could be inherently moralist, as also "dishonest" and "honest," all referring to tendencies and not exceptional instances. This seems the case even when the tendency might be justified; for example, I know someone who claims that the only way for her to survive in communist Eastern Europe was to be dishonest, but this left her feeling morally compromised even so, which indeed is one reason why she hated the system.

[30] Also "mature" and "immature," "careless," "brave," "cowardly," "stupid." "Clever" and "smart" are interesting cases because, while perhaps always thick, each can have *opposite* connotations (e.g., to call someone clever can be to malign him).

out cruel actions," but which is hard to imagine being used in any way other than to condemn. But note that "cruel" itself is *not* so locked into a judgment, although it is surely a thick term. It is possible to feel that (some) one is being properly cruel, in the primary dictionary sense of willfully or knowingly causing pain to another. For example, a medical researcher who intentionally inflicted pain on animals in the laboratory in order to test the efficacy and safety of a promising drug for the treatment of excruciating and heretofore untreatable pain in human beings would not be considered evil or even doing anything wrong by most moralists; indeed, she might be viewed as a hero. Someone intentionally subjecting another to cruelty might even be considered to be doing a good turn for the "victim" – being cruel to be kind, as we say – like the aborigine parents who sent each of their offspring into the wilderness for a personal trial to fend for themselves in order to prepare them for the rigors of survival in their harsh environment, or the modern farmers who make their children watch what happens to the beloved heifer they have raised from birth after she is sent to slaughter. So doing something cruel does not *mean* that one is doing something wrong, although there is surely that suggestion.

My point about the difficulty or impossibility of ridding ourselves of moralism is that our language is so riddled with thick terms, we would be left almost speechless if we adopted an eliminativist stance toward moralist language.[31] So we will always be viewing the world through morality-tinted glasses, and will just have to learn how to "see past" the tint to the purely descriptive and valueless reality if we are striving to be desirists. The moral-abolitionist project can take us only so far. As I've said, the practical ideal would be to cultivate purely amoral attitudes while still using moralist language; but both our no-doubt-wired-in moralist tendencies plus our morality-saturated language may make it unlikely that there will ever be mostly amoralists on the barricades. I have likened our situation to visual illusions to illustrate both the possibility of throwing over moralism, just as we can respond to the actual straightness of a stick that appears to be bent at the water's surface, and the actual difficulties of doing so, just as

[31] On this Blackford (2016) and I agree. Pettit and Knobe (2009) find an even deeper penetration of morality into our language and psyche.

we must struggle to accept that the straight line segments in the Müller-Lyer illusion are in fact the same length.

As always let me remind you of what I am saying and what I am not saying. I would certainly be happy to have all of us be intrinsically averse to cruelty (and sadism etc.). I am only urging that we strive to cease to *add* to that inhibition and aversion a moral judgment and attitude, which, I have argued and illustrated, is both baseless in reality and net counterproductive with regard to our considered desires. So even on those occasions when we decided, all things considered, to be cruel, we would feel bad, but from sadness and not guilt. Rorty (1989) has put the general idea with particular point in a discussion of what he calls the "irony" of Proust and Nietzsche:

> Proust temporalized and finitized the authority figures he had met by seeing them as creatures of contingent circumstance. Like Nietzsche, he rid himself of the fear that there was an antecedent truth about himself, a real essence which others might have detected. But Proust was able to do so without claiming to know a truth which was hidden from the authority figures of his earlier years. He managed to debunk authority without setting himself up as authority. . . . He mastered contingency by recognizing it, and thus freed himself from the fear that the contingencies he had encountered were more than just contingencies. He turned other people from his judges into his fellow sufferers. . . . (p. 103)

Ersatz Morality I: Desirist Adaptations

Desirism is crucially different from morality, and yet can appear almost identical. The essential distinction is that desirism does not deal in categorical imperatives or objective values. But the very same imperatives and values that a moralist believes in could be adopted and adapted by a desirist – simply by lopping off the categorical and objective fat. Here is an extended example of how this could work with the moral theory of consequentialism.

Moral consequentialism holds that the right thing to do is that which has the best consequences. There is in fact a variety of moral consequentialisms, depending on which sort of "good" one has in mind to maximize (to the "best") and *whose* good is taken to matter. Thus, *egoism* is usually understood to stipulate that *pleasure* is the good (and pain the bad), and

one's own pleasure is what matters, whereas *utilitarianism* is at the other end of the consequentialist spectrum[32] and stipulates that *everyone's* pleasure matters (equally). Meanwhile, *moral perfectionism* holds that the good consists in the flowering of human nature, so the moral imperative is to bring human nature to its fulfillment (whether in oneself or all of humanity, depending on the brand of perfectionism). And so on.

A desirist could be attracted to any of these consequentialisms, one or more or all of them. That right there distinguishes desirist consequentialism from moral consequentialism, since the latter would not allow for multiple allegiances. The monotypic nature of any moral theory follows from the liability to practical contradiction of a plurality of principles; for example, if physical pleasure is good and helping others is good, what are you supposed to do if helping others will reduce your own physical pleasure (and no common measure is available)? This is not a problem for desirism, since different cathexes will sort themselves out (although there could be "ties"). Thus, if, after adequately considering the alternatives, you end up helping others (on some occasion, in general, whatever), then that matters more to you than experiencing pleasure. I said to an acquaintance who, although knowledgeable about animal agriculture, nevertheless proclaimed, "I love my steak!" – "I'm not judging you or your eating habits (or trying not to); but I do observe that you care more about your taste buds than the suffering and slaughter of young animals, and I wish you didn't." I might also have added, "So please don't tell me you are an animal lover because you love your dog."

But even if a desirist had a dominant consequentialist preference, say, hedonistic utilitarian, her ethic would differ from the moral version. The latter is in fact absurd and impossible.[33] How could anyone go about determining which of the options available to her would yield the greatest net utility? Keep in mind that there is no time limit on this outcome; the consequences one million years from now count as much as tomorrow's. A toothache is a toothache, no matter when it occurs. The mind can only boggle at the possible consequences of even the most trivial action, such as scratching your nose, into the indefinitely far future and relative to not

[32] Or "continuum," as I described it in detail in Marks (2009).

[33] The following recapitulates my argument in Chap. 4 of Marks (2009).

scratching your nose but doing x, y, or z instead. Actual consequentialisms for the most part simply ignore this problem and consider only a small set of near-term outcomes (Should you steer the runaway trolley car away from the five workmen on the track straight ahead and hit the one workman on the siding instead?[34]), or else gratuitously argue that the long-term consequences of all the options may be safely ignored because they somehow balance out (Sure, the one workman's great-granddaughter could be the next Gandhi, but she could also be the next Hitler; or, sure, the one workman's great-granddaughter could be the next Gandhi, but the great-great-great grandson of one of the five workmen could be the next Jesus[35]), or they all just trickle effectively to nothing ("... we do not normally in practice need to consider very remote consequences, as these in the end approximate rapidly to zero like the furthermost ripples on a pond after a stone has been dropped into it"[36]).

The desirist's hedonistic utilitarianism is far more reasonable. Its guiding principle would be to act so as to bring about the best foreseeable consequences for all *insofar as it is reasonable to determine and assess those consequences under the circumstances*. Thus, steer the trolley car into the one workman and away from the five workmen. And what would be compelling the desirist to this outcome? Not a toothless obligation from On High, but the actual, felt motivation to so act after she had explicitly or implicitly done the utilitarian calculation ("Knowing nothing more about the situation or its consequences than that either one person will die or five persons will die, and given that I must act at once, I feel compelled to spare the five").

[34] The runaway tram or trolley is a classic thought experiment in philosophy, whose discussion began in earnest in Thomson (1985) and has been elaborated ad infinitum ever since.

[35] Cf. Kagan (1998):

> ... there will always be a very small chance of some totally unforeseen disaster resulting from your act. But it seems equally true that there will be a corresponding very small chance of your act resulting in something fantastically wonderful, although totally unforeseen. If there is indeed no reason to expect either, then the two possibilities will cancel each other out as we try to decide how to act. (p. 65)

[36] J.J.C. Smart in Smart and Williams (1973), p. 33. This argument also ignores that even the tiniest relative difference in outcomes – say, by the pain of one splinter after ten million years – has the absurd implication that one act was morally obligatory and the others morally prohibited.

But why is this not itself a morality? In other words, why presume that the intended ethics of utilitarianism has not all along been some such commonsensical precept, and not the infinitely foresighted and hence impossible-to-obey command I have made it out to be? My answer is this. Precisely because it would be impossible to satisfy an ethics that was genuinely concerned about the consequences of our actions, no consequentialist ethics could claim our absolute fealty, and hence it could not be a morality. Think about it. Whenever you train your gaze on the near-term or otherwise reasonably foreseeable consequences of your action, you are not considering its *real* consequences, that is, its *total net* consequences (not to mention, relative to the total net consequences of anything else you might have done instead). So in a very meaningful sense you are merely throwing a sop to consequences, indulging in a pretense, stoking the illusion of bringing about a better world. For example, for all Johann Kühberger could possibly have known, saving little Adolph from drowning was clearly going to have better consequences that anything else he might do at that moment[37]; but in reality this act made World War II and the Holocaust and countless other resultant tragedies to the present day and beyond possible.[38]

I conclude that all we could possibly hope to affect intentionally are things that we can reasonably foresee; but in favoring these with our intentions we must put aside any pretense of contributing to a better world, that is, of *even attempting* to maximize utility. So ethics does take on an element of absurdity, I admit. It is as if we were playing a kind of game when we speak of guiding our actions by attending to their consequences, because, strictly speaking, we can do no such thing. Given this state of affairs – part of the much lamented "human condition" – I think it makes sense, therefore, to "go with" our desires, which are naturally attuned

[37] Whether true or apocryphal, the episode will serve; but the evidence for its truth is given here: http://regiowiki.pnp.de/index.php/Johann_Nepomuk_K%C3%BChberger.

[38] This is why Presidential contender Jeb Bush, when asked if he would kill baby Hitler if he could go back in time, said, "Hell yeah I would" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C4Iz2nA1AfiveM). Comedian Stephen Colbert subsequently commented, with far more wisdom than humor, that if he had the chance, he would instead grab baby Hitler and raise him in a loving (and vigilant) home (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7sixMlVLbv1zE).

(presumably via evolutionary selection) to the short-term and familiar, but also capable of being refined and expanded via additional rational considerations,[39] including new data. Thus, we spontaneously favor our own offspring; but, by vivid literary and journalistic and media accounts, as well as actual experience and imaginary experiments, we can find our caring responses spontaneously extended even to starving children overseas . . . and, with sufficient education and experience, even to future generations, and so on. But none of this, for all we could ever tell even only with some degree of probability, will conform to the *total net* consequences of our actions (a fortiori, the *best* total net consequences of all of our available options), and hence is still a matter of our subjective preferences rather than objective consequentialist obligation.

There are additional problems for a moralist consequentialism. Thus, it is not only a question of knowing what consequences would follow from any action you might ever take or not take, but also of knowing the values of those consequences. So even if you knew that the one person on the siding was working a summer job to put herself through music school as a budding virtuoso pianist whereas the five people on the main track were all vicious convicted felons working on the chain gang, what possible objective measure exists by which you could calculate which outcome would be better? There are plenty of candidates, to be sure; but would not the "winner" be determined by the preferences and subjective values of the "judge"? A desirist consequentialist accepts the implicit answer to that rhetorical question and does not attempt to gussy up her considered actions with moralist casuistry.

So there is such a thing as a consequentialist of desire who is not a consequentialist of morality. This sort of desirist would, all other things equal, be motivated to bring about the best foreseeable consequences for all sentient beings in accordance with her subjective (but still rational) assessments of those consequences. I do think, however, that the most likely implementation of desirism will be a mixed ethic, with elements of consequentialism (and of different types) and also other familiar moral theories such as deontology and virtue ethics. After all, all of these moral theories

[39] And also, of course, irrational ones; but in general my hunch (and that is all it is, with a dash of preference thrown in) is that rationality will steer us more reliably in the directions we want to go.

remain with us precisely because they all have some intuitive appeal, which I of course understand strictly as a pull on our desires (considered or unconsidered) and due ultimately to various adaptive responses to the varied contingencies of our evolution. The mistake has only been to insist that only one of them could be applicable to human life. There have, by the way, been attempts to include them all within a single morality, either by prioritizing them[40] or melding them.[41] But insofar as this is still done under the moral mandate, they are doomed to failure, according to the arguments I have given against morality as such. And even other *moralists* continue to find fault with these attempts on various technical grounds.

For the desirist consequentialist this presents no deep problem (which is not to say, of course, that individual decisions won't sometimes involve soul searching). Thus, in a notorious elaboration of the trolley problem, suppose the only way for you to save the five workers on the track was to push a fat man off a bridge, which spanned the track, into the path of the runaway trolley car. Suppose also that nothing of significance distinguished any of the six people whose fates were now in your hands, so that once again there seems to be a simple utilitarian calculation determining what to do: Sacrifice the one to save the five. Nevertheless, if your intuitions or feelings are like mine, you would be loath – to put it mildly – to push an innocent person off a bridge to his gruesome death. In fact I have a clear *moral* intuition that it would be *wrong* to do so.

To the moral consequentialist, my reservations might be written off as pure squeamishness to do the right thing that would clearly have the best consequences.[42] But if I were a moralist, as indeed I once was, I would counter with the argument that my so-called squeamishness was in fact

[40] The prototype is Ross (1930).

[41] The grandest contemporary effort along these lines is Derek Parfit's *On What Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[42] A more sophisticated consequentialist account would be along the lines of Kupperman (1983), who might argue that it would make perfect consequentialist sense for us to have such strong inhibitions to perform certain types of acts that we would continue to feel bad even if there were strong consequentialist reason to perform an instance of the type on a given occasion. My more general point is simply that moral consequentialism is recognized to face several notorious hurdles, whereas desirist consequentialism is a standard item in our motivational repertoire.

the manifestation of the correct moral view of the matter and therefore a refutation of consequentialism itself. I would be intuiting from the position of a deontologist or, specifically, a Kantian, a person whose guiding ethical maxim is that proposed by Immanuel Kant, namely: Never treat any person merely as a means. In this case, pushing the fat man off the bridge would be a stark instance of treating a person merely as a means. It does not matter that the end in view was something noble, in this case, saving the lives of five other innocent people, or that the consequence would be saving five by sacrificing only one.

For the moral consequentialist, then, there is not only a practical crisis but also a theoretical one, since the very moral principle he or she wants to live by has been thrown into question. There is no foreseeable resolution of the theoretical issue; therefore the practical question also remains in perpetual limbo. But the desirist consequentialist does not have this problem. For, not being a moralist who is thereby committed to a supposed absolute truth, he or she recognizes that his or her commitment to consequentialism is at base a preference or a feeling, however informed and considered, and as such is liable to influence by further considerations. In this case, then, the strong aversion to pushing an innocent person to his death is another relevant factor, and, in my case anyway, likely to prevail.[43]

Naturally a pure consequentialist would be outraged by my "failure" to act. But similarly I would be horrified if the consequentialist pushed the fat man to his death. The moral consequentialist would view me as misguided by a bad theory, namely Kantianism, or perhaps as just a

[43] I find a kindred spirit infusing Judge Richard A. Posner's critique of Peter Singer's defense of animal rights (although, amusingly to me, Posner still wants to retain the *moral* high ground, even at the cost of being "illogical," instead of just giving up on morality), thus:

> Moral argument often appears plausible when it is not well reasoned or logically complete, but it is almost always implausible when it is logical. An illogical utilitarian (a "soft" utilitarian, we might call him or her) is content to say that pain is bad, that animals experience pain, so that, other things being equal, we should try to alleviate animal suffering if we can do so at a modest cost. You, a powerfully logical utilitarian, a "hard" utilitarian, are not content with such pablum. You want to pursue to its logical extreme the proposition that pain is a bad by whomever experienced. And so you don't flinch from the logical implication of your philosophy that if a stuck pig experiences more pain than a stuck human, the pig has the superior claim to our solicitude. . . . (Posner and Singer 2001).

weak-willed utilitarian; whereas I would view the consequentialist killer as indoctrinated by a bad theory, namely utilitarianism, and furthermore as a calculating machine rather than a human being with feelings. He or she would counter that it is I who lacked feelings, or at least empathic imagination, namely for the five people I am willing to see die so as not to violate some supposed absolute principle (if I were a moral Kantian) or else to be able to indulge my timidity (in the guise of being a flexible desirist). The consequentialist might also challenge me with the trolley variation wherein one of the five people was my daughter. But I could retort: What if the fat man were your son?

Again, no resolution is to be expected of this perennial back-and-forth–that is, no objective, theoretical resolution. I could even imagine, say, a moral consequentialist arguing that a general *prohibition* on pushing innocent people off bridges *no matter what* would have better consequences overall; but at this point the theory would become unfalsifiable – the final victory of casuistry over dialectic, and a sure sign of futility.[44] For practical purposes, however, there probably would be a resolution, or resolutions: A fully convinced moralist consequentialist would push the fat man off the bridge, whereas a sincere desirist consequentialist (not to mention a desirist Kantian) might very well not. (Would the desirist try to prevent the moralist from acting on *his or her* conviction? That's another question – another practical question, according to desirism, hence "solvable.")

Part of a desirist consequentialist's motivation might also include wanting to convince others to be desirist consequentialists. The method or methods of convincing would be guided by the usual desirist precept: "Whatever works, albeit consonant with one's considered desires." Thus, the desirist might specifically avoid playing the moral card ("You should always try to maximize utility to the best of your knowledge; this is the absolute obligation of everyone"), seeing it

[44] I myself engaged in this very sort of futility on behalf of a *Kantian* morality in Marks (2009), pp. 74–76.

as generally ineffective, even counterproductive (this being one of the reasons for being a desirist in the first place), and/or as violating one of her other ("subjective") values, say, honesty. The honesty might be in conformity with her utilitarian commitment ("Telling the truth is likely to have better consequences in the long run"). But it could as well – enabled, as we have just seen, by desirist immunity from "a foolish consistency" – follow from a simple (or "Kantian") dislike of dishonesty without reference to the relative consequences of honesty versus dishonesty.

Ersatz Morality II: Recommending

I have argued that desirism is crucially different from morality even though it can appear almost identical to a normative theory, such as utilitarianism. But this impression arises with respect to desirism itself; that is, isn't desirism still normative in the sense of *itself* being prescribed? Am I not putting forward desirism as something people *ought* to adopt? My answer is again *No*. I have been using the word "recommend" as a substitute for the moralistic and normative notions of requiring or demanding or commanding or enjoining or prescribing, etc. Thus, instead of saying "You should not lie" or "It is wrong to lie" or "Don't lie," a desirist who was trying to dispense some helpful advice would say, "I suggest that you not lie" or "Based on my understanding of your situation, I recommend that you tell the truth" or "If I were in your shoes and had a chance to think it over, then, so far as I can tell (not being in your shoes and not being you), I wouldn't lie." But similarly in promoting desirism itself, I don't go around telling people they ought to be desirists. I simply recommend it.

Well, not simply: I also provide copious arguments or considerations in an effort to persuade them (you). In theory I could also employ deceptive techniques, intentionally specious arguments. (No doubt I am offering some unintentionally specious ones.) But, given my values and my circumstances, I feel no need to do this, and in fact am averse to doing so (You will have to take my word for that), if only because it would be less of an intellectual challenge for me, and I like to engage in intellectual problem solving for its own sake. But mainly (I like to think,

anyway) because I am (for who knows what reasons or causes) committed to truth as a personal goal and in my dealings with others.

It may seem odd to a moralist that, on the one hand, I am advocating the *truth* of desirism, and on the other hand, forswearing the imposition of that truth on others. Aren't recommendations reserved for things that are *not* matters of truth? "I recommend that you try this flavor of ice cream; you might like it." There is no corresponding truth about the high quality of the flavor; it's all a matter of taste, isn't it? But it would seem odd to say, "I recommend that you believe the Earth is round." The Earth is round, period. Just so, saith the moralist, it is wrong to torture babies. It is not just a *recommendation* not to!

Let us not put too much emphasis on the word "recommend." I would *urge* you not to torture that baby.[45] I might even shoot you to stop you, because I *really don't want* you to be doing it! But, unfortunately for the moralist and even for me the amoralist (given my preferences), I recognize that the torturer may *really want* to torture that baby, may even have given it a lot of thought, might even *urge* on others to torture other babies. (The events currently transpiring around the globe and being proudly broadcast by their perpetrators in online videos make this seem far from a far-fetched possibility.) All I can say (or mean) in the end, therefore, is that my preference is that you not do it; so if you asked me for my honest advice, and I was not overcome by fear of being tortured myself for telling it to you, I would so-to-speak-recommend that you not torture the baby.[46]

(The moralist might object to the conditionality of that decision and declare that it would be wrong to recommend torturing the baby even on pain of being tortured oneself. But I dare say the moralist would be just as likely, or unlikely, as the desirist to make that recommendation

[45] I owe this point to Richard Garner (personal communication).

[46] Tazewell (2011) has made the marvelous suggestion that there be an online forum where people could submit and discuss and even vote on an ideal list of ten "com*mend*ments." I like this idea not only for its institutionalization of undemandingness but also for its incorporating reason giving. Even the usual Ten Commandments would be so much friendlier if they came with annotations. Cf. Marks (2015c), my little attempt to "demoralize" and rationalize a local ordinance.

under those circumstances. The only difference I see is that the desirist would not be claiming to be in touch with a higher truth, nor pleading "weakness of will" as an excuse. Instead the desirist would just feel awful both because his or her strong desire for the baby's welfare was about to be frustrated and his or her self-ideal as a caring and courageous person was being throttled by his or her own hand.)

It may seem, then, that desirism has less force than morality because it does not command or prohibit, etc., but only recommends (although the parenthetical paragraph above suggests that the practical upshot may be the same). But there is also a way in which desirism has *more* force. For in the first-person case, whereas the moralist's injunction could still be ignored, the desirist *will* (barring extraneous event) *follow* his or her own recommendation. Thus, the moralist decides it would be wrong to lie, but lies anyway, maybe because he wants to for selfish gain. But *however* the desirist acts after considering the pros and cons in a rational and informed way, that is what she would have recommended to herself. Of course there could still be desirist second-guessing: Maybe there was some defective reasoning or mistake about the facts of the situation, or a more attentive mulling over might have moved him or her differently. A desirist could also have regrets even when the process was flawless, simply in virtue of some strong desire of his or hers having been thwarted by an even stronger one. But in the run-of-the-mill case, the desirist will do as she would recommend (to herself). But in the run-of-the-mill case the moralist, I submit, may or may not do what he or she thinks is right. Or perhaps what is most likely, I add cynically (but sincerely), the moralist will do what he or she wants and (sincerely) call it right, thereby adding arrogance to hypocrisy.

But, again, what about the recommendation of desirism itself, that is, that some person or everyone adopt it as one's ethics? It is one thing to grant that particular decisions and actions depend on one's preferences, and so are to be recommended (however strongly or urgently) rather than asserted. But how can something that is claimed to be *true*, namely desirism, be only recommended? My answer is that desirism too is a preference, but in the same way that particular decisions and actions and

outcomes are – that is, I do believe that desirism has objective and factual and true components; but without a preference, those truths and facts (or, strictly speaking, one's rational beliefs) would be idle. For example, I believe it is a psychological fact that desirists would be less angry than moralists.[47] I happen to like the idea of a world where there is less anger.[48] Therefore (using "therefore" in a causal rather than a logical sense) I like desirism. But somebody else might be wedded to anger as a value or a virtue, as something that makes her own life worth living, or that transforms the human animal into something admired or exciting or interesting (taking all of these notions in a purely subjective sense: interesting *to the anger lover*, etc.) – analogous to how I myself feel about, say, compassion, or intellectual curiosity, or artistic creativity.

I admit even myself being approving of displays of anger on occasion, especially if I sense them as divorced from egotism and selfishness. It's just that I find it increasingly difficult to sense them in that way. So "ego" may be the real object of my distaste, and something like anger strikes me as particularly liable to adulteration by it. My sense that ego may be the culprit is supported by the observation that, whereas we are liable to anger when we believe somebody else has done something wrong, in our own case we are more likely to become angry at a lapse of prudence. So perhaps the common denominator is that our own interest has been frustrated ("I hate him for cheating me" and "I could kick myself for having missed out on that opportunity").[49] But someone might also value anger *instrumentally*, believing quite plausibly that anger can motivate us to act on our convictions. I acknowledge this too, although for me it is a decidedly mixed blessing, given that so many of the motivated convictions are ones I abhor. But even if that were not so, my primary aversion to anger is probably intrinsic; I "just don't like it."

[47] See, for example, Prinz (2011), pp. 211–229, for a defense of the centrality of anger to morality.

[48] Cf. Nussbaum's (2015) recent turn against anger.

[49] This is a switch from my earlier view that all anger is moralistic; see Marks (2013d), pp. 40–42, Marks (2013e), pp. 157–161, and "World without Anger" in Chap. 1 above. But it is consistent with my distaste for *morality* on the basis of its own *egotism*; see Marks (2013d), pp. 42–44.

The upshot is that the anger aficionado might reject desirism *on the same factual basis* – that desirists would be less angry than moralists – as I have for embracing it. Of course the most fundamental factual basis of desirism is basic amoralism or moral irrealism, the belief that (metaphysical) morality is a myth. What convinces me of the truth of this belief, as I have noted, is the so-called argument to the best explanation. However, this still leaves plenty of room for someone to decline to be a desirist. They might of course reject the argument and so not accept the truth of amoralism to begin with. But even accepting its truth, they might still allow their belief in the *utility* of empirical morality (i.e., the belief in morality) for what they most care about, to override any commitment to the *truth* about morality. So once again *preference* would have been shown to be an unavoidable component of desirism's (whole-hearted) acceptance; for, in the present case, a person would have to value *truth* (or rational belief) above all other things in order to embrace desirism.

Thus, I suspect that even the moralist has a preferential or psychological basis for her moralism. Again, this is because the phenomenon is causal; neither of us is engaging in a strictly rational inference so much as we are being influenced by relevant considerations. So I could venture an empirical prediction, namely, that the more prone or drawn to anger a person is, the more she or he will manifest moralism; and likewise, the more moralist, the more angry. A scientific psychologist (using suitably refined and operationalized notions of anger and moralism) could seek to test this hypothesis. I myself, a *philosophical* psychologist, depend mainly on my personal observations of the human scene (in addition to consulting the scientific literature), including introspecting my own emotional and moralist responses, to convince me of the truth of the correlation. Conceptual risks abound for these empirical tests, of course; for example, if a component of one's concept of moralism is anger, then it is a foregone conclusion that the correlations will be "discovered" "empirically" – just as would the empirical finding (say from a survey that asked these as separate questions) that being a bachelor and being unmarried are highly correlated. This only shows, I think, that subjectivism runs even more deeply than my concession to objective components in ethics suggested.

But suppose there were a moralist who was able to bracket her passions while making her meta-ethical choice (for moralism over desirism). Nevertheless it is rather typical for a moralist to argue that morality itself demands (and not merely recommends, of course) that we embrace morality.[50] For example: "What? You don't think Hitler did anything wrong? You don't think he was an evil man? You just *don't like* the things he did? Why, that is itself an evil attitude, an evil doctrine!"[51] I point this out to ward off any charge of circularity lodged by a moralist against my desirist defense of desirism, since the moralist may be just as circular in her defense of morality. But I also think it is more telling against the moralist, who is apt to deny that morality is just a preference. For to argue that morality is a *requirement* does indeed beg the question of whether there even is such a thing in the universe as that kind of requirement.[52] The desirist defense of desirism, on the other hand, depends only on there being such things as preferences, which there surely are.

However, again, both morality and desirism can invoke (presumed or believed) facts and logic in their defense (and so also be *objective* in this sense). Thus, the moralist is fully entitled to argue that the embrace of desirism would be pernicious for so many things that both the (or, really, that particular) moralist and I hold dear. Naturally I would counter that I believe the embrace of morality has amply proven itself to be even more pernicious. So this is another empirical question. But, even so, I believe,

[50] A forceful expression of this view is Dworkin (1996).

[51] I do not exaggerate. A well-credentialed colleague wrote this to me: "The moral badness of death camps and gratuitous child torture is the most certain thing we have. To think otherwise is to have something wrong with you – to be less than human." I find it telling that this person also appears to have a low regard for other animals. However, the irony is that I share his outrage. But of course I now view my own outrage as "just a feeling" (see the eponymous Chap. 4 for further explication), and one that I (and others feeling similarly) might be better off suppressing. For one thing, I could not help sensing an arrogance and pride in my colleague's response (although again I must acknowledge the further irony that my response to that was itself moralistically tinged and perhaps even saturated).

[52] It also raises the question of exactly what is it that the moralist claims we are morally obligated to be when she claims that we ought to be moral. It would hardly do to parse this as "You ought to do what you ought to do." But once you begin to spell out what it means to be categorically obligated to do something, you enter into endless controversy, not to mention nonsense. Cf. "Saying What You Mean" above.

the issue would remain quite irresolvable; for it would be a vast undertaking and be tied up with intractable conceptual and operational questions (What exactly is meant by or would count as being moralist, etc.?).

In the end, then, we are left with contingencies and preferences to decide whether to embrace desirism or morality. Take the case of the late Ian Hinckfuss, who was a fire-breathing anti-moralist[53] (after my own heart), and Mitchell Silver (my perennial interlocutor), who is just as tenacious a moralist.[54] Both provide arguments aplenty for their respective positions. I, it turns out, am more receptive to those from Hinckfuss. Why? Because of who I am and, presumably, the countless accidents of nature and nurture that made me thus, and also my present circumstances. But, I submit, this is also why Hinckfuss and Silver have the positions *they* do. In other words, if one wants really to understand why Hinckfuss was an amoralist and Silver is a moralist, look not, or not just, at their arguments but especially at their biographies. As Nietzsche aptly asserted: "Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been – namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir. . . . "[55]

Functions of Morality

Amorality is frowned upon by some moralists because it is deemed unable to perform the functions of morality. The idea that morality has a function or functions is itself frowned upon by some moralists, namely, those moralists who conceive morality simply as something to be done or obeyed, no questions asked, or as a set of self-evident truths like 2+2=4. But those moralists who are not satisfied with that but seek an explanation or a justification for obeying the dictates of morality – these are the meta-ethicists, who are inquiring into the very nature of

[53] See Hinckfuss (1987).

[54] See Silver (2011).

[55] In Nietzsche (1966), sec 6. And, interestingly, it was Mitchell Silver who brought this quotation to my attention, and even apparently accepts it.

morality and not simply asking what morality requires of us, the latter being the purview of so-called normative ethicists – assume that morality serves some compelling purpose.

The most obvious purpose that a functional morality could serve, since Darwin anyway, is human survival; for if humanity had not survived, then (human) morality would not be in existence for us to wonder about, not to mention obey. Of course when a Darwinian speaks of purpose, it is not in the literal sense of someone having intended it; for that would only be to bring back God. No one intended anything in nature on the Darwinian scheme; so purpose is being used only in the sense of functionality. For something to have a purpose is for it to perform some function, even if this came about purely by happenstance. Thus, the kind of moral theorist I am considering supposes that by trial and error, where to err is to die off, a certain form of interaction among proto-humans came about which proved to give its possessors greater durability than those who interacted differently, and this we call morality.

It is not necessarily the case, however, that morality *contributed to* our durability or survival; it may simply be compatible with it. So survival might not be the "purpose" of morality after all but only a constraint on it; whatever else morality is or does, it must allow us (and ultimately itself) to survive, for . . . here we are. This means that functionality may not in fact be the explanation of morality, and so neither would be Darwinian selection. But it is old news even for Darwinians than evolution involves other mechanisms in addition to natural selection.[56] And, again, here I am interested in speaking only to the concerns of those moralists who think morality does serve a purpose, and survival does seem a plausible candidate for that purpose.

There remains a logical problem with the functional approach itself – to morality, as well as to other normativities like rationality and prudence – namely, that one cannot derive an *ought* from an *is*. So for example, let's grant that morality serves the purpose of human survival (that's the *is*: a presumed *fact*). Does that mean we are all obligated to be moral (that's the *ought*: a presumed absolute imperative)? Not at all. It only implies that *if we want* our species to continue to exist, then, provided there is no better way

[56] See e.g., Richards (2010).

to achieve this end consistently with the rest of our desires, we ought to be moral. This cannot be taken for granted. As alluded to in Chap. 1, I know some animal rights advocates who would just as soon see humanity eliminated for its cruelty and indifference to other animals. At the other extreme, Hitler valued a certain kind of hardy nobility above mere survival. So both could spurn a morality premised on human survival. But even with this hypothetical parsing of morality, *ought* has not been supported, I maintain, since we can articulate the same idea more straightforwardly and intelligibly by saying instead: If we wanted our species to continue to exist, then, all other things equal, and provided there were no better way to achieve this end consistently with the rest of our desires, we *would* strive to be moral. In other words, I see here a causal claim about human psychology, not a mysterious injunction from On High or even an objective rule of practical reasoning. But I will say no more about that here since my aim in this section is not to *refute* (all the less, defend) the functional approach to *morality* but only to *defend amorality* against the objection that it fails to perform an essential function. Moreover, amorality does not of course need to show how it supports any *ought* or merits an *ought* itself, since it doesn't claim to.

The supreme purpose of survival could ground various subsidiary purposes, such as making sure that human groups flourished, since no individual human being would have lasted very long in our typical surrounds without a supportive group. That last, then, may be the proximate purpose of morality. Survival would similarly ground other practices, such as *rationality*, whose proximate purpose is preserving and enlarging our store of knowledge, since the rules of logic perform precisely that function, and, presumably, knowledge has enhanced our survival prospects. *Prudence* or individual preservation is a third essential practice for survival of the carriers of morality (and of rationality and prudence).[57] And presumably there is also a best mix of these three (both in the individual and as types in

[57] This general scheme of functionalities for multiple normative realms comes from Copp (2015). Wong (2006) also offers a functional analysis of morality. Meanwhile Haidt (2001) suggests multiple functions for morality itself.

a population), since they can certainly come in conflict with one another, which the rough and tumble of life itself sorts out.[58]

The functionality of morality not only motivates but also constrains. For the survival of society and hence of us requires not only that we perform certain acts but also that we refrain from performing other acts. Thus, our conscience prompts us to help someone in distress, but it also discourages us from taking revenge over every slight. This is why moralists paint a picture of amorality as both sapping the populace of its community spirit and licensing selfish and disruptive behavior. But if this were true, then eliminating morality would threaten our very survival, not to mention our thriving, would it not? And this seems to be a truly modern crisis; for was it not the advent of Darwinism that brought this understanding into our consciousness? If we understand that even our most heartfelt moral convictions and compulsions rest on a basis of mere functionality, do they not lose their survival value? It is precisely the no-questions-asked demand for obedience that has enabled moral rules to motivate us to do the extraordinary things that have been required for our survival in a difficult and even hostile environment, and inhibited us from doing the selfish and wanton things that would make our environment even more difficult and hostile. For example, if it were not an absolute command, either by God or his regent on Earth (a king) or just by the universe itself (karma yoga), to selflessly serve the community, who would do it? And yet if nobody did it, the community would die, and hence also all of the individuals it sustained.

Thus the condemnation of amorality. What can the amoralist say in response? I offer two main replies. One is that something which has been essential for survival heretofore may no longer be and may even be counterproductive. I think the case can be made that morality has outlived whatever utility it may have had in the past. Consider, for example, the moralist commandment to be fruitful and multiply (and

[58] Some theorists want to prioritize one or the other of these three. So for example, a rationalist like Immanuel Kant could see rationality as grounding morality and morality in turn grounding prudence; thus, the moral thing to do is precisely whatever rationality dictates, and the purpose of prudence is to make us suited to carry out our moral, i.e., rational, duties.

hence we should not use contraceptives or have abortions or masturbate or practice homosexual behavior or allow women in the workplace outside of the home, etc.). It could be that the resultant numerical thriving of humanity is now threatening to be our downfall due to the depletion of resources it has engendered. This would still be a perfectly Darwinian outcome; it's just that the fittest to survive in the new, overpopulated environment might no longer be human beings but some other species, say, rodents. Or many humans might still survive, but no longer in a condition of civilization, whose refinements might no longer have survival value or even be tolerated by the new rigors.

Of course this unwelcome prospect might seem only to counsel a changed morality and not its elimination. If the goal were still the survival of humanity, and a thriving one at that (but now thriving in the sense of well-being rather than mere numbers), then wouldn't we be throwing the baby out with the bath water to eliminate morality? Instead what would be wanted is to engineer *different* functionalities into the overall scheme of survival, which would preserve group cohesion in the new circumstances. So for example, we could replace the commandment to be fruitful and multiply with a commandment to live in harmony with the Earth, and hence to be tolerant of contraception and abortion and masturbation and women in the workplace and homosexual activity, etc.

My reply is that such a regime would be welcome indeed, but just not under the rubric and with the apparatuses of morality. What difference would that make? It is precisely the *moral* framing of these functionalities that *stands in the way of* changing them and adapting as circumstances and hence survival (and prospering) requirements change (or for that matter being tolerant of the requirements for surviving and thriving in different *concurrent* circumstances, such as, say, living in a desert versus living in a temperate zone, or living in a society with history H1 versus living in a society with history H2, etc.). Morality commands. Morality asserts truths. Morality invokes categoricals or absolutes. Such notions are very hard to adjust or dislodge when circumstances and pluralism would make doing so beneficial. Yet a fundamental fact of the world, as Heraclitus noted millennia ago, is that "All is flux." Both change and diversity appear more salient than

ever in our technology-driven and ever-shrinking global village. A system that holds fast against this at all costs is surely not adaptive.[59]

On the other hand, just going with this flow without anything to hold onto at all would also seem to court disaster. That is why I seek a Middle Way: an ethics that does not *command*, etc., but does not just throw up its hands either and instead *recommends*. This is desirism. But in practice it would be mostly similar to morality. And this leads to my second response to the moralist's brief against amorality, which is that an amoral ethics such as I describe in this volume has plenty of human resources to call upon to substitute for the discredited morality. For example, I am all for instilling various motivations and inhibitions in our children that conduce to human survival and thriving (where of course thriving is as I conceive it by my lights or preferences, but not so different from most people's, I would surmise and hope), and these might very well match for the most part those which the prevailing morality of my society also inculcates. The difference is that I would want to be sure to back up this developmental program with explanations for it to the young people that are both true and appropriate to each developmental level of the maturing human being.

Thus, there would be no talk of gods or of the even more mysterious free-floating[60] *oughts* and *shoulds*. But there would still be rewards and punishments and, most importantly, modeling of the desired behaviors and attitudes by the adults. And there would still be stories (would could certainly draw on religious traditions) and "hands-on" experiences to cultivate our natural feelings of compassion and respect and so forth in the youngest. We would also provide more and more opportunities for learning and reasoning and critical thinking about human behavior and the world and the universe as the person grew older. I dare say that the products of such an upbringing would stand at least as good a chance of turning out to be sterling human beings by anyone's estimation as the

[59] Although the ever-increasing fundamentalism and polarization of contemporary times could well be a response to it. Cf. Armstrong (1993).

[60] As opposed to hypothetical *oughts* and *woulds*, such as: *If* you want to avoid going to jail, then you ought not to rob banks. (Although I would just as soon that we refrain from the use of these as well; see Marks [Forthcoming].)

products of a moralist or a religious regime. I think they would turn out better on average, and make the world a better place. But in any case they would have the intrinsic advantage (by my standards) of living in reality rather than a fantasy world.

A final thought. I have acknowledged that morality has a function that has probably been helpful to survival (of individual human beings, of human societies, of Homo sapiens, and of itself), namely, to promote group cohesion. I have also [following Copp (2015)] allowed that other human practices do similarly. In particular, rationality has promoted our survival by its function of preserving and expanding knowledge. Why, then, am I content to keep rationality but intent on eliminating morality? My answer is that rationality makes no pretense to be doing anything other than preserve and expand knowledge (and thereby promote survival and other projects near and dear), and its rules are universally acceptable to us. Morality, by contrast, has little if any universally agreed-on content; but even if it did or does, it disguises what it is about, namely group cohesion for the purpose of survival, in order to enhance its efficacy or functionality, and thereby introduces unnecessary woes into the world.

My objection to morality, therefore, is not its function but only its manner of performing it. Morality pretends to offer categorical truths and to have a divine or other cosmic source and authority and justification for them so as to boost our motivation to carry out what is necessary for group cohesion and survival. Certainly I (and all of us) want there to be a mechanism in place for preserving group cohesion as essential for our survival and thriving. My argument has been that desirism can perform this same function but in a completely honest and more benign way, simply by being open about what exactly it is about, namely, preserving group cohesion (and whatever other values or desires we have after due reflection, etc.[61]). "Do this because, as best we can tell,

[61] Note that a functional morality will also trip up when it comes to things like animal ethics. If the plausible function of group cohesion is defining of morality's purpose, then concern about other animals could only be at best an instrumental value. But it was my clear intuition (when I was a moralist) that other animals were deserving of moral regard on their own account. And desirism has no problem here since, even though the desires in question will always be humans', the liberty and welfare of other animals are surely capable of being our desires' intrinsic objects.

it promotes survival and/or these others values you and I subjectively share." This is better because morality's myths, however useful and even essential they may have been heretofore, now pose one of the greatest *threats* to our continued survival. It may be true, then, that desirism will sacrifice some of the motivating power of morality. But in my opinion that is an advantage, not a disadvantage, in a world such as ours has become. Think of it as like opting for solar and wind power over nuclear power plants. What we need in this ever-faster-changing world is an ethics that is more flexible and less rigid (and hence less dangerous) than morality (not to mention just plain true). That is what I consider desirism to be.

3

Desire and Reason

Types of Desire

What is the desire in desirism? The notion of desire is a vexed one . . . probably because it is not one, but at least two. This is not an unusual situation. How many words in the dictionary have but a single definition? But our interest now is in desire, so if "desire" has more than one meaning, which meaning is intended by the name of "desirism"? In his excellent book, Griffiths (1997) finds this same situation to exist for the everyday concept of emotion. He concludes that we might be better off scrapping the notion and substituting (at least) two others that are more precise. But he also acknowledges that the everyday concept, confused as it is, may serve useful purposes other than his own concern, which is to develop a scientific psychology of the mind. What I prefer to do with desire is split the difference by speaking of two types of desire, but still retaining the same word "desire" for both so that I can formulate an ethics that is keyed into our everyday concepts and vocabulary.

Is it just a coincidence that "desire" has the two meanings I shall discuss? After all, if someone were defending a theory of bankism, it

J. Marks, *Hard Atheism and the Ethics of Desire*,
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would seem very odd if the theory turned out to pertain both to places where you could deposit your money and to places along the sides of rivers. So I suspect that if indeed desirism pertains to two different meanings of "desire," then those two meanings must themselves have some kind of real affinity. The analogy would be not "bank" but, say, "argument,"[1] which means either a reason for believing something or a quarrel – quite distinct phenomena, and yet obviously related by a real correlation between the two activities in human affairs ("Abortion is wrong because it's murder, you monster!" "It's no more murder than having your appendix out, you idiot!"). The definitions and illustrations I give immediately below are intended to show just this for desire.

So what are the two meanings or kinds of desire I have in mind? Let desire$_1$ be the more basic sort. It is a psychological state that intends or wishes for or is otherwise positively disposed to something as a direct object or aim; for example, you desire to go for a walk. Now you might desire to go for a walk for some further reason, with some further aim in view, such as losing weight. But by calling desire$_1$ "direct" I mean that you have no further aim. You desire to go for a walk "for its own sake." Sometimes this is called an intrinsic desire. Something that you intrinsically desire or desire for its own sake is also something that you might like or love or enjoy or something that you might value. I know that I go for lots of walks just because I love to do so, and I would also say that walking is something I value highly – again, for its own sake, intrinsically.

Saying that I do it for its own sake does not mean that I could not give you reasons why I do it; but those reasons, insofar as they are reasons for why I do it for its own sake (since I might *also* have instrumental reasons for doing it), would not be *other* things that I want or love or love to do. They might *seem* to be so – for example, I might say "Well, I love to see the sights and to stretch my legs and I love walking especially when the sun is shining because I love the light." But, I submit, what is going on here is that I am, in effect,

[1] Thank you, Mitchell Silver.

defining what I mean by "going for a walk" – it is all of these things together that constitute the thing that I love, which I call "going for a walk." Whereas if I said I wanted to go for a walk because I needed to lose weight, I clearly would not be defining what it means to go for a walk.

Desire$_2$, then, is precisely the psychological state of intending or wishing for something as an indirect aim, that is, because one intends or wishes for something else, perhaps ultimately something else that one desires$_1$.[2] Thus again, if you desired to go for a walk in order to lose weight, then the desire would be of kind desire$_2$; it would exist because you desired to lose weight, again either because you desired$_1$ to lose weight for its own sake or desired$_2$ to lose weight for some further purpose, such as impressing your girlfriend, and so on. This second kind of desire is often called extrinsic or instrumental desire.

So the reason for calling both sorts of desire by the same name (why that same name is "desire" I will leave to the etymologists) is that both have to do with intending or wishing for something. Of course I have not given a complete analysis; what after all are intending and wishing (and in these particular senses)?[3] But for present purposes, this will suffice.

I have one more thing to say, however, about the similarity between the two types of desire: Both can be for either an action or a state of affairs. Thus, you could desire to go for a walk, an action, or you could desire that the sun shine, which is a state of affairs (and not something you could *do*), and either one could be for its own sake or for some further reason or purpose. So, analogous to desiring to go for a walk (an action) as explicated above, you might desire$_2$ that the sun shine (a state of affairs) so that you can go for a walk, or you could desire$_1$ that the sun shine simply because you love the heat and light of the rays.

[2] I first proposed and defended the thesis that *all* desires have a desire$_1$ component in Marks (1986). Subsequently William Lycan, Richard Garner, and Mitchell Silver challenged me on this (personal communications), and I no longer rely on this thesis. More on this in the sequel.

[3] A first-rate example of how to go about examining desire to its essence is Schroeder (2004), although it concerns mainly desire$_1$.

When a desire is for an action, it is equivalent to motivation. If you desire to go for a walk, then you are motivated to go for a walk, whether for its own sake or for some further purpose. This further implies that you *will* go for a wall, all other things equal – that is, without intervention by an extraneous event, such as an asteroid impact, or by a conflicting desire of equal or greater strength, such as a desire to take a nap. Desiring "to lose weight" might seem to be a counterexample to the equivalence of action desires and motivation, in that losing weight is not an action but only the possible result of an action, and yet you could be motivated to lose weight. But I think that here, "to lose weight" needs to be parsed as "*to do something* to lose weight"; *that* is what you are motivated to do, perhaps because you desire to weigh less (a state of affairs). You can no more be *motivated* to weigh less than you can be *motivated* that it be a sunny day, however strongly you may *desire* either.

And now at last I can explain why I call my ethics "desirism" even though "desire" has these multiple meanings. Desirism advises that you figure out what you want (i.e., desire), all things considered, and then figure out how to get it, consonant with your considered desires. The wants or desires in this formulation can be of any and all of the types discussed above. So for example, you might realize ("figure out"), after reflection on your own experience, that you desire_1 to live in a place that has plenty of light and warmth (a state of affairs) and then, after researching locales, that the way to bring that about ("get it"), consonant with your other desires, intrinsic and extrinsic (such as desiring_2 to avoid hurricanes and tornadoes because you desire_1 not to be living in constant anxiety), would be to move to Arizona. This further implies that you have figured out that you desire_2 to move to Arizona (an action), or, more precisely, have actually come to have that as a new desire_2 (and therefore *will*, other things equal, move to Arizona). In sum, following the recommendation of desirism, you have figured out that you intrinsically desire a certain state of affairs, namely, to live in a warm and sunny place, and as a result now have the extrinsic desire or motivation to do something, namely, move to Arizona.

A final objection to desirism needs to be considered: Is desire really implicated in all motivation and action and valuing? What

about doing something (helping the little old man across the street) simply because you *believe* it is the right thing to do and that you ought to do it, or loving something (say, honesty) just because you *believe* it is a good thing, etc.? On my scheme, there would also need to be a desire involved, such as desiring to do whatever is the right thing or desiring whatever is a good thing. But why?[4] Why isn't belief sufficient to motivate or to make us value something? My answer is simply that believing that something is good or the right thing to do has no power to motivate or otherwise move us if we just don't give a damn. That, indeed, is a main part of my brief against objective obligations and values. These high-sounding features that we invoke or attribute to various things have no power in themselves to move us unless we are susceptible to them, which is just what I mean by having a desire.

I do concede, therefore, that all or most or many of us do desire to do (what we believe to be) the right thing and to value things that (we believe) are good. That is why believing that something is the right thing to do can be motivating, and why believing that something is good can win our admiration for it. We are inherently moral creatures in this sense. Still, the moralist (and, more basically, the psychologist) will not be satisfied with this response. Have I done anything more than *claim* or *stipulate* that a desire must be involved in (moral) motivation? What really is my argument or evidence? Why not simply suppose that sometimes a belief that, say, doing x would be wrong, is held with insufficient strength to affect us, perhaps due to the overwhelming strength of a desire to x? In other words, a particular belief, like a particular desire, will result in the corresponding action only "other thing equal."

My reply is that I need not win this battle in order to win the war. Let me grant that moral beliefs are inherently motivating. I would then make the empirical claim that, given the belief that doing x would be wrong (but without a *desire not* to do x) and the desire to x, the latter will typically prevail. In other words, moral beliefs may

[4] This is the challenge from Lycan previously alluded to.

have the capacity to motivate, but in the affairs of real life they tend to be less powerful motivators than desires.[5] Thus, if you "know" you shouldn't eat meat because you don't need to and it contributes to animal cruelty, but you have no physical or other nonmoral aversion$_1$ (say, disgust at bodily organs and fluids) or aversion$_2$ (since, say, you have no compassion for animals) to eating meat and in fact love to eat meat . . . chances are you will remain a carnivore. I would also claim that the reason it may appear otherwise is that our moral beliefs are so often tailored to conform to our desires ("There's nothing wrong with eating meat. In fact it's the right thing to do, since otherwise we wouldn't even have fertilizer for plants! And besides, I love the taste of meat"[6]). But then it would be the nonmoral desire that is doing the motivational heavy lifting, I submit, making the moral belief look powerful. And also, keep in mind, the agent may indeed have a strong desire *to do the right thing* (we being moral creatures). But once again all the motivational "credit" might go to the belief.

Meanwhile, another main part of my brief against morality and objective values has been that such notions as "the right thing" and "a good thing" are bogus insofar as they connote something objective, which they are apt to do in our brains as they are constituted. And the final part of my argument has been that the clothing of our desires in this fictitious mantle of objectivity, while more alluring, is more detrimental to the world I (and I think you) hope for than would be the bare desires. Therefore, just as our brain's susceptibility to certain powerful drugs advises abstinence from the use of those drugs because of their likely damaging effects, so our brain's susceptibility to certain powerful objectifications advises abstinence from indulging in those objectifications because of their likely damaging effects. Therefore desirism recommends acting on the basis of desires that have been rationally vetted, which, I believe *or at least hope*, will translate into fewer instances of people being moved by any beliefs in objective values.

[5] Cf. Pölzler's (2015) very interesting article on this subject.

[6] See for example Hayward (n.d.).

Intrinsic Desire and Morality: Entomological Revelations

Darwinism is all the rage among contemporary ethicists, and with good reason. Since no informed thinker can deny the centrality of natural selection to our development as the human beings we are, our values, like any of our other traits, must conform to the constraint of survival. In other words, however much we are by nature wedded to notions like justice and beauty and reason and curiosity and charity, the root cause must have to do with their furtherance of, or at least compatibility with, our survival under the conditions of our evolution on this planet. Yet on the face of it, our values often appear indifferent to and even in conflict with our survival. How could this be? What, after all, has rapture by a sunset, or the fervor to understand what happened before the Big Bang, or abhorrence at cruelty to other animals, etc. ad inf., to do with our individual or even collective advantage in the struggle for existence?

Much ingenious thought has gone into addressing this question, particularly as regards altruism. For example, imagine A, who has some "altruism genes," competing in the game of survival with E, who is a thoroughgoing egoist with only "egoism genes." E would appear to have the advantage, since he will do whatever it takes to survive, whereas A would, on some occasions, sacrifice herself for others; so that we might expect E to survive and A to perish, and hence the trait of altruism itself to disappear from the population. But consider that if A's altruism were directed toward her offspring, then A's very self-sacrifice could assure the survival of her genetic trait of altruism in the next generation, and so on in the same manner into the indefinitely far future; whereas E's uninhibited selfishness might inhibit the survival of his offspring, thereby bringing about the demise of that trait in short order. Thus, what at first might appear to be a paradox turns out to follow from the simple logic of natural selection.[7]

[7] The mechanism or mechanisms that assure the persistence of altruism in the human population are complex and even controversial; indeed, the very nature of altruism is contested. For

Noticing a spider by my kitchen sink the other day led me to consider the question of "paradoxical traits" more broadly. The tiny creature huddled in the dark, presumably patiently awaiting his or her prey. The thought struck me: "This spider is *not* thinking, 'I had best huddle in the dark, the better to obtain food'." Then followed a long train of other thoughts (in me, not the spider). First was that many people would infer from this initial observation that the spider – and by extension all other nonhuman animals – is a mere mechanism; that is, that instead of reasoning to a conclusion about how to behave, the spider merely acts by instinct.

But I came to a different conclusion about the spider's mental life, indeed, the opposite conclusion. To me it seemed obvious that the spider, while certainly not reasoning to a conclusion, nevertheless was acting on the basis of a rich mental life, and in fact one similar to ours. For I suddenly appreciated that the spider was probably responding to the darkness with what, in the human case, we would call a preference or a desire. That spider likes the darkness. What that spider feels is the welcoming pleasure of basking in shade, perhaps in much the way you and I would take pleasure in finding shelter on a sweltering sunny day in the tropics. There is nothing fundamentally alien about the spider's experience. There is no impassable gap between us, no deep mystery about "what it is like" to be a different sort of creature from ourselves.[8] Nor, therefore, is there any need to "anthropomorphize" in order to empathize with him or her (if it is sexed); we need only zoomorphize, so to speak, since surely all animals – now using "animals" to include humans – share one or another of many mental traits and not only physical traits.

Thus, neither do *we* "reason to a conclusion" when seeking shade in the normal run of cases. Yes, we might do so in special circumstances, or when needing to be reminded of the obvious because we have been distracted, etc. But for the most part, if we find the sun too hot, or if we wish to hide from a pursuer, or from the pursued, and so on, we will seek the darkness

a state-of-the-art treatment of the issues, see Wilson (2015). My example is only for illustrative purposes, to show the theoretical possibility of accounting for altruism in the seemingly selfish world of natural selection.

[8] As Nagel (1974) famously held there *was*.

as a matter of course. Say "instinctively," if you like, thereby bringing us "down" to the "level" of other animals; or say instead, and as I prefer to do, that all animals, human or otherwise, usually act on the basis of desire.

But there is much more to say about this, even in my "desire" terms. Of particular note is that the desires that characterize us as animals are *intrinsic* ones (what I called "desire$_1$" in the previous section). An intrinsic desire is a desire to do something "for its own sake." This is to be distinguished, in the first instance, from an extrinsic or instrumental desire (desire$_2$), which is a desire to do something for some further reason or "ulterior motive." So, as illustrated in the previous section, if you wanted to go for a walk in order to lose weight, and only for that reason, since otherwise you are averse to any kind of exercise (which is how you became overweight), then your desire to go for a walk would be merely instrumental. But if you desired to go for a walk simply for the pleasure of stretching your legs and seeing the sights on a beautiful day, then your desire to go for a walk would be intrinsic. (Of course a desire could also be both.)

So that little spider, as I see him, has an intrinsic desire to huddle in darkness . . . just as you and I have an intrinsic desire to huddle by a fire on a cold day. Now there are several things to note about this. First is that these desires could be construed as serving instrumental purposes. Thus, the spider is huddling in order not to starve, and you and I are huddling in order not to freeze. As suggested at the outset, the common denominator here is survival. So intrinsic desire would seem to have a function that makes sense in evolutionary terms.[9] Nevertheless, my main point is that these desires are intrinsic for all that, at least in the normal run of cases, since it is usually not necessary to, and could be positively maladaptive to have to, make an explicit inference from end to means in order to have these desires in the relevant circumstances. Our experience, therefore, is *not*, "I am cold; *therefore* I should huddle by this fire," but is rather, "Oh, there's a fire. Umm, warmth feels good." So in this respect,

[9] I am using "evolution" here as synonymous with natural selection, but natural selection is only one actual, not to mention possible, mechanism of *evolution* in the broad sense of undergoing change. The equivocation seems warranted by natural selection's prevalence in our current understanding of the evolution of animals. But see Fodor and Piattelli-Palmarini (2010) for a (contested) corrective.

to this degree, we are no different from the spider, who does not reason that s/he needs to huddle in the darkness, but only feels drawn to the darkness and satisfied to be in it.

What has this to do with (so-called) paradoxical traits? It seems to me that many if not all of our intrinsic desires veer away from our evolutionary concerns, and in so doing carve out the special domain of the ethical. I have already suggested that there is no genuine paradox here, since explanatory hypotheses are available to bridge the gap between evolution's demands and the sometimes seemingly opposed desires we have. Nature moves us by indirection; nature speaks to us through feelings. Feelings are our common denominator as animals, which we tendentiously call "instincts" in other animals and "reasons" in ourselves. But in fact both the spider and we are moved by the desire to get out of the heat or light and into the shade by nature's mechanism for protecting us from predators or our skin from radiation or for feeding us, etc.[10]

What I want now to emphasize beyond this is the *centrality* of intrinsic desire to ethics. This is a matter of interest and importance, I shall argue, because ethics is usually conceived to be about a different phenomenon that is easily confused with intrinsic desire. This other phenomenon is *inherent value*. Inherent value is most directly confused with what we could call *intrinsic value*, after the intrinsic *desire* that gives rise to it. Thus, if you desired to go for a walk for its own sake, then your *desire* would be intrinsic and so therefore would be the *value* you attributed to what you desired – walking would have intrinsic value for you. Now suppose you were a real walking enthusiast, who wanted to spread the gospel of walking to all and sundry. Then a subtle shift might occur in your conception of walking's value, from something you valued subjectively to something that possessed *objective* value. That latter is what I am calling inherent value.

[10] It then becomes possible for "intelligent" creatures like ourselves to exploit these feelings for contra-survival purposes. Witness blocking reproduction with contraceptives while having sex solely for pleasure, courting heart disease by gorging on salty snacks, and growing obese from eating too many highly sweetened desserts (although any or all of these could also promote our *species'* survival prospects in an overpopulated world).

My main contention is that this mental move from subjective to objective is a mistake, and one with enormous, and largely baneful consequences. I don't mean just about walking, of course, but in ethics generally.[11] I take ethics to be reflection on how to live[12] (with more particular foci on actions, motives, traits, lifestyles, character, and so forth). But ethics, as I noted in the Introduction, is often more narrowly defined as the study of *morality*. And there's the rub. For morality, at least on a common understanding, is a domain of inherent values. It is in morality that we hear about things that we "must" or "should" or "ought to" do (etc.) *tout court* or *unconditionally* or *categorically*, which is to say, *not* because we happen to desire to do them, since desire is a merely psychological or subjective phenomenon, but because they have objective value, or, in a teleological ethics, because they bring about something that has objective value. The term "inherent" is applicable in that it conveys the idea that the value *sticks to* the activity (or object or state of affairs) in question, whether it be walking or truth telling or whatever. We also say that inherent value is "absolute," whereas intrinsic value is only "relative" (to one's desires); so an action with inherent value is required of us, regardless of our desiring to do it or not to do it. An action with inherent value is our *duty* or *obligation* to perform; similarly, an action with negative inherent value is prohibited to us, even if we have a strong desire to carry it out (Thou shalt not commit adultery).

Inherent value, according to its proponents, can "stick to" many different types of things. Correspondingly, there are also many species of inherent value. Thus, not only can actions like walking or truth telling be objectively required or right to do[13] (and actions like lying and killing

[11] And most generally, in axiology, the domain or study of value as such. Thus, axiology encompasses not only ethics but also, for example, aesthetics, which is another value domain where subjectivity is commonly mistaken for objectivity ("I love Beethoven's 5th Symphony" becomes "Beethoven's 5th Symphony is magnificent").

[12] And also the fruit of that reflection.

[13] The value of walking "for its own sake" is perhaps more naturally styled as "good" rather than "right" since we experience it more as an enjoyment than as a duty. Walking could, however, be styled as a duty or as objectively required in the instrumental sense, when its value is derived from some further good, such as health.

objectively forbidden or wrong), but also various character traits can be objectively good (or bad), which we call virtues (or vices), and various states of affairs can be objectively good (or bad), such as that peace prevails, and persons can be objectively good (or evil), and various scenes or human artifacts can be objectively beautiful (or ugly), and various verbal or behavioral routines can be objectively funny (or unamusing or offensive), and various physical conditions and exudations etc. can be objectively disgusting (or attractive), and so on. By contrast, an *intrinsic* value is an illusion *insofar as it seems to inhere in* an object, for it is really only a "projection" of subjective value into the object . . . analogous to the way we "project" a color sensation that arises in our brain into some object, like a red apple.[14]

A red apple *is* objectively red *in the sense that* it reflects light from its surface in such a way that, under specific conditions, various nerves in our retinas and optic nerves and cerebral cortices fire in such a way that we experience the sensation of red. But that sensation is in our brain, not on the apple's skin, and hence is only subjective.[15] Someone else might experience the redness of the apple differently. Indeed, I have noticed that I myself experience its redness differently under different lighting conditions, and even with my two eyes severally. Just so, on the inherentist's account, someone may, say, intrinsically disvalue Beethoven's music, and this disvaluing would be a real phenomenon in his or her brain induced by sound waves from a performance or a recording that excite various nerves; but to project that disvaluing into the music itself and thereby attribute *inherent* negative value to it would be a mistake, since Beethoven's music is objectively of the highest quality. It has objective value because the value is in the object of our regard (in this

[14] The situation could also be characterized as an *interaction* between an organism of a certain type, in a certain state or under certain conditions, and an object (or surface) of a certain type, in a certain state or under certain conditions. But I still think it would make sense to characterize the value as a projection, which *results from* the interaction.

[15] "Subjective" in the sense of belonging to the *subject* of the experience, that is, the one who is experiencing the red color sensation – the experiencer. It is of course an objective fact of the world that the sensation exists (although its nature is problematic).

case, Beethoven's music), not merely in our subjective experience of that object (our enjoyment or displeasure at listening to Beethoven's music).

I accept the above as an analysis of the contrasting concepts of intrinsic and inherent value. However, I believe that only intrinsic value exists in reality.[16] This is certainly a ground-shaking[17] thought,[18] and I cannot claim to be fully reconciled to it. Yet it does very definitely seem now to me to be true. As much as I myself love Beethoven's music and, when in its grip, am filled with the sense that the music itself contains objective worth to the highest degree, I must, in a cooler moment, utterly reject that valuation. This has definite practical consequences. For while I would still take pains to attend a nearby concert of Beethoven's music, since I love to listen to a good performance of it, I would no longer lift my nose in contempt for the person who vastly prefers listening to Mantovani. *De gustibus non est disputandum*.

Of course that motto is a harder sell when it comes to morality.[19] It is one thing to suppress one's disdain for lowbrows, quite another to suppress one's outrage at atrocities. Or so it seems. Alas, I have become

[16] Note that I am *not* (necessarily) rejecting all inherent *qualities*, but only all inherent *values*. The former is a metaphysical notion, not an axiological one. Thus, for example, human beings may be inherently belligerent (under certain circumstances); I only reject that belligerence is inherently *bad* or *good*, or *right* or *wrong*. Of course many of us *intrinsically dislike* belligerence, but that is a different matter (this being my main point) – and it would still be a different matter even if we *universally*, i.e., all human beings, disliked it (you could then even say: even if human beings were *inherently averse* to belligerence). For that would still be a fact about our nature and not a fact about the nature of belligerence.

[17] And grounds-shaking, to coin a term, in that it removes certain considerations as legitimate grounds for drawing rational conclusions about how to live.

[18] It is comparable to losing one's belief in God. Indeed, objectivity is the secular version of God, since for most nonbelievers (in God) it is the metaphysical source of value in the world.

[19] In fact it is potentially a hard sell in any value realm. Consider: "How can you eat gefilte fish? It's disgusting!" For someone who feels that way, it is almost impossible to conceive that the disgustingness of gefilte fish is entirely relative to the individual. Indeed, this phenomenon can arise outside the realm of values and in the realm of facts. Consider: "How can you go around wearing shorts? It's cold!" The person who says this simply cannot fathom how her experience of feeling cold could be only a subjective fact about herself rather than an objective fact about the temperature. Of course we could *define* "cold" to mean, say, 50 degrees Fahrenheit or lower; but this would only shift the speaker's pseudo-objectivity to the question of whether one is rationally or prudentially permitted to dress lightly when it's cold.

more sensitive to the similarities than the differences. When I experience rage at the person who cuts me off on the highway, or despisal at the Volkswagen company for deliberately deceiving the public and the government about the emissions from its diesel vehicles, or contempt for people who continue to eat animals despite their growing awareness of complicity in needless cruelty and slaughter, I am now keenly aware of the anger that fuels these feelings[20] – anger that has its own source of being apart from what is eliciting it (maybe my general frustration with life's recalcitrance to my deepest desires), and that will often make the situation even worse. I therefore consciously strive to dissolve the feelings by directing my thoughts toward countervailing ideas and desires; specifically, I remind myself that right and wrong are myths, that the people with whom I am angry could not have done otherwise than they did, and that "everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle" (Ian Maclaren if not Philo).[21]

By the same token, I feel less need to suppress the tendency to objectify colors, and the beauty of Beethoven's music, and other non-moral phenomena, since the effects of *these* projections are less baneful and may even be net beneficial.

What this still leaves me with are intrinsic wishes and desires: that drivers use caution, that companies behave honestly, that human

[20] The objectifying impulse is so strong that one can experience not only disapproval of someone else's action, etc., but even incredulity. "I simply cannot believe that they would cut somebody's head off." "I simply cannot believe that they would skin an animal alive." This is the power of desire. It is the same force at work when a highly aroused male simply cannot believe that the person he desires is not also turned on. The result may be rape. Objectification is dangerous. It is like a weapon, which can be employed for benign purposes but has a great potential for havoc and must always be handled with care; and in most situations it may be best for citizens simply to be unarmed.

[21] Compare this comment by the Dalai Lama:

> Every night in my Buddhist practice I give and take. I take in Chinese suspicion. I give back trust and compassion. I take their negative feeling and give them positive feeling. I do that every day. This practice helps tremendously in keeping the emotional level stable and steady. (Reported by *Newsweek*'s Melinda Liu and Sudip Mazumdar, March 20, 2008)

animals refrain from eating all animals.[22] I deeply care about and desire all of these things, which motivate me to various actions. But sans the phony patina of morality that layers objective disvalue atop reckless driving and drivers, dishonest companies, and carnivorous habits and persons, my actions can be focused on effectiveness, rationality, universal charity and goodwill, and other ends and values that I intrinsically like, rather than on venting, retaliating, preaching, punishing, and so forth, which I dislike both intrinsically and instrumentally (i.e., because they are things I dislike in themselves and also lead to other things I dislike in themselves or are simply less effective in bringing about what I do like).[23] This, then, is why I deem intrinsic desire and intrinsic value to be the very soul of ethics (and of valuing things generally), and reject the standard interpretation of ethics (and axiology) that places value "*in*" things (including actions, motives, character traits, sentient beings, artifacts, etc.). Value is therefore (and in this sense) subjective, not objective.[24] And this has various interesting and important ramifications.[25] As I noted at the outset, one is that we are much more firmly situated in the animal realm than we are used to suppose, for all animal species, including our own, appear to be guided by intrinsic desire above all.

But are not human beings superior in that we can override desires by force of reason? So sometimes we act for the same kind of reasons, or really feelings, as the spider does, but are we not also capable of a kind of action, based on *reasoning*, that is absolutely unavailable to the spider?

[22] I also desire these things instrumentally, since I also like the consequences I believe they have; for example, cautious driving results in fewer accidents, injuries, fatalities, etc.

[23] The second part of Marks (2013e) contains many extended examples of what I find advantageous about the *amoral* life. See also the final section of the present book.

[24] More precisely: Value is inherently subjective, but it does contain objective (or harmlessly objectified) components as well, specifically the unevaluative qualities of the things we value (the honesty we find so virtuous, the arrangement of lines we find so beautiful, etc.) and the psychological attitudes that give rise to our valuations (the desire that everyone be honest, the pleasure at viewing a drawing, etc.).

[25] Of course I mean "interesting and important" *to me*, this being in keeping with my subjectivism. However, I sense (or at least hope) they would be found interesting and important by many others as well, which is why I bother to write about them.

Many have drawn this implication from the behavior of another insect, the *Sphex* wasp. Scientists performed a simple and clever experiment to debunk this creature's cognitive aspirations.[26] The wasp's typical way of feeding her young is to bring back a cricket for them to eat in the burrow where they are incubating. Just prior to dragging the carcass into the burrow, however, the wasp enters to make an inspection, apparently with intelligent intent to make sure everything is OK. What the scientists did was pull the cricket a few inches away from the burrow entrance while the wasp was inside. When the wasp emerged, what did mama do? She dragged the carcass back to the entrance *and then did another inspection*. The scientists pulled the cricket away again. The wasp emerged again, dragged the carcass back again, and did another inspection. This was repeated forty times before the scientists felt they had made their point: The *Sphex* wasp is not an intelligent being but only a programmed robot, not a conscious being but only a mechanism.

But I find both that conclusion and its supposed implication to be highly questionable. The conclusion is questionable because it makes the same leap of interpretation I criticized in the case of my spider: There is no need to deny consciousness to a being just because it does not employ reasoning to decide how to behave. My spider probably acts on the basis of feeling, just as we usually do, and so too, I would imagine, the *Sphex* wasp. The scientists merely debunked their own unwarranted attribution of reasoning to the wasp; there was no reason or need in the first place to assume that the wasp must *figure out* whether to inspect the burrow before bringing food to her young, any more than there is reason or need for a human parent to *infer* that she or he should check on the baby every few minutes. In the normal run of cases one simply *feels* the urge to do so and acts accordingly.

[26] Although I will be disagreeing with an interpretation of the wasp's behavior, the claim about how exactly the wasp does behave can also be questioned. Furthermore, my account of the experiment and its conclusions comes from secondary sources and my own speculations. A folklore has developed around it (actually a number of experiments were conducted over a century), and it is that rather than any actual experiment (or experimenters) which is the target of my critique. See Keijzer (2013) for more details of the history of the experiment and how it has been appropriated.

But, saith the scientists, that is "the normal run of cases"; the point at issue is whether human beings have the unique capacity to override feeling by means of reasoning. To this I reply that the scientists have quite unwarrantedly assumed that reasoning really does make a difference with human beings. I have two reasons for doubting this, if not absolutely, at least in the main. One is that human behavior is often (and I believe typically) just as absurdly repetitive as the wasp's in the experiment.[27] The other is that this can take place in the presence of abundant reasoning.[28]

I need only cite an example from my own life to make these points, since I am sure that my reader can readily identify with the phenomenon or recognize it in others. I have had an intermittent relationship with the same woman for the last ten years.[29] We have often considered getting married. But the "intermittence" is due to frequent fallings-out over seemingly minor matters. From my point of view the problem has arisen, first, from her odd failure to observe certain verbal customs, such as saying (or writing in an email) "Thank you" when I have done something nice for her. But of course this only rises to the status of a "problem" when I react in a certain way. And react I often do, since, for reasons or causes ultimately unknown to me or anyone, I become very irritated after a string of such occasions and finally express that irritation.

Naturally this has a negative effect on her in turn, who apparently sees no justification for my irritation. Perhaps she saw no need to say "Thank you" in the first place. Although of course she and I have discussed these things many times, I am still unable to speak definitively on her behalf; so I will speculate about her thoughts and feelings. She may not feel appreciation for me because she has expectations of my doing certain things for her as a matter of course; indeed, there would only be cause for *criticism* if I *failed* to do them, but there is no place for praise or gratitude

[27] By the way, there is also the possibility that the wasp has good reason to reinspect the burrow on every occasion. Cf. Merow (2013).

[28] Following on the preceding note: Merow (2013) applies this latter point to the wasp (albeit tongue in cheek), attributing reasoning to *the wasp* in the experiment.

[29] Indeed it is so intermittent that I call ours an off-again/off-again relationship.

if I do them.[30] Or she may in fact feel appreciation for the things I do for her – after all, why else stay with me all these years, despite our problems? But therefore she sees no reason to have to *verbally express* that appreciation on every occasion. Am I so dense as not to recognize it? Thus, in either case, my expressions of irritation, not to mention the irritation itself, are, from her point of view, entirely gratuitous. So to her they appear mean-spirited, even cruel. And she, being, in her words, a "very sensitive" person, is deeply hurt by them.

To me this is of course "absurd." I too am a very sensitive person . . . obviously! That's why supposedly little things like her not saying "Thank you" are so distressing to *me*. Can she not at the very least acknowledge that we are alike in this regard: that our respective hurts are due to our equally sensitive natures, albeit with respect to different things? Maybe she can, or maybe she can't. But the bottom line is that neither of us, despite our insights into ourselves and the other, has proved capable of altering our response one iota in all these years. She simply cannot assure reliable verbal expression of her appreciation for the things I do for her, and I simply cannot reliably *refrain* from expressing my irritation at her failures to verbally express appreciation. Meanwhile, she simply cannot cease to feel distressed by my verbal expressions of irritation, no more than I can cease to feel irritated by her failures to verbally express her appreciation.

And the result has certainly been disastrous,[31] since we both deeply desire marriage, but it is clear that will never happen. Obviously, however – to complete my argument – we are both doing a lot of reasoning about the situation. This does not help. Indeed, I can say about myself, and I don't doubt it is similarly true for her, that on occasion it is the reasoning itself that leads to the offending behavior: I reason to the conclusion that I must speak to her harshly about her inconsiderateness![32] But just as often it is the opposite: I see abundant

[30] Cf. "A Moralist Crosses the Street" in Chap. 4.

[31] Also comical from a third-party point of view.

[32] The objectivist about reason and morals might object that I could not possibly have been *reasoning* when I decided on such a course of action, since I was obviously in the throes of passion

reason for *not* expressing, perhaps even not feeling, irritation – because it is not warranted by the facts and/or it will only have negative effects. But to no avail: The irritation arises, and I express it.[33]

Therefore when I consider the *Sphex* wasp, I think: *C'est moi*. And I can only (scornfully) laugh at the scientists who conclude, on the basis of their experiment, that the wasp is *therefore* different from us, when in fact they have at least as much reason to conclude that we are the same as that wasp. If only the scientists were as reflective about the human condition as they have been clever in testing the wasp, they would not, after the 40th trial, have dismissed the wasp as inferior, but instead have felt a shock of recognition: "It's just like us!"[34] But of course the scientists are human oh so human, and behold the mote in their fellow animal's eye without considering the beam in their own eye.

Thus my case for our commonality with other animals due to the preponderant reliance of behavior on intrinsic desire rather than reasoning. I have presented this as part of my case for the mythicality of *inherent value*, and, all the more, its phony and even baneful role in ethics (and axiology more generally). An ethics of desire is not only more naturalistically plausible than an ethics of *inherent* (absolute, objective, categorical) value but can also explain why we value *intrinsically* things that are not on their face concerned with survival. In ethics it has been specifically *morality* that is premised on inherent value. This has been manifest in two main and opposing ways. One is the utilitarian or consequentialist morality, according to which we are all absolutely obligated to maximize (or at least to try to maximize) the amount of inherent good in the world. The other is the deontic or nonconsequentialist morality, according to which we are all absolutely obligated to do whatever is inherently right. Neither has any reality apart from its basis in desire, but both cause great mischief for making us think they do. Hence my recommendation to ditch morality altogether.

(anger). But this is just the kind of Monday morning quarterbacking I object to in turn. If bad reasoning turns out not to be reasoning at all, then it becomes trivially true that rationality, that is, good reasoning, will always lead to the right conclusion.

[33] This obviously bodes ill for the desirist project, which is based on reasoning. But . . . hope springs eternal!

[34] von Bülow (2003) appears to have come to the same conclusion.

Metaphysics and Justification

Desirism is concerned with prediction (You *will* or *would* help the little old man across the street if you thought about it) rather than prescription (You *ought to* help the little old man across the street). This points to an essential aspect of desirism as fitting into a causal or deterministic scheme or metaphysics. By the same token the metaphysics of free will that is essential to morality goes out the window. This is another one of those things that moralists fret about, since our modern conception of the world is premised on causality.[35] A very popular moralist response has been to postulate a so-called compatibilism of free will with determinism, such that free will is understood to be simply one type of causal process, namely, the determination of actions on the basis of beliefs and desires. Thus, if you help the little old man across the street because you believe he needs assistance and you desire to be of assistance, then you have acted freely, *no matter that* your belief was caused by the light rays entering your eyes, and your desire is the product of a long causal chain going back to your upbringing, your parents' upbringing, and ultimately to the Big Bang. Whereas if you help the little old man *despite* your desire to be helpful and your belief that he does *not* need or want assistance (and no other, overriding beliefs or desires), so that you yourself are puzzled by what you are doing, you are not acting freely; perhaps you are responding to electrodes planted in your brain by an evil scientist. So both scenarios are completely causal and "determined," but it does make intuitive sense that the former is done freely.[36]

But I see compatibilism as pointless if the "point" is to save morality. Morality clings to free will because the idea of *enjoining* someone to do something (You *ought to* do x) implies that a person has the choice of doing

[35] In fact this is itself a vexed issue: to what degree *if any* the world is governed by causal laws and/or what that would mean. For example, is not the physical world *indeterministic* at the fundamental level of quanta? I will assume that the world of people and familiar things is governed by *nonexceptionless laws*. (On this point see the marvelously concise Fodor [1974].) Thus for example, if a human being stubs her toe, then *generally* or *all other things equal*, that person will be unhappy.

[36] The story is not as simple as this, of course, for, for instance, if not your behavior but your belief and desire that caused it had been implanted by the evil scientist, the compatibilist would probably not say that you were acting "of your own free will."

it or not. This is encapsulated in the slogan "Ought implies can."[37] But it seems to me that it is a fiction that someone ever has *that* kind of choice, even though we can spell out conditions of attribution for it. Consider this analogy. We can specify a definite set of criteria for what counts as Thor's displeasure with humanity; nevertheless a superabundance of thunder and lightning do not in fact indicate Thor's displeasure with humanity, because there is no Thor. Just so, there is certainly a distinction to be made between acting as a result of one's normally induced beliefs and desires, and acting (if it can even be called "acting" as opposed to just happening) as a result of being manipulated by an evil scientist; and maintaining this distinction can be useful for certain purposes, such as deciding on a suitable intervention to prevent unwanted behavior (just as predicting stormy weather also has practical uses). Thus, a bad actor could be incarcerated in the one case and subjected to surgical removal of electrodes in the other. But there is no free will in either case, just as there is no Thor.

Why make a big deal out of this? What is the problem with labeling the proximate cause in one of these scenarios "free will"? My answer is that this additional attribution opens the door to various attitudes that are near and dear to the moralist's heart and repugnant to mine. Thus, if the defendant is found guilty of *freely* murdering the victim, then she is liable not only to rehabilitation or confinement or whatever is necessary to protect society and help her if possible, but also to scorn, retribution, blame, etc. I see no place for any of the latter in the real world, no more than I see a place for fear of Thor's anger. Hence I have no sympathy for retaining free will and indeed want to remove it from our conceptual vocabulary.

Let me relate an extended example of free will's officiousness to illustrate the advantage of desirism over morality. Its role in the following is to ground unfortunate moralist responses that a strictly causal understanding would have precluded. A good friend and I were about to fly overseas on a working holiday.[38] My friend wanted to make a quick specialty purchase at a shop in the airport terminal. We were passing a shop that had the item, but she continued past it.

[37] And we could add "*Ought not* implies *can*" to cover *prohibitions*.

[38] Indeed the very same that figured in "Neti Neti" in Chap. 2.

"Why don't you go in here?" "Oh, I can get it downstairs." "But it's right here . . . ," I noted, puzzled. How could she be sure the store downstairs would have the item? So she followed my implied advice and went into the store. Unfortunately, when bringing the item up to the cashier and rearranging what she was carrying in order to find her wallet, she dropped her expensive camera. When she tried it out after that, it did not work. Thus, even before getting on the plane, one of my friend's main reasons for wanting to go on the trip had been scotched. We were both devastated.

But we were both also resourceful. So while my friend fiddled with the camera to see if she could find a workaround, I searched on my smartphone for a repair shop at our destination. We both met with some success, so our spirits were somewhat lifted as we finally boarded the plane.

Happy ending? I thought so. Until weeks after our return I confronted my friend about her odd irritability since the trip. She finally spilled the beans. She had been angry with me all this time because she held me responsible for the damage to her camera (and then the difficulty she had had using it on the trip). I was flabbergasted (and outraged). What on earth was she talking about? She quickly qualified her statement by saying she held mainly herself to blame . . . for having ignored her own instinct and following my advice to purchase the item at the first shop. If we had gone downstairs, she had intended to park me and the camera on a bench while she went to purchase the item. So now I was subjected to a reevaluation of what I had thought had been our wonderful trip overseas. And it was essentially my fault . . . for even the part about her own fault was only that she had listened to me. This was too much, and I let her know it. We did not communicate after that for quite a while.

All ridiculous, and all unnecessary, from my point of view. What is my point of view? The desirist one, of course. My analysis is that both my friend and I were being moralists (though my failure was to be a lapsed desirist while hers was to be a staunch moralist). To begin with, there was her blaming me about what had transpired. Consider that whenever something happens, it has a cause . . . and that cause has a prior cause, and so on as far back as you care to trace it. But at no point in this "chain" is there any *wrong*-doing by a *free* agent, a fortiori any reason for *blame*,

etc. That is a mythic imposition by moralists.[39] It is just as if someone had attributed what happened to fate, or to karma, or to the stars, or to the devil. These metaphysical influences simply do not exist, or else they are colorful names for perfectly ordinary processes, like the "acts of God" clause in an insurance policy that refers to floods and tornados.

Furthermore, even from a moralist perspective, what had I done but make a suggestion to my friend at the airport which made perfect sense to me under the circumstances? If anything I had her interests at heart, since I wanted to be sure she found the item she was looking for. If the first store didn't have it, she'd have a second chance downstairs. But if we skipped the first store and the store downstairs didn't have it, she might be out of luck, since we had to make the plane. Unbeknownst to me my friend had another idea: that she wanted to put down the camera. I suppose in a perfect world I might have figured this out by myself and offered to hold it while she was in the first store. But could I really have anticipated she would remove the camera from around her neck while she was reaching for her wallet? (I still don't understand this.) And would there not have been equivalent risk in her transferring the camera to me and then back again? And was it really out of line to expect her to voice her own concern, rather than simply acquiesce to my (reasoned) suggestion? So she's surely right, by moralist lights, to take responsibility for her own action (or inaction).

But need we talk about right and wrong and blame and (moral) responsibility at all? What good does it do? It certainly does a lot of "bad." That, even more than the sheer non-existence of such a thing as blameworthiness, is my brief against morality: Look at the baneful effects

[39] Compare this from Fried (2015):

> . . . the ex post consequences of our choices can yield important information to help guide similar choices in the future (e.g., the discovery turned up in the investigation of the Challenger explosion that O-rings crack in freezing temperatures). In some small number of cases, the consequences can shed some light on the ex ante prudence of the particular decision that produced them. But our reactive attitudes towards bad outcomes are, alas, not that discriminating. They generally take the much cruder and logically indefensible form of concluding that if something bad has happened and some human agent is a but-for cause of it, that agent is to blame (in the moral, not causal, sense).

that belief in it has. Because my friend implicitly believes in morality, she probably did spontaneously hold herself blameworthy for dropping the camera. (This is not a logical necessity but, it seems to me, a psychological likelihood.) But since moral guilt is one of the worst, perhaps even the worst feeling known to human beings, in a flash her mind wrested control of the moral situation as it sought to deflect the guilt elsewhere. And since blame requires a human target (when a dog or a household appliance is not the "responsible" subject), and since yours truly had certainly been part of the causal chain leading to the accident, and was in fact the proximate or penultimate human cause (other than herself), naturally I was honored with the dishonorific.

Thus I am offering a twofold desire-based account of moral attributions. The most direct cause (however unawares) of, say, moral blame is to prop up the force of a nonmoral desire that the blamed party is frustrating, for example, to accuse a thief of wrong-doing; you want to retain or regain possession of what the thief has stolen, and so you not only take steps to retrieve it but also, or to reinforce that process, *blame* the thief for taking it. But there is also an indirect cause of moral blame, which is to deflect guilt. This is because, hoisted by its own petard, the mechanism of morality that has been "designed" to make being blamed painful, strikes out in an effort to deflect that pain by rerouting the direction of blame toward another. In the paradigmatic case of A blaming B, this means that B will deny guilt and throw it back at A; B will see him- or herself as the victim. Thus the mechanism of morality is double-edged and comes back to bite us when its primary function of helping to bend others to our will is turned against oneself. But now we see that this also happens when A blames A; I dropped the camera, so I did something *wrong*. But A rejects the blame attribution because it is so painful and therefore seeks a B on whom to redirect it. Morality is just too powerful for its own, or at least our, good.

Still, the moralist could demur. Must not this kind of bane be balanced against the kind of boon we might also expect from blame? An obvious function of blame is to enlist aid or reparation for the person who has been wronged. But I am suggesting that this tactic backfires more often than not by eliciting defensiveness from the person who is being blamed. In the present example, my natural generosity and caring about my friend were scotched by my resentment at being blamed . . . *but not before they had*

moved me to buy her a new camera before I knew she held me responsible for the damage to the old one! I really did want to make her whole for any loss that occurred on an expedition I had invited her on, no matter that it was her doing. But the self-defeating excess of morality is such that even that did not assuage her. No matter that the presumed purpose of blame (aid for the injured party) had been satisfied; blame demands recompense in its own moralist terms as well (e.g., an avowal of contrition). Perhaps this demand is motivated in turn by the desire of the party who feels she has been wronged *not to feel beholden* to the wrong-doer for compensating her loss; so that would be yet another way that morality screws things up, since beholdenness – as opposed to spontaneous gratitude – is itself a moralist imposition most of us would like to avoid and hence (the desire to avoid feeling it) might motivate its own mischief. In fact it was my friend's failure to *thank me* for the new camera that finally prompted me to inquire if something was bothering her.

To me, then, there are just these two salient facts about the airport incident. (1) For at least the last 13 billion years it had been predetermined that I would suggest she shop at the first store. And (2) once the camera had been damaged, the only thing to do was to figure out how to rectify the situation.[40] Yes, there was also room for emotions; so a third salient fact would be (for both of us) to experience and express sadness (which we did). But there was no room whatever for blame, and the *moral* emotions that tend to accompany it. Blame only sets up the scene for anger and defensiveness. When I finally did find out what had been going on in my friend's mind, my mind was flooded with just the kind of arguments I am relating now. But it was also flooded with moral passions, since, amoralist or no, I still retain the lifetime habit and perhaps "wired in" responses of morality. Anger engenders anger in a

[40] Compare this from Michel Faber's novel *The Book of Strange New Things* (London: Hogarth, 2014) about the Oasans (the native people of the planet Oasis):

> If someone dropped a dish and broke it, they would remember next day that the dish was broken, but rather than reliving the incident when the dish fell, they would be preoccupied with the need to make a new dish. (p. 376)

moralist context since anger, being a moral judgment, is reacted to as an *injustice*, another moral judgment, hence spawning anger in return.

So I became resentful and bitter. I could immediately summon a host of reasons to hold my friend responsible and myself guiltless, indeed, virtuous. This, then, was my own moralist contribution to the fray. Had I maintained a desirist demeanor, I might instead have responded like the Zen master Hakuin, who when falsely accused of fathering a child, simply replied "Is that so?"[41] and even assumed (nonguilty) responsibility for raising the child.[42] But not only was I spontaneously angry at her; I also felt I *ought* to be. Of course holding my friend fully responsible as I did only elicited counterarguments from her as her own defensiveness kicked in. What is clear is that no resolution will be achieved when both parties are fending off blame; indeed there is likely to be escalation.[43] There is no way I was ever going to accept that I had been even partly to blame, and there is no way she was ever going to hold me blameless. Hence our subsequent separation. Only time could heal this wound: forgetting if not forgiving.

All unnecessary. All pointless, even counterproductive. All based on a fiction. Ergo: Embrace desirism.

But of course that conclusion does not follow. That is, it does not *follow from* my interpretation of the incident as a matter of logical necessity, but it does *follow for* me as a matter of causal effect. In other words, I have really provided only an illustration or an *explanation* of why I have come to accept amorality and desirism, not a *justification* for them.[44] For it is easy enough to think of or imagine an equally detailed example that lends itself more readily to a morality-friendly interpretation. The very example I have parsed may lend itself to one by

[41] Instead I reacted more like Rufus T. Firefly (Groucho Marx) in *Duck Soup*: "'Upstart' you call me? This means war!" Funny? Yes indeed. And yet the tragicomedy of the human condition is nowhere better rendered than in this 1933 film, wedged between two global holocausts having equally ludicrous origins.

[42] See the story "Is That So?" in Reps (1989), pp. 7–8.

[43] And this does strike me as an excellent and purely secular and amoralist reason to embrace Jesus's suggestion, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone . . . " (John 8:7).

[44] See the following section for a fuller discussion of this distinction.

a more morality-friendly analyst; my friend would naturally find fault with my analysis. I have in fact pared down the example, long as it already is – I hardly exaggerate to state that I could go back to Adam adducing relevant considerations – and so could be suspected of having done so tendentiously. Is it not highly plausible, therefore, that my whole desirist spiel has been due to a guilty conscience?[45] I have repeatedly pointed out the extreme aversiveness of feeling morally guilty; so does that fact not indict my own efforts to elude it? (This would turn the table on my hypothesis that it was my friend's guilty conscience that caused her to hold me responsible.) And since, in this case, I would be unable to deny my causal involvement (I have no "alibi"), my only recourse, if I wished to discharge the pain, is to deny that such a thing as moral guilt exists at all!

There is no quick way nor perhaps any way I could answer that argument in the form of a decisive refutation. My method is only to pile on the illustrations and analyses in such a way as to lure the reader into the desirist fold.[46] It is rhetoric, not dialectic. It is more story than argument. It is a tale told from a point of view, with the intent of making it sound attractive. But obviously that "attractiveness" would depend as much on the receptivity or sensibility or maybe just plain sympathy of the reader as on my own efforts. There needs to be a "match." If I were a Dickens or a Stowe I could bring more people around to my way of seeing things, perhaps. And yet even so elegant a stylist and incisive a thinker as Nietzsche has no mass appeal, in my culture anyway. So in the end "what works" will depend on a thousand contingencies, as is true for everything, according to me.

[45] A similar criticism has been lodged against some philosophers whose postwar "deconstructionist" philosophies serve as a suspiciously convenient counterpoint to their having harbored Nazi sympathies during the Hitler regime.

[46] Cf. Cartwright (2015)'s sympathetic portrayal of this as a philosophical method. I might here mention also Anderson (2015)'s article in the same journal issue, which defends "experiments in living," another pragmatic methodology I am employing; see also Anderson (1991). Finally I can cite Hall (2006)'s astute observation that advocates need "to cultivate an alternative viewpoint, one that takes hold, gains energy, and becomes plausible to enough people to effect a paradigm shift" (p. 73).

But all of that is perfectly in tune with my philosophy, is it not? So even its possible failure to "take hold" could be further vindication of its truth. I'd better watch that, however. Once a thesis becomes unfalsifiable, even more verified by its very failure to become universally accepted, one risks entering the world of pure fantasy. Whereas I am the Moses who wants to lead people *out of* the desert of mirages – of God and morality – to the promised land of reality.

Back and forth, and at ever more abstruse levels of discussion. There is no stopping in that line of progression, except perhaps in a throwing up of hands; so let us return to the concrete. Once again there is a salient fact for me: The endless dialogue about who is to blame is nothing but a massive and absurd digression from what is better attended to, namely, how to deal with the practical matters at hand. After the camera was damaged, all that mattered was salvaging the trip for my friend (and me indirectly as one who could not enjoy it if she were not enjoying it). And further I have tried to show how another practical matter requiring just as much attention was how to deal with the inevitable moralist impulses that such an incident aroused; for these had just as much potential to spoil the trip, and even our friendship.

I know in my own case I immediately squelched the moralist impulse to reprove my friend for her carelessness. (How could she have allowed herself to remove the camera from around her neck?) Fortunately I had enough common sense at that moment to realize that matters of consequence hung in the balance of how I reacted to the situation. Apparently my friend was undergoing the analogous process, since, it turned out, she was holding me responsible for what had happened. The difference, though, is that in my case I had no respect for my knee-jerk moralism, and so really was able to consign it to the trash bin in my psyche (or more precisely the recycling bin, since it remained available for me to draw on should I be backed into a moralist corner, as subsequently happened when my friend finally revealed her true thoughts to me). But she, who as a moralist has no such recourse, must have been harboring and nurturing her resentment all along, which explains the "irritability" I noticed and finally remarked on, thereby precipitating our temporary split.

Also after my "outrage" at her revelation of her holding me responsible, I was immediately aware of the baselessness of my response. For if there is one thing above all an amoralist does not want to become moralistic about, it is somebody else being moralistic. Indeed, I was aware of this absurdity at the very time of my response, and even remarked on it to my friend. But I still could not stop it. Again the analogy: In a dizzy spell you can know you are only sitting in a chair and yet be incapable of stopping yourself from feeling whirled about. In a way it is the most difficult moralist response of all for an aspiring amoralist to suppress, since one is going out of one's way not to judge the other person and yet is being judged by her. It seems one is allowing one's punching hand to be tied behind one's back while the other person continues to pummel; so the impulse to untie that hand becomes hard to resist.

But the damage had been done, and so now a new practical problem presented itself: How to salvage our friendship in light of the mutually moralist tirade that had passed between us. For psychological effects are real, no matter how groundless their causes. So the only practical solution seemed to be to let time pass and the memories of the exchange fade and more sober calculations of the value of our relationship come to the fore. But how much better (in the desirist sense of fulfilling our reflective desires, I mean of course) if all of this nonsense and pain did not have to come about in the first place. Thus my ethical "argument" against free will, the implicit belief in which is the great enabler of morality, and another reason for preferring desirism to moralism.

Explanations and Reasons

We usually think of ourselves as acting on the basis of reasons, and we think this is important because, as we say, reasons are what *justify* our actions, and hence show *us* to be *rational*. Furthermore, we (qua moralists) believe that reasons show us to be *moral* by providing our actions with *moral* justification. But if morality is no longer part of deliberation on the desirist scheme, what becomes of reasons? Moral reasons are what

provide the *oomph* of *ought* in ethics; but amorality explicitly excludes *oughts*. A person has certain beliefs and desires and then decides or acts on their basis, period. The action does not "follow from" the belief and desire; it merely *follows* them, that is, as an effect of their cause. Therefore only the causal mechanisms of psychology are or need be invoked or involved; no effort is made to *rationalize* the resultant decision or action *as moral*.

But I believe that reasons still have a role to play in a desirist ethics. Their interplay with causes is, however, continuous . . . and interesting. Let me explain with an example. The other day I went to the home of friends, who had invited me for dinner. My hostess, although not a vegan herself, always pleasantly and deliciously accommodates my veganism with her ethnic recipes. My host, also not a vegan, is also accommodating; however, he is archly skeptical of veganism (as much else). So quite consistently with his personality, he chose the commencement of our dinner as the perfect occasion to pose a simple question to me: "Joel, why are you a vegan?" And quite consistently with my personality, I was delighted to answer. However, my personality is now split, since, although I have been an amoralist for eight years, I was a moralist for almost 60 years and so could hardly have extirpated morality from my soul. Furthermore, on the face of it (although I now suspect a greater role for compassion even then), my original reason for going vegan was a moralist one: Having learned about the cruel treatment of animals in the production of food (and so much else), I became convinced that *it was wrong* to be complicit in it by continuing to eat (or otherwise use) animals or their "products" (milk, eggs, etc.). And so I stopped.

But I was determined to respond to my host in an amoralist manner. For one thing, even if I had still been a moralist, there were simple social grounds for abstaining from moralist talk . . . analogous to the commonplace advice to avoid talking about religion or politics if you want to keep an informal gathering pleasant. For it is a given that no one is going to change their mind. It does happen, but it is rare. So no matter how "rational" the discussion may be, the end result will most likely only be an exposure of differences of deeply held opinion about deeply concerning issues. And along with that, however unspoken, is likely to be a less

than flattering judgment of one another. So what will have been gained? There will only be a loss of the bonhomie one would hope for on a social occasion. To begin a discussion with the claim that something about which you and your interlocutor disagree is "right" or "wrong" is surely to wave a red flag in front of him or her, for nobody is content to be thought of as in the wrong.

But then what could I say? What does it mean to give an "amoralist answer"? I think it is quite simple: just *say what it is that you want and why*. My host had asked me, "Why are you a vegan?" My answer, in simple, personal, friendly, and respectful terms, was: "Because the production of food from animals involves every kind of cruelty to those animals, and I don't want that to happen. And since human beings – at least people like me in this society – can get along perfectly well without eating any animals (including humans of course) or animal products, I am a vegan."

Now let me note several things about this answer. One is that it is, in a way, simply a statement about myself; and in particular it does not contain any accusation against my non-vegan host. I have only spoken about my own preference, which is that other animals not be used for mere human convenience. Another is that I have nevertheless given a reason or reasons for my decision to be a vegan: facts, or claimed facts, about how certain foods are produced and about human nutritional needs and gustatory experiences. Furthermore, if any of these factual claims were questioned, I could expand on them at length, adducing evidence and arguments. Finally, even though my answer gives reasons, it also provides, or at least suggests, a causal explanation of my being a vegan: My beliefs about food production and human nutrition, etc., plus my desire that animals (not) be treated in certain ways, caused me to alter my dietary habits.

Still, a moralist might concede that that is all well and good about myself, but of what use would it be in convincing my host to change *his* dietary habits? In other words, can talking only about oneself influence others? My answer: Yes, certainly. For one thing, my host may simply not have known about how his food is produced. There is widespread ignorance about this in an urban society. I myself did not know about it in any detail until I was 60 years old. However, even knowing about it, one is even more likely to be ignorant about viable alternatives, that is to say, about available and appetizing foods that can be substituted for animal

foods in a nutritionally adequate diet. So this kind of information could also be part of my answer to my host's question; indeed, the very meal set before us on the dinner table was a demonstration par excellence of that very thing.

But finally, and perhaps even more to the point, is that I had laid before my host, as well as the others seated at the table, the bald proposition that the production of animal food involves cruelty. So since I myself don't need to eat it at all, I wish not to be contributing in any way to that cruelty; and since I believe hardly anyone else in our society needs to be eating animal food either, I wish very much that they too would refrain from contributing to this cruelty. Put in this simple way, the "case" for veganism seems to me to be compelling . . . not only to me, but to most people . . . but of particular note in this instance, to my host. For consider his position: Without being accused of any "wrong-doing," he has nevertheless been put in the position of seeming to be indifferent to the cruelty of animals . . . or at least, and what might even be worse from his point of view, of seeming to care more about filling his belly or tickling his palate than about the suffering and slaughter of animals. No matter whether he is a moralist or an amoralist, he would not – if I may speak empathetically – wish to think of himself in this way and/or be seen by others, such as the rest of those seated at the dinner table, to be this way. And what reply could he possibly make? As a matter of fact, he was silenced by my answer.

But now let us return to the theoretical question about reasons and causes with a more detailed analysis of my answer to my host. For despite the practical efficacy of my answer, the concern about its rational cogency may still not have been put to rest. Has my answer provided real reasons, or has it only performed a causal function? A reason for thinking the latter is that I am *incapable* of offering the following argument:

> The production of animal food involves cruelty.
> Human beings do not need to eat animal food to survive and thrive.
> It is wrong, when easily preventable, to inflict or contribute to needless cruelty.
> Therefore eating animal food is wrong.

This is an explicitly moralist argument, so, being an amoralist, I am unable to endorse the third premise, and hence cannot draw a sound conclusion.

It seems that instead of an argument I can only offer an *explanation* of my behavior, thus:

Explanation 1

The production of animal food involves cruelty.
Human beings do not need to eat animal food to survive and thrive.
Therefore* I do not eat animal foods, and I attempt to convince others not to.

The "therefore" in this "argument" is not a logical one but a causal one (which I have indicated with an asterisk). It does not *justify* my becoming a vegan but only explains why I became one. Indeed, it does not even serve as an explanation, for mere (presumed) facts or truths cannot cause my behavior. The actual explanation would therefore have to go something like this:

Explanation 2

I believe that the production of animal food involves cruelty.
I believe that human beings do not need to eat animal food to survive and thrive.
Therefore* (other things being equal) I do not eat animal foods, and I attempt to convince others not to.

But again this is hardly justificatory. For one thing, my beliefs might be false. So let us at least add some justification to the "*premises*," thus:

Explanation 3

I believe, *on the basis of rational inquiry*, that the production of animal food involves cruelty.
I believe, *on the basis of rational inquiry*, that human beings do not need to eat animal food to survive and thrive.
Therefore* (other things being equal) I do not eat animal foods, and I attempt to convince others not to.

But this is still not justificatory, nor indeed even fully explanatory, of the "*conclusion*," because somebody else could just as well have "argued" in the same vein to a very different "conclusion," thus:

Explanation 4

I believe, on the basis of rational inquiry, that the production of animal food involves cruelty.
I believe, on the basis of rational inquiry, that human beings do not need to eat animal food to survive and thrive.
But I love the idea of animals being made to suffer and die.
Therefore* (other things being equal) I eat as much animal food as possible, and attempt to convince others to.

So the explanation of my behavior must be something like this:

Explanation 5

I believe, on the basis of rational inquiry, that the production of animal food involves cruelty.
I believe, on the basis of rational inquiry, that human beings do not need to eat animal food to survive and thrive.
I strongly desire that animals not be subjected to needless cruelty.
Therefore* (other things being equal) I do not eat animal foods, and I attempt to convince others not to.

The nature of the inference (or "inference" in scare quotes) in Explanation 5 is a causal one, for presumably some kind of causal connection gets us from the beliefs and desire to the resultant action. But the inference does also seem *logical*. Possibly this has to do with the familiarity or "naturalness" of the relevant causal law, say something like the following:

> For all persons p and all actions a, if p believes that a would bring about a consequence that p strongly desires not be the case and also believes that a is not essential to human survival or thriving, then, other things equal, p will refrain from doing a and will attempt to convince others likewise.

Perhaps this law could even be conceived as an analytic truth about belief or desire; in other words, it would express one implication of what it *means* to believe something or to desire something. On the other hand, such a law or truth could prove elusive, either because belief and desire are merely folk concepts inadequate to the task of genuine explanation (cf. Stich [1983]) or because the ultimate explanation may not even lie at the level of psyche (cf. Davidson [1970]). But ideally we would be able to formulate a true causal premise that is sufficient both to explain the action and validate the inference (now sans quote).

Now, with Explanation 5, have I not only explained but also justified my behavior? Note that I am asking about a purely rational justification and not a moral justification. We could also speak of practical justification because the outcome is action and hence practical. Finally, note that my action would thereby also pass *desirist* muster, since desirism recommends that one do what one would (want to) do after rational inquiry. My answer is yes. Therefore I believe I have shown that it is possible for an action to be justified rationally even if it cannot be justified morally, and hence also the cause of an action can count as a reason for it.

The question might be asked: Why am I willing to give reason a pass but not morality? Isn't the categoricity of logic just as presumptuous as the categoricity of right and wrong and other objective values? My answer is that I have discovered morality to be dispensable and happily so in the affairs of life, and in (what I consider to be) the best theory of the world,[47] whereas I have discovered neither to be the case for reasoning. Indeed, how could I even be addressing this question if reasoning were not a legitimate activity? Yet it is also possible for a human being to display small regard for reasoning. I know such people. I would recommend that they reconsider.

Finally, then, why not simply identify desirism with *practical* reasoning?[48] My answer to the central question of ethics – How

[47] Recall the discussion of argument to the best explanation in "Second Pass" in Chap. 1.

[48] Here I am attempting to answer a concern expressed by Schroeder (2012 and personal communication).

shall one live? – would then be simplicity itself: *Be rational*. I am tempted to do this, believe me, especially as a former Kantian moralist (and present Kantian amoralist), and I don't mind using this language informally. Similarly I speak of rational desires and rational actions, these being the products of desirist deliberations. However, I resist a formal identification for two reasons. One is that practical reasoning is its own can of worms in philosophy, and so the attempt to identify desirism with it could potentially involve as lengthy a discussion as has my effort (explicitly in Chap. 2) to *distinguish* desirism from the similarly contested notion(s) of morality. And since such an identification strikes me as not having sufficient benefits to warrant such an effort, I refrain. That brings me to my second reason, which is that the identification of desirism with practical reasoning could actually have some of the *baneful* effects I have been attributing to the identification of ethics with morality. This is because it would reintroduce normativity, or at any rate the appearance of normativity, into ethics, whereas the whole point of desirism has been to remove it. Normativity is the "more" in "Morality is more; desirism is less" (Chap. 2). So while a desirist does indeed accede to the normativity of reason in arriving at her beliefs about the world, her resultant desires and actions are first and foremost causal products of those beliefs (and who knows what else). Whatever rationality thereby ensues is therefore the tail and not the dog.

Hence I do not even want to suggest that some rule-based practical rationality is to be expected as a derivative product. I remember having the thought, when studying music theory and being given the exercise to apply it to the composition of an original two-part invention, that Bach himself may not have been "following the rules" when he composed his music so much as the rules were derived from what Bach composed. But Bartok must have been following any such rules even less. Just so, I am not advocating a naturalism (all the less an idealized construction) of desirist rationality by which our conative responses to (rational) beliefs could be normalized, for this again would be the kind of overreaching that leads to full-blown normativity. My conception of desirism is entirely individualistic, such that even the desirist who is the lone holdout from a desirist group consensus, even if that were the rest

of humanity, could not be deemed "unethical" in virtue of that fact.[49] I myself have been the odd person out too many times to want to countenance a tyranny of even an amoral majority.

Reasons and Causes: A Pragmatic Distinction

There is a fascinating *pas de deux* between the justifications we are prepared to offer for our actions and allegiances, and the actual histories that gave rise to them. A deep skepticism seems warranted (although of course keeping in mind that the reasons one might put forward for it would themselves be tainted by the *skeptic's* biography). But I have argued, with various caveats, that a desirist is capable of giving justificatory reasons for his or her actions, even though these reasons are causal and explanatory in nature. I still maintain, however, that there is a useful distinction to be made between reasons and causes even in amoralist discourse (which is to say, discourse that dispenses with *morally* justificatory reasons). I can imagine, though, the moralist being dissatisfied with the distinction I would draw between causal reasons and causes as such. For consider that it may seem arbitrary for me to have given as my causal reason for being a vegan that the production of animal food involves cruelty, I don't need animal food to have a healthy and appetizing diet, etc. Is this not, literally, false? In fact, in two distinct ways? One way is that my veganism could not have been caused by such mere facts; thus, it could be true that the production of animal food involves cruelty, but if I had no knowledge of that or did not believe it, how could it touch me? Indeed, the belief alone, that is, even if the belief were *false* and food production a totally benign process, would suffice (along with other beliefs and desires) to cause my veganism, would it not? A person who has lost the lottery but believes she has won it will be happy; a person who has won the lottery but believes she has lost it will be sad, *n'est-ce pas*?

[49] Had the holdout made a mistake of fact or logic, then there would be grounds for discrediting his or her dissent.

This is not news, however. I had already spoken about my beliefs and desires as an alternative way to speak about my causal reasons (cf. Explanations 2 and 5 above). More telling is a second criticism of the bona-fide reasonhood of causal reasons, namely that they do not seem to have a non-arbitrary cut-off point. For was I not picking and choosing to assign reasonhood for my veganism to (my beliefs and desires about) cruelty in the production of animal food, when I might in addition or instead have adduced, say, my having been brought up in urban middle-class circumstances in the Northeast United States in the Twentieth Century, and having read Francis Moore Lappé in college, and having studied philosophy and ethics in graduate school and then taught them for decades, or to take a different tack, to having watched Disney cartoons and animal documentaries on TV when a child, or perhaps even to having always been squeamish[50] . . . and on and on? I have no doubt that contingencies such as these, and perhaps in multitudes, were instrumental to my eventual vegan turn. What then makes these *not* causal reasons, whereas the contingencies about my present beliefs and desires *are*?

Perhaps I could begin to develop a theory of causal reasonhood by stipulating that reasons are constituted only by proximate causes and/or by intentional causes, that is, beliefs and desires. Or perhaps I could draw a distinction between what causes me to be a vegan versus what caused me to *become* a vegan, the former being a reason and the latter a mere cause. I don't know if that would work. There is usually some clever philosopher who will come up with a counterexample to any such proposal (not just for causal reasonhood but for any concept one was attempting to define). Indeed, *clever I* would wish to hold onto the option of putting forward a *nonintentional* phenomenon, such as the (presumed) fact that *animal-food production involves cruelty*, as a reason for veganism, even for *my* veganism (i.e., my being a vegan) in particular.

But I'm not really all that interested anymore in this kind of analyzing. Today my favorite sort of answer to this sort of inquiry would be a pragmatic (and of course desirist) one. I would assess each situation in which I found myself in order to determine which cause(s)

[50] Cf. Herzog and Golden (2009).

and/or reason(s), if I expressed it or them, would best serve my considered desires. Thus, I might have an array like the following[51] from which to mix and match.

[I am a vegan because]

(I believe/know that) the production of animal food involves cruelty.

(I believe/know that) I don't need to eat animal food in order to be healthy and enjoy life.

(I believe/know that) delicious vegan food options are readily available and easy and inexpensive to prepare.

I don't want other animals or any animals (i.e., including the human ones) to suffer or die needlessly.

I believe that my forgoing animal food will contribute, however modestly, to the reduction of animal suffering and dying by reducing "demand," and – what is perhaps more significant – will make me a more effective advocate to other people for forgoing and advocating against eating animal food.

I have studied and learned a great deal about the real nature(s) of other animals, and about our evolutionary connections to them, and about the conditions under which they are bred and otherwise treated in the preparation of food (among other uses) from their bodies and products.

(I believe that) animals used in the production of food are sentient, intelligent, and capable of a wide emotional range.

(I believe that) the production of animal food is highly detrimental to the environment in multiple ways.

I had an urban middle-class upbringing in Twentieth Century America.

I went to a Quaker school for all of my primary and secondary education.

I have always been physically squeamish.

[Etc. ad inf.]

[51] Note that I have listed only items I take to be true and well-established. But of course a desirist amoralist – and probably even a moralist – might rationally decide to include speculations and even perpetrate deceptions or misunderstandings to further his or her purposes.

Thus, in becoming convinced *myself* to go vegan it might be enough for me to learn about how other animals are treated in the production of food. But if I were trying to convince *you* to go vegan, a more effective tactic might be to inform you of the delicious vegan food options that are readily available, nutritious, and easy and inexpensive to prepare . . . perhaps even simply by exposing you to them (inviting *you* for dinner, etc.). Meanwhile, alluding to my squeamishness might be supposed unhelpful in "converting" others to veganism, so it might just be relegated to the causal category and never called upon as a reason. But even here I can imagine utility, for example, as an entrée to an exposition of what one is actually eating when one eats animal food . . . hoping thereby to induce the squeamish among my auditors to consider a change of diet.

It would thus be a matter of what could be called rhetoric to determine the best approach to a given audience or interlocutor on a given occasion. And any of the items in my list would be transformed from a mere cause to a (causal) *reason* whenever it were used in that way. Perhaps my urban background and Quaker education would never find such use, serving instead as concessions to the contingency of my preferences; so they would always remain in the realm of mere causes. But it is hardly detrimental to the project of offering reasons that there may also be mere causes lurking about. Consider for example your belief that the Earth is round. You would be able to offer many *reasons* for believing such a thing; nevertheless you need not deny that your belief in the Earth's roundness was probably *caused by* your having been taught that in the school you attended as a child.[52]

In sum, my suggestion[53] is that, although all (actual) reasons are causes, we reserve the term "reason" for those causes whose mention to others will, we believe, serve to motivate (cause) *them* to agree with us.[54]

[52] And even with regard to *that cause*, you might on occasion enlist it as a *reason*, as when you are trying to convince someone to believe that the Earth is round by noting that the proposition is put forward as true even in elementary school.

[53] About both how I think we do use reasons (and the label "reason") and how I recommend that we do.

[54] Or otherwise further our considered ends (which, furthermore, as always, need not be self-serving).

"I am a vegan because (I believe that) eating animals and animal products promotes cruelty" gives a reason or justification whereas "I am a vegan because I used to watch a lot of Disney cartoons" gives only a cause or explanation, since, even though both are ultimately only causes, the former is far more likely than the latter to move *you* to become a vegan too.[55]

Reason Is Not Enough

I have built up a case for rationalizing our desires. But this is not sufficient for the kind of ethics I favor. For of obviously critical importance is the quality of those desires that are being rationalized, as it were the fecundity of the ground that is being tended. The very point of my placing desire at the center of ethics was to assure motivation in response to rational beliefs about the situation at hand. This was meant to be in stark contrast to our notorious ability to be unmoved by moral injunctions (unless they coincide with or are unopposed by our non-moral desires). But it could still be the case that a person's existing repertoire of desires led to actions (or inactions) that were contrary to the considered desires of most of us (not to mention, one of us), even in concert with rational beliefs that had been amply reflected on. Thus, my oft-mentioned example of intelligent and informed friends who nevertheless continue to eat animals with abandon. Clearly there is something defective in their desires – that is, something about their desires that made them impervious to the cognitive stimuli that were sufficient to move *me* to become a vegan.[56]

[55] In other words – to let another "Marx" (namely, Groucho, supposedly) have the last one – "Those are my principles, and if you don't like them . . . well, I have others."

[56] So "defective" is to be understood only as relative to my own considered desires and not as an objective judgment. The word is itself tendentious, and I have used it as a personal indulgence, or perhaps, cheatingly, to influence my readers. So let this note compensate for that. And why would I want to "compensate" for employing a tactic that might help bring about what I desire? Because I desire even more strongly to be consistently honest.

I can only surmise that the deficiency is due to something congenital or more likely (or even if so) something lacking in their experience base. An obvious candidate is exposure to the animals they eat – both in a natural environment and in the conditions of agricultural husbandry and slaughter. More generally, our desires need to be nurtured . . . to be "conditioned" when we are young especially. They will be in any case – the only question is in which "direction." So the entire rational project I have devoted the bulk of my analysis to presumes a suitably prepared conative foundation, whose structure and strength are due largely to nonrational factors. But these nonrational factors can be rationally deployed. Thus, if I wanted my children to be compassionate individuals who were capable of being rationalized as adults into . . . liberal Democrats! . . . then I would be wise to introduce them to every manner of nurturing care and concern about other animals, human and nonhuman. In doing so I would still be depending on their native endowment as whatever kind of creature we are, for desire cannot arise ex nihilo.

Experience enters into ethics at two points, therefore: In the original development of our desire repertoire, and later in its full fruition. For example, in my own case I must have had sufficient caring experience and/or a robust enough native endowment to end up with a compassionate personality. But then it was still necessary for me to have my compassion directed toward other animals, about whose condition in agriculture (and even in the wild in modern circumstances) was largely unknown to me until a late age. As it happens I am also acutely susceptible to influence by the written word, so much of my education in animal ethics came about by reading; and perhaps that was sufficient for me to become a vegan. But I have also been influenced by graphic or moving depictions in videos and films; and I am certain these media are the main eye-openers for the bulk of the human population. There was also the example set by new friends in the "movement," and surely community and modeling are powerful factors for everyone.

Even so, my omnivorous friends have seen the videos too, and have had the example of myself before them . . . and still they eat

their meat and dairy and eggs. So I offer no panacea.[57] But I do think desirism needs to (i.e., I want it to) incorporate the cultivation of desire by nonrational and not just rational means. The formula for desirism may therefore call for modification, say:

> Figure out what you want, by means of rational inquiry *and wide experience*, and then figure out how to get it, consistently with your vetted desires.

[57] And always I must keep in mind that the bottom line is only *getting what I want*. So my friends might equally lament that I am denying myself the pleasures of omnivorism, and attribute it to some defect in my capacity for pleasure or whatever.

4

It's Just a Feeling

No Problem

It is amazing to realize that feelings are at the root of everything that matters. It is amazing because "mattering" feels objective. But that's the point: It *feels* objective. Just as a hallucination can feel real. Feelings are themselves real, of course, but as feelings, not necessarily as signifiers of something beyond themselves – again, just as a hallucination of x does not present an actual x. "Is this a dagger which I see before me?" asks Macbeth. Well, no, it isn't. Just so, the sublimity of a Beethoven symphony, the infamy of the murder of innocents, the unthinkability of shoving a commuter into the path of an oncoming train . . . all are projections of feelings: aesthetic transport, outrage, unqualified inhibition. This is amazing. This is shocking. This fact about feelings elicits its own bevy of strong feelings.

Another fact about feelings is that they are subjective. By this I mean not only that they need not signify anything objective (except their

J. Marks, *Hard Atheism and the Ethics of Desire*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-43799-6_4

own existence), but also that they belong to someone, the "subject" of the experience or feeling. Thus, when I say, "It is amazing," I mean, "It is amazing *to me*." I might sometimes also mean that most people would react the same way and share that feeling with me; but the only thing I can say with assurance is that *I* have the feeling. Someone else might even be simply indifferent and have *no* feeling where mine is urgent and intense. And it is important to realize this (i.e., *I feel* it is important, which by now goes without saying), that the conviction of a shared feeling is part of the objective pull of a strong feeling, and not necessarily indicative of something real or true.

Yet another amazing and important fact, therefore, is that feelings are relative. Different people will have different feelings about the same thing, even conflicting feelings. Indeed, one can oneself have conflicting feelings about something. This will generate its own feeling: of indecision, torment, etc. But the default of feeling is that *other* people share whatever feeling one feels oneself (even if the feeling is of being torn between opposing feelings). This is like the default of credulity: When someone tells us something, we tend to believe it is true, and that others believe it too. The belief that others share our feelings may even be a subset of that basic credulity; for if we feel strongly about something, then it must be *true*, and *hence* others will feel it too – just as when we see a bolide crossing the sky, we are confident that if we point to it, others will see it. But in the case of feelings, this turns out to be surprisingly, amazingly false a great deal of the time.

But perhaps the most amazing and important thing of all is that feelings are enough. Enough for what? For things to matter, for things to be valued, for things to motivate us, for life to have meaning, etc. This has often been doubted. There is a widespread mistrust of subjectivity, which is why people strive so mightily to assert and convince themselves and others that their own beliefs and values are objective. I diagnose the main conflicts in human history and today as due to the insistence on objectivity by vying ideologies, no matter whether religious or secular. Meanwhile professional philosophers continue to secrete endless quantities of mental sweat devising explanations of how morality could be objective. There has been a long-time worry that, without an objective

source of value, such as God, anything is permissible.[1] On the other hand, a characteristic lament of some self-styled existentialists is this: Why bother doing or caring about anything since nothing matters?[2] The very malady of modernism is despair over the illusoriness of our objective projections into the world. Perhaps the most telling contemporary symptom is to find this malaise at the heart of a popular video game, Mass Effect. As one commentator[3] notes:

> The value of *Mass Effect* as a science fiction universe is that it is a critical starting point for discussion about the purpose of humanity in a materialistic universe. Without an answer to that question, there is no real reason for Ender to defeat the Buggers, or for humanity to seek out new life and new civilizations, or for us to not let non-organic life be the torch bearer for intelligence in the universe.

But against all this I say, there is no purpose for humanity (and for anything else) *and there need be* no purpose . . . no *objective* purpose. It is enough that we have the desires we do, for desires carry in themselves their own reasons for being.[4] Furthermore, desire is enough (amazingly!) even though our desires are purely *random*, in the sense of having been caused by a countless myriad of factors over which we have little to no control[5] – genome, culture, upbringing, experiences, memories, current circumstances, etc. ad inf. What matters is something – whatever it is, however subjective, relative, and random – that

[1] This being the position of Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. And yet permissibility is itself an objectivist notion, just like rightness and wrongness (i.e., impermissibility). God not only commands but also issues licenses.

[2] Many existentialist thinkers, however, embrace subjective meaning as I do, Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* being a well-known case in point; and anyway life's meaninglessness wouldn't matter to a thoroughgoing existentialist, as Nagel (1971) pointed out at the end of his essay.

[3] Munkittrick (2012).

[4] My personal struggle to realize this is related in Marks (2013c), particularly pp. 98–101 ("The Burden of Desire") and Chapter 7. But of course Pascal noted it first: "*Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas.*"

[5] And no one else does either, so far as is apparent. And if someone were in control of our desires, then their autonomy would be similarly constrained or else utterly mysterious.

matters to me (or to you or to anyone), and not because what matters to me is itself of objective significance such that It Matters. In other words, when I say that what matters is what matters to me, I am not asserting a fact but only offering a definition. The *meaning* of "what matters" is "what I care about"; I am *not* saying that this matters (except to me, which as a matter of fact it does). Things mattering to me is not itself something that matters *tout court*, since nothing does – just as things mattering to me is not something that pleases Zeus, since there is no Zeus. But if I am consumed by the desire to travel to Mars for its own sake, even if I know I could never return and have endlessly reflected on the implications of that . . . or if I am fighting for my life and my family's survival against the barrel bombs of Bashar al-Assad and the beheadings of ISIS . . . then the cosmic pointlessness of these ventures is less bothersome than a gnat's bite.

Yet somehow the contingency and subjectivity of mattering and value have not only escaped the notice of most of us, and indeed been denied by our deep belief that what matters to us is what matters *tout court* (incoherent as that belief might be); but there has also been implanted in us (by the same undirected yet inexorable forces of biological evolution, etc., that account for what matters to us) the deep *desire* that the things that matter to us, matter *tout court*. I suspect (inspired by some of the Buddha's insights) that this clinging to objective value is a product of egotism. This may be best revealed by a very special objective value, namely, that of humanity itself. There are some thinkers who accept what I have said about the subjectivity of values but with a single exception, namely the value of humanity. Their reasoning is that since all (other) value comes from human beings, as the "subjects" who "project" their preferences into other things, human beings themselves must be the true possessors of objective value. We are the creators of value in the universe, as it were. Without us there would be no value. Hence only we have *objective* value.[6]

But my response to this (when I heard the argument expressed just yesterday) was that this argument is premised on the stunning presumption that *other* animals do not also value things. Do not birds value, say, a tree, the way we humans value, say, our home . . . or even a tree?

[6] This is my attempt to parse Immanuel Kant.

My interlocutor replied that birds do not value a tree the way we value our home or even a tree. I could grant that, but so what? Of course what birds find of value in a tree may (or then again may not) be quite different from what we value in a home or in a tree. But the relevant fact is that they value it. So if there were no human beings at all in the universe but only birds, there would still be value in the universe. In fact, even with human beings in the universe, the particular values that birds bring into it owe nothing to us and everything to them. So does that give birds objective value too?

Here my interlocutor balked, because her real agenda was a Western religious one – to vindicate the special place the Bible (on one interpretation) gives to human beings in the scheme of things. Our failure to find any trace of other intelligent life in the universe (indeed, any other life at all) has also fed into this anthropocentrism. To me of course it appears to be sheer egotism: the egotism of our species in this case. Here too I see desire at the root: We so desire to be Number One that we construct our entire cosmology on the presumption of our centrality (even literally in the Aristotelian case). But the egotism inherent in objective value can be found everywhere. One need not hold that the only thing in the universe to have objective value is human beings, in order to derive self-importance from what one values. The very attribution of objective value to whatever things happen to be (the objects of) one's own preferences – whether this be a particular wine, a particular motion picture, a particular way of regarding other animals and people, a particular way of bringing up children, of structuring society, of treating prisoners of war, a particular attitude towards going to war at all, etc. ad inf. – is a sign to me of conceit. Why not call a spade a spade and simply refer to them as "my values" or "our values"?[7] Because we are by nature proud.[8]

[7] As a matter of fact I have noticed, to my pleasant surprise, even politicians increasingly using this formulation. But this just goes to show what I expressed in "Morality Is More" in Chap. 2, that "political correctness" is not enough to bring about a real revolution in meta-ethical attitude. For it seems pretty clear to me that "our values" is being used by at least some of these politicians as a code word for "the true and correct values."

[8] "Ego" may be further implicated by our *egoism*, that is, not just by our *egotism* to be Number One but also by our desire for our own welfare.

Thus is the essential insight that I am delineating in this section, resisted by us, heart and mind. What a magnificent unfolding of reality is experienced, therefore, and what a relief from endless tension and struggle, when we come to realize the truth of meaninglessness *and* that it is nothing to dread. It is the loss of exactly nothing. The whole world remains. Indeed, it is my belief that there is a gain. For the realization of the thoroughgoing randomness and subjectivity of our values does counsel a certain modesty, namely, that our ethics not outstrip our desires. Thus, if we have become constituted as egoists, then nothing will move us that does not appeal first and foremost to our own welfare. If we have become constituted as communitarians, then nothing will move us that does not appeal first and foremost to our community's welfare. If we have become constituted as aesthetes, then nothing will move us that does not appeal first and foremost to our sense of the beautiful and the ugly. If we have become constituted as a combination of all of these and many other things, then we will be susceptible to many appeals, and to varying degrees, but not to all appeals. And if we vary one from another in our elementary constitutions, then only certain appeals (if any) can be expected to move all of us.

Since ethics presumes that one *can* do whatever an ethics recommends (or *requires* on a moralist accounting), the realization of our constitutional limitations and tendencies implies that ethics must have relatively modest ambitions. And a modest ethics strikes me as a good thing because it reframes our conflicts and disagreements in a way that would make them less destructive.[9] This is because they thereby cease to be a clash of opposing truths and are understood instead to be a difference of preferences. The supposed truths are in reality appearances (or so it now appears to me) because they are constructed not only of (in the best case) informed and rational beliefs, but also of (in the best case) informed and rational desires.

Yet another amazing fact is that our desires and feelings and values and motives and actions can be rational even though Hume was right

[9] That is, as a rule. But I would never rule out that some desires, even rational desires, can be implacable. A moralist would add: And ought to be! But of course an anti-Nazi moralist would hold that only anti-Nazi desires *ought* to be implacable, whereas a Nazi moralist would hold that only Nazi desires *ought* to be implacable. And furthermore God is on our side . . . whoever *we* happen to be.

about reason when he wrote, "Reason is, and ought[10] only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (*A Treatise of Human Nature* 2.3.3). Our desires etc. are rational provided they are the result of rational inquiry. Thus, for example,[11] if I have researched animal agriculture and determined that it involves massive cruelty and I have researched nutrition and determined that I do not need animal protein to be healthy and I love animals more than I love the taste of their flesh, then (simplifying and all other things equal) I will become a vegetarian and (hence) it is rational for me to do so; but if I have researched animal agriculture and determined that it involves massive cruelty and I have researched nutrition and determined that I do not need animal protein to be healthy but I love the taste of animal flesh more than I love animals, then I will remain a carnivore and (hence) it is rational for me to do so.

There are moralists who maintain that there would be no relativism if our rational inquiry were truly thorough and ideally cognized. Thus, we would all be vegetarians or we would all be carnivores if we underwent the desirist process, and hence a major obstacle to calling this morality after all would have been removed.[12] I consider this a fond hope, perhaps motivated (even among the supposed secularists) by religious yearnings for a God who grounds moral truth (especially when it coincides with our own preferences). But simply to insist that this is the case, and in the face of so much evidence to the contrary (and not to mention an evolutionary story that makes it appear completely implausible), is to make one's hypothesis unfalsifiable, and hence not truly empirical.[13] It becomes exactly analogous to the religious claim that if you have not gotten what you prayed for, then you did not pray sincerely enough.

[10] I take this "ought" to be nonmoral, as if to say, "*If you want to speak sensibly*, you ought not assume reason is anything other than passion's slave."

[11] Harking back to "Explanations and Reasons" in Chap. 3.

[12] Cf. Smith (1994).

[13] Compare this supportive passage from Prinz (2015):

> Moral sense theorists might reply that this diversity is illusory. They might say, for example, that people would stop condemning victimless crimes on reflection. That claim is amenable to empirical testing, and so far the tests provide little support. (p. 22)

Furthermore, no matter how informed and rational a desire may be, it is not the sort of thing that can yield a truth. No matter how informed and rational is my desire that the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution be repealed, it cannot be *true* that it *ought* to be. Therefore I continue to debate its defenders passionately because I care about the issue, but I am less likely than of yore, when I was an objectivist about values, to vilify them, or to refuse to compromise with them. If this were reciprocated, then there might actually be significant progress on the gun issue in my country. But as things stand, we are stymied, just as are Israelis and Palestinians, and all others whose opposed values are absolute.[14] One cannot compromise about absolute values any more than one can compromise about whether the Earth is discoid or spheroid.

Only the possibility of epistemic mistake stands between confident beliefs and intolerance, and it is an uphill battle for epistemic modesty to temper strong belief. But self-identified preferences, no matter how strong, have tolerance built into them. Opponents with absolute values are like soldiers at war, where "all's fair" because only winning matters; opponents with subjective values are like team sportspersons, where winning only has meaning if it is done in accordance with the mutually accepted rules.[15] Absolute valuers believe that what they value is in fact valuable (or right or good or beautiful or funny or interesting, etc.) and what their opponents value is not, or even has disvalue. Subjective valuers believe that what they value and what their opponents value are just the products of different feelings (assuming equal due diligence as regards the relevant facts, since a fully rational or sound value will be based on *true* beliefs), and so it is an "even playing field" as regards their respective values' inherent import (which is in fact zero).[16]

[14] I am, of course, not, qua desirist, advocating compromise on all issues (not to mention cases where the other party is not interested in compromise). Agreeing to allow ISIS to wipe out all Yazidis in return for their freeing all Christians is not an option (for me, at least in my present uninvolved circumstances contemplating the issue in the abstract).

[15] Of course that is an idealistic statement, and expresses, as always, my preferences as much as relevant facts. Many of my college student(-athlete)s used to laugh at my conception of sportsmanship. Winning is what gets you prestige, money, a career, they would inform me, in sports as anywhere else.

[16] Wright et al. (2014) offers a very similar interpretation of supportive empirical research.

Problem

I have done my best to persuade you that desirism is an attractive philosophy. But I am also trying to reassure myself that the desirist project is sound. How could I deny that there is always room for doubt, not just purely hypothetically, but on the reasonable grounds that, even putting aside my preferences, desirism has a shaky foundation in intuitions about broad empirical issues? Specifically, is it really true that both the individual and society could function at least as well (by our own lights) as we do now without believing in a morality of the sort I have characterized and discredited? Many intelligent and sincere critics have argued quite fervently that the answer is "No!" I have answered those critics here and elsewhere.[17] But in the private (now public) recesses of my heart and mind, I cannot be sure.

Of course that is only the way of philosophy – and a healthy way it is, as opposed to dogmatism. But it also may seem to trivialize the philosophic enterprise. For are we free to entertain these grand theories only so long as they can never be put to the definitive test? So what would that test of desirism look like? We could suppose there was a philosophical pill that would strip the individual of any belief in categorical imperatives and absolute truths of the moralist (or other evaluative – axiological, in the philosopher's parlance) sort, and, in addition, instill a desirist spirit (to figure out what you want by means of rational inquiry, etc.). Then we would see what happens, and whether we liked the result and preferred it to prepill conditions.[18] In effect I have already swallowed such a pill, but only in my imagination, and my imagination – as depicted in this book – may have erred about the consequences. So the real test would involve a real pill.

Now, I have predicted that the results would be to my liking, by comparison with my moralist existence. And similarly I have predicted that if all of us took the pill, the resultant society would be to my liking, and to the liking of most of us – we would prefer it to our present

[17] In most technical detail in Marks (2013d) and with many everyday examples in Marks (2013e).

[18] Not so simple. Read on.

society. But might not things go horribly wrong? Is not any such change or experiment always subject to unintended consequences? Yes, of course; we all know the admonition, "Be careful what you wish for." That is why so much testing is done before a new drug is approved, etc. Still – equally obviously – this does not mean we do not want to make changes, or that we are never prepared to take risks. So the mere possibility of catastrophe would not be sufficient reason to deter a trial of the desirist pill if we had persuasive reasons to think desirism might benefit us greatly.[19]

In an actual trial I or we might also try graduated dosages, and also the effects of the pill might wear off soon. This would provide some insurance against catastrophes. If things were not going well, the trial could be halted and, we would hope, any adverse effects reversed. But let us imagine that the change is irrevocable. What catastrophe might result? Three sorts of unintended negative consequences occur to me: (1) negative consequences instead of the positive ones predicted, (2) an unexpected negative response to the predicted consequences we had assessed as positive prior to the trial, and (3) negative consequences in addition to (and perhaps even due to) the positive ones predicted.

An example of (1) – negative consequences resulting from the inducement of desirism instead of the positive ones predicted – would be that anger remained in our emotional repertoire after the transformation. I have argued that anger is inherently moralist, and indeed one of my reasons for liking desirism is that its perfect inculcation would therefore mean the elimination of anger. But maybe anger at having one's (nonmoral) desires frustrated can be just as intense as moral anger. So this experimental result would indicate that I had been mistaken about that implication, that my analysis of anger had been incorrect, and hence my preference for amoralism unsound at least to that degree.

Another instance of (1) would be that the transformation to desirism actually heightened some negative emotional response that I had not

[19] So even if there were a real pill or the prospect of one, a prepill investigation such as the present one would be in order to determine whether to take it.

even anticipated, say, egoism. Maybe, given human nature, if we truly transformed into beings whose governing motivation was to figure out what we wanted, etc., it would turn out that egoism would become even more prevalent than it is at present. My expectation has been that humanity would become more compassionate and less selfish; but instead we might become more *rationally* selfish, that is, egoistic. We can trim our desires all we please with rational and informed considerations, but if at base we are concerned mainly about Number One, then this could manifest even more powerfully than if we had remained in a confused state. Obviously I just don't know without taking the pill.[20] But such a result would turn me and maybe everybody else into a type of person that, prepill anyway, I just don't want us to be.

An example of (2) – an unexpected negative response to the predicted consequences of inducing desirism that we had assessed as positive prior to the trial – would be that the pill works as advertised, but desirism turns out to be not so jolly as I had anticipated, quite the contrary. For instance, maybe the most rational life and the most rational society would be conditions that I would, ex hypothesi, be motivated to pursue; and yet I would come to feel that I was a mere cog in the great machine of human existence and ultimately judge life not worth living. A rationalist would typically object by arguing that rationality itself rules out such a possibility since it is infinitely adaptable, even to the discovery that its explicit workings are emotionally unsatisfying. In such a case, rationality would simply advise *not* always "figuring out what you want by means of rational inquiry, etc." But this won't work, will it? For wouldn't following such a recommendation be tantamount to forswearing desirism itself?

Perhaps there is a happy medium (which is in fact what I've had in mind all along), such that a desirist would figure out that the way he or she really wanted to live was to be generally rational but of course not to be explicitly

[20] But, as noted earlier, a recent study (Bear and Rand [2016]) claims to show something in this very vein:

> Although many have suggested that it takes cold, deliberative reasoning to get people to engage in this kind of prosocial behavior, our evolutionary model finds precisely the opposite. It is not reflective thought that allows people to forego their selfish impulses, but rather reflective thought that undermines the impulse to cooperate.

reasoning about everything. Desirism would advise a "*middle* way" of rationality; that would be the *most* rational way to live. Living remains an art or a skill, no matter how rational the guiding motive. We must stipulate, then, that the philosopher's pill would allow for this reflexive flexibility.

Does (2) still pose any problem? What if it turned out that the middle way was not sufficient to make life seem worth living and that in fact only a wholesale overthrow of desirism would suffice? For example, maybe a desirist would "figure out" – after rational reflection – that what he or she really wanted was to live without any rational calculating whatever. After all, some people have a temperament that thrives on spontaneity and novelty. Or perhaps reason could be accommodated up to a point but not fully embraced by some (or all?) people because they find essential to a meaningful and motivated existence various supernatural or other beliefs that fly in the face of reason but are accepted by "faith" or "intuition" – perhaps the very beliefs in a commanding God and morality whose elimination is part of the desirist program as I have envisaged it. Or maybe such emotions as anger would indeed be eliminated without the belief in morality, but people with a romantic temperament would find this unbearable. And so on. Therefore, again, desirism could prove to be a mistaken choice, at least for some people.

An example of (3) – negative consequences resulting from the inducement of desirism in addition to (and perhaps even due to) the positive ones predicted – would be discovering that the pill does indeed bring about a desirist attitude and we prefer it to our previously moralist attitude both intrinsically and instrumentally, but it also makes one highly susceptible to stroke. Obviously we are not interested in that, so let's rule out that kind of strictly organic effect ex hypothesi too.

But what if desirism were disappointing due to its very success? Thus, suppose the pill eliminated not only the belief in morality but also all anger and guilt, as I anticipate it would, and none of us wanted to return to our prior state. Might it turn out that various important human projects could then never be motivated?[21] Think of the analogy of a pill

[21] Prinz (2011) argues quite ingeniously, and on the basis of empirical research, that anger and guilt are to be preferred to empathy in the ethical life due to their respective effects.

that removed our ability to experience physical pain. We might never wish to turn back the clock on that one. On the other hand, we might find ourselves at a serious handicap in situations where, say, the pain would have warned us of impending tissue damage or of some internal condition in need of attention. In the desirist case, perhaps this would prove to be a serious problem only where there were other people who were not desirists, who would then have the motivational advantage in any competition or conflict. I have suggested, for instance, that Hitler was an arch moralist, so we amoralists could find ourselves unable to turn back his onslaughts. But even if there were no moralists at all in our community or even on the planet, would not a prudent strategy of survival recognize that evolutionary mutants could arise at any time . . . if only by extraterrestrial invasion? So desirism might not even be adaptive and might put our (and hence its own) very survival in jeopardy.

But we might also analogize desirism to the removal of the *suffering* component of pain. As paradoxical as it sounds, some clinical cases of feeling no pain may be more precisely characterized as feeling the pain but not caring about it. Some physiologists seem to recognize this when they distinguish between nociceptors that respond to tissue damage and C-fibers that make us *hurt*. The effect of a sedative is similar. This suggests that the pain pill we would desire is one that would leave intact our capacity to perceive pain, that is, tissue damage or other organic condition, so that we could learn to become more aware of it and respond appropriately (compare biofeedback) even though we no longer *suffered* from it. Just so for the desirism pill: I would offer as substitute for the moralist motivation that has been removed, enhanced awareness and cultivation of compassion and reflection. Granted, it might not work as well; I know that I am less likely to stay awake if my clock alarm plays music than if it buzzes. But life is full of trade-offs. The relative strengths of our considered desires would decide.

But this is why we need a real empirical test, a pill. I cannot help but notice that my (supposedly) desirist intuitions are compromised – not only by ignorance of the actual consequences of the adoption of a desirist regime, but even by the very nature of my intuitive responses. The latter is really a twofold problem. Since I was a moralist for nearly six decades before "seeing the light," I might, like the codger I am, still be wearing

the morality-tinted glasses I thought I had taken off. Therefore how can I ever be sure that what I take to be a desirist response on my part is not in fact moralist or more moralist than not, or that what I take to be a moralist response of someone else's is not in fact desirist or more desirist than not? An example of the latter: Might Hitler have been the very epitome of a desirist despite my identifying him as an arch moralist? Perhaps it is my own tendency to categorize things and people as good or evil that makes me assume Hitler was doing the same (or take him at his word that he was), when in fact he may have been conceptualizing people who got in the way of his desires simply as impediments to be removed (and perhaps using moralist language like a Machiavellian politician to make a populist appeal). "No hard feelings, Janek. We just want the Lebensraum."[22] Maybe my main evidence against moralism is based on a misdiagnosis of *all* of the people who are messing up the world as moralists when in fact the problem is precisely that most of them are already desirists.

By the same token, how do I know that *I* am a *desirist*? Take my response to the environmental movement, which movement (it seems to me, qualifying as per the previous paragraph) has become more and more explicitly moralist (indeed, religious, now that certain evangelicals and even the Pope have come on board[23]). My spontaneous reaction to this moralism has been scorn. To me it seems silly and absurd to have to insist that there is something objectively wrong and bad and evil about exhausting our natural resources and polluting our habitat and wreaking havoc with the habitats of other animals we care about and causing climate change that will raise sea levels and wash away our coastal and island communities, etc. Isn't it enough that we surely *do not want* these

[22] I can't help but think of the man in the Monty Python routine about the cheese shop, who courteously told his victim, "I'm terribly sorry but I'm going to have to shoot you."

[23] And in fact members of all faiths worldwide. In this regard see for example, the work of Mary Evelyn Tucker. Furthermore, the environmental movement has probably always been religious at base; for example, Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* has been viewed in this way. I myself have suggested that the concern about preserving species is probably not coincidentally resonant of the Garden of Eden's view of species origins, since a truly scientific attitude would accept species change as the norm (including of course the extinction of our own). More on this in "Stop the World" in the sequel.

things to happen? I even see it as *counterproductive* to turn this into a moral crusade, since this engenders additional defensiveness and resistance by, and hence strife with, opponents of environmental reforms, which must *hinder* progress toward the goals we *all want*.

Now, perhaps the net result of the moralism of environmentalism will be positive for reforms: Maybe the passion for them will overcome the resistance to them (and more effectively than if the environmental movement had not taken a moralist turn). As I say, this is one of the big unknowns that a real test – ultimately the environmental movement itself – must determine (although it could *never* be determined if this was the *best* strategy, due to the counterfactual element). But perhaps even more telling for my own, *desirist* crusade is that I spoke of my *scorn* for the moralist turn in the environmental movement. Isn't that a moralist attitude itself? Would it really be possible for me to get worked up about the moralism of the environmental movement without being moralist myself? If not, then how could I plausibly suppose that the environmental movement would be able to motivate sufficient response to turn around climate change, etc., without itself being morally impassioned?

The problem of knowing my own motives is even more fundamental than how I react to others' (perceived) moralism. In situations where I myself am moved by some cause or situation in a way that seems to me to be amoralist, can I be sure of the nature of my own reaction? Take the main example I have been using throughout this book: veganism. As a desirist vegan, I claim to be moved by rational and emotion-based but not moral considerations. However, I have also granted that my response has probably been conditioned by my previous moralism, and even now partakes of most of the same reasons for my originally moralist veganism. Thus, whereas as a moralist I came to the conclusion that *it was wrong* to eat animals and animal products because of the cruelty and killing involved in animal agriculture and the nutritional and gustatory adequacy of a vegan diet, now I find that what I call my *compassion* is sufficient to keep me just as committed (and I suspect that compassion was doing most of the motivational work when I thought my allegiance to *doing the right thing* was my paramount motivator).

But there is more going on than that in my current motivation. I can readily sense the old moralist attitude in my feelings about nonvegans. I really do have contempt for them. I have been dismissing this contempt as my atavistic retention of a discredited moralism, which after all I practiced for most of my life and which may even be hard-wired in all of us. But it may be more than that. When I was a moralist, I subscribed to the Kantian philosophy that one must never treat anyone merely as a means.[24] This had come to me as a revelation when I was a young philosopher; it seemed to me to capture the essential intuition of what made something wrong or not. For example, deceiving someone was wrong, not because it was an instance of deceiving someone, but because deceiving involves treating someone as a mere thing to be used for some purpose. I developed a very strong emotional distaste and disgust for this manner of "treating" people and animals. It struck me as so egotistical, so selfish; so apparently I was already primed to dislike egoism and egotism.[25]

I still feel the strong emotional pull of this idea. Is it really only "atavism"? Or is it essential to what I, as a desirist, characterize so baldly as a "dislike"? I have come up with a desirist response even to the possibility that Kantianism remains at the root of my veganism.[26] I acknowledge that my attitude and motivation are indeed Kantian; however, I deny that they need any longer be moralistic. This is for the simple reason that my aversion to egotism and exploitation is not something I any longer take to be the perception of a timeless truth, namely, that these things are inherently bad or wrong, but only *feelings* I *happen to* have. I recognize

[24] I understood "anyone" to include nonhuman animals, although Immanuel Kant himself did not. See Marks (2009), Appendix 3.

[25] There are complications here (of course). For example, it is possible to use someone in the Kantian sense even if you are doing it for the welfare of others and not oneself . . . perhaps even the welfare of the person being used (although then it might be argued that it is not a case of "*mere*" use). And not only that: According to Kant it is possible to merely use *oneself*. He probably would have considered prostitution to be an example of that (although, again, if this is for one's own purposes, such as to stay alive, it might be interpreted as not a case of *mere* use). But although surely theoretically crucial, these fine points need not enter into the question I am exploring now.

[26] Cf. my analogous analysis of desirist utilitarianism in "Desirist Adaptations" in Chap. 2.

that my attitude is both subjective and contingent, having no further significance.

But is this true? I don't mean: Is it true that my attitude has no objective basis? I mean: Is it true that I don't believe it has? Or even more to the point: Is it true that, were I finally (with or without the aid of a pill) to rid myself of the atavistic belief in morality that adulterates my responses, would I still "not like" egoism and egotism and exploitation, or sufficiently so to motivate my veganism? Would my compassion for the animals be strong enough to pick up any slack? After all, that compassion must contend against the appetite I still possess for meat and dairy and eggs. I also have a gnawing uncertainty about the healthiness of a vegan diet. I am even aware of arguments that personal veganism does not save any animals; and my customary dismissal of this possibility as *irrelevant* by referring to my not wanting to be *complicit* in animal exploitation, is surely suggestive of a moralist motive, is it not?

Truth be told, then, I do not know whether I myself instantiate desirism. I do not know my own motives, my own springs of action; or at least I do not know if I know them. And the grounds for doubt are more than merely speculative, given the countless irruptions of clearly moralist feelings into my response repertoire. How can I know what is doing the work, x or y, if x and y are always found together in my motivation? The torturer who clearly loves his work must always be suspect when he declares that his prime motive is duty. Similarly, my *denial* that duty motivates my veganism must always be suspect if my compassion for animals is always accompanied by contempt for people who exploit them.

So perhaps I have been kidding myself that I have been experimenting with amoralism; that I, in effect, took that philosopher's pill myself on that fateful day of my anti-epiphany eight years ago. Certainly I can report that my friends continue to view me as morally earnest – indeed, as a person who is even *more moral* than before in having smoothed some of his previously rough *moralist* edges (here observing the distinction between being moral and being moralist that I have purposely suppressed in this book). If so, does it not undercut my claim that sufficient motivation to carry out our projects

would remain (or at least the projects that I myself view favorably) even after we had removed moralism from our psyche? It does not prove that there wouldn't; but it hardly counts as evidence that there would. And that throws into question the entire desirist project, does it not? Hence, as I say, the need for an actual empirical test of the desirist hypothesis.

But we have no such test, no such pill. In this section I have only been taking us through a thought experiment, which is just a more focused version of what I have been doing throughout the book. That is why this section comes in the final chapter and adds a giant question mark to all that has come before. I do believe that I have adduced many relevant considerations and vignettes in favor of desirism. I have even cited some supportive (but also some countervailing) empirical studies. And for the last eight years, my own life has served as an informal experiment. But as my identifying scorn and contempt among the components of my own basis for judging the outcomes of these investigations attests, my final conclusion is surely tainted.[27]

And that's not all. Suppose we *were* able to perform the test. There would need to be some kind of neutral or consensus agreement between the moralist prepill and the desirist postpill as to what counts as better, would there not? But it is unclear whether that would be possible. If the difference between the two states were something like a migraine headache going away, there would be no problem. But if, say, a person after taking the desirist pill judged the results to be excellent, whereas prepill, had she known what they were to be, she would have been appalled, which judgment is to count? Thus there may be an inescapable question begging in any "findings" of the experiment. John Stuart Mill tackled a similar dilemma when he asserted, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is only because they only know their own side of the question" (*Utilitarianism*, ch. 2). But does this not simply ignore the question of

[27] I continue the examination of the possible compromising of the evidence I have adduced in "One Person's Ceiling" below.

from which perspective one is then to judge? Experimental psychologists would try to control for ordering effects like this by running multiple trials or groups with different sequences of experience. But it still might turn out that satisfied fools prefer being fools and unsatisfied Socrates prefers being Socrates. "...I asked myself on behalf of the oracle, whether I would like to be as I was, neither having their knowledge nor their ignorance, or like them in both; and I made my answer to myself and to the oracle that I was better off as I was" (Socrates in Plato's *Apology* 23a).

Perhaps this is all we could ever expect from the attempt to answer a philosophical question like "How shall one live?" And so...

A Chapter I Cannot Write

I would like to write a chapter that demonstrates the appeal of desirism to nondesirists, and in particular, of course, to moralists. Unfortunately I am unable to do this, and the reason is one of my own arguments against moralism, namely, that there is no single morality or universal agreement on what is right and what is wrong and what is permissible. Indeed, my impression is that, far from abiding by the dictum that you can't get an ought from an is, morality allows getting any ought at all from any is whatever. Hence, as much as I am tempted to assert things like, "The moralist will like desirism because a desirist world would be a less aggressively contentious world," I cannot do so because, despite the appeal of such a world to my own conscience (i.e., morality), I cannot be sure that it would appeal to everyone's conscience. In fact I am sure it wouldn't. And even if there *were* broad consensus on some things, what would that show about what is right or wrong or permissible? There is broad consensus that it is permissible to eat other animals under normal circumstances, and yet, qua moralist, to me it is wrong, wrong, wrong.[28]

[28] As must be apparent by now, everything I know about ethics I learned from animal ethics; cf. Marks (2013a).

Is It Just a Foil?

What if, despite all of the difficulties discussed above, I were somehow able to make a convincing case for desirism. Yet a final impasse might loom. For if we (whoever that may be) became convinced that morality is indeed a myth and we would, in many respects, be better off believing that, we might still be convinced that we simply cannot dispense with (believing) it. This "cannot" could be of two sorts. (1) Perhaps we are psychologically incapable of conceiving the world as anything other than a realm of absolute values of the moral sort. So we would be in a situation analogous to the rational hallucinator who knows that she is experiencing hallucinations and yet cannot shake the belief that they are real (i.e., *not* hallucinations); or the person who "knows" that hamburgers "come from" cows that have been terribly mistreated and yet "really can't" *believe* it; or the good *burgher* who knows that *human beings* are being slaughtered by the hundreds of thousands in the camp next door but really can't believe it.[29] (2) Perhaps we are fully capable of believing that morality is a myth, and yet understand (or believe anyway) that human life or society would fall apart without the belief in morality. After all, is this not precisely why (1) may be the case, because evolution implanted the belief in morality (like the belief in God) firmly within us?

Among the already small cadre of amoralists, many perhaps most are of the latter (2) persuasion. Some of them, as previously discussed, have suggested a "fictionalism" of moral "pretense" to help us get by. But would that form of cognitive dissonance be sustainable in a crunch when true moral grit was required to save the day? If (1) were the case, then perhaps so. But yours truly remains skeptical. Therefore if the belief in morality really did have essential utility for the things a desirist cared about, he or she would be well-advised to hide her candle under a bushel. A policy of secrecy and deception would be called for. But even that would not help the desirist him- or herself. Here a voluntary lobotomy might be in order.

[29] All of these examples, by the way, cast doubt on the standard analysis of knowledge as justified true belief, since it seems we *can* know things without believing them.

Thus would obtain the conditions for the perfect storm of ethical absurdity: desirists finding themselves intellectually incapable of believing something that they must believe, either viscerally because of their very constitution, or else on pain of extinction due to the consequences of their disbelief. Perhaps evolution has seen fit to keep a few of us disbelievers around only as a foil to keep all the rest of the populace on their guard and suitably stimulated to continue to affirm their faith.

My main means or method of countering this ignoble fate has been to offer as many realistic examples as I can of the comparable not to mention superior utility of a morality *substitute* for achieving our rational goals. But here too lie difficulties. Read on.

One Person's Ceiling

The extended examples I employ usually involve personal experiences, which, as noted in "Problem" above and "Third Pass" in Chap. 1, introduce obvious pitfalls into the investigation. The method I have chosen surely showcases the hall of mirrors that is our human condition. Thus, it is not lost on me that the very nature of some of the episodes I relate, a fortiori the lessons I draw from them, depends on how I am interpreting events, including the crucial identifications of various actions as moralist or amoralist. But I still see the value of using personal experiences as illustrative of a genuine engagement with theoretical questions, since they can ground intuitions that are not merely speculative. That these experiences are still not guaranteed to be real ones either, and may instead be but the skewed interpretations of a moralist amoralist with who knows what other human oh so human psychological quirks and biases,[30] is a hazard from which no method is immune, I submit.

So let me tell a tale that makes this very issue the centerpiece. Its overt aim is to illustrate yet another disadvantage of moralism, namely, a tendency to engender defensiveness. For our desire not to be considered

[30] And now embarrassingly or winningly put on display, as the case may be.

morally guilty or blameworthy (and perhaps only secondarily, not to *be* guilty) is so pervasive and powerful that we all carry a chip of resentment on our shoulders . . . to the point of inducing hallucinations of censure where none exists. But in this story, who is the hallucinator?

I was visiting a friend for an overnight stay. I finally crawled under the covers in the guest room in contented anticipation of much-needed sleep, and must have nodded off fairly quickly. But at some point I was awakened by a loud rumbling noise. There was no way I would ever get back to sleep with that noise. I effortfully pulled off the covers and walked into the hallway to see if it might be the furnace, the guest room being in the basement. But it wasn't. I returned to the bedroom and the noise was as loud as ever. Not only was sleeping out of the question, but the enclosed room began to feel like a torture chamber, probably due to the amplifying effect of darkness. I was loath to go upstairs and wake up my host. Fortunately I discovered that by relocating the bedding to a couch in the corner of the room, I was able to tolerate the sound, and I eventually fell back to sleep.

The next morning as waking consciousness returned, the sound suddenly stopped. A little while later as I was walking upstairs to join my friend for breakfast, I was actively pondering whether to say anything about the noise. Why even hesitate? Precisely because I am well-versed in the ways of moralism, and my friend is a particularly moralistic fellow; so I actually anticipated an unfriendly interpretation of anything I might say. And this is exactly what happened. I figured I did need to say something since I expected to visit in future, and it's something he'd want to know about anyway to avoid discommoding guests, and I was also just plain curious. (It turned out that the noise was due to a floor fan in his bedroom immediately above the guest bedroom and bed.) But when I mentioned the sound and how oppressive it was, his immediate response was, "Nobody else ever said anything about it."

Now, this is not exactly a sympathetic response, is it? I certainly know (or would like to believe) that in his place I would have spoken very differently, expressing genuine sorrow that my guest had suffered, out of both empathy and a "selfish" desire that people whose company I enjoy would want to visit again. But instead I sensed a placing of blame . . . on the "victim." It was as if my friend were saying, "Only you would be so

sensitive as to find annoying what none of my other guests has even mentioned." And why would he mean this? Precisely because his moralism primed him to interpret my description and inquiry about an unpleasant event as implicitly *blaming him* for it. And, the aversion to being blamed being so intense in us all, his psyche automatically deflected it onto me. What does it matter even if I *were* the only one "so sensitive"? Wouldn't I still have suffered, and wouldn't he still want to prevent that?

I need not merely speculate about what was going on inside my friend's head, because this is just the sort of thing we like to get together to talk about. So after I had unloaded my analysis on him (this actually came in an email after I had left), he replied as follows:

> There are some fairly significant different facts as I recall the incident. The entire conversation started by you asking whether I turned something off, and you asked this in a clearly upset and agitated way. That may or may not be significant, but it seems to me that before the conversation began you were already disturbed and primed to be morally judgmental and offended. Moreover, your analysis of my initial comment ("you are the first one to mention . . . ") about what was going on in me psychologically, does not resonate with what I recall feeling at the time. I thought there was a practical issue I was trying to get at, namely, whether I was confronted with a problem I would have to figure out for the occasional guest to ensure she slept well when she was visiting, or was I disturbing most of my guests, and Joel was the first guest that was simply forthright enough to let me know that it was a problem. In other words, my comment that you're the first one to say the fan kept him up, was not blaming you but trying to get at a relevant fact by noting the background information that I had to that point.
>
> It seems to me that if one did want to interpret my comment in a moralistic way, as is your take on it, you only have at best half of the correct interpretation. I could see how you think I was trying to deflect blame (although I do not think it was mostly, if at all, about that) from myself, but that you would think I was trying to therefore assign blame to you strikes me as odd, but perhaps tellingly odd. It occurs to me that your attachment to *amoralism* is in part motivated by the fact that you are constantly feeling morally judged by others, even when, perhaps very often, there's absolutely no moral judgment on their part – they simply are noting something that may involve you, or may not even involve you

> but somehow you feel implicated by comparison. You hate that you are in a world in which moralistic judgments are made about you.
>
> So, when, as you note, I went on to say more or less what you thought I should have said right after my first comment, namely that I was sorry you didn't sleep well, that we would have to figure out how to allow you to come in the future without the fan being a problem, etc. – all of which is the precise response you recommend upon reflection in your email – that all strikes you as secondary and philosophically / psychologically irrelevant because it was preceded by my noting "first time someone brought that to my attention." Your entire focus is on that comment, which you see as putting you in some sort of special category that is demeaning to you. To what extent do you think that your amoralism is motivated not by disliking being moral, but feeling badly because you think you are being shamed (although why someone should feel ashamed to be a light sleeper is puzzling).

This is of course hilarious. By "this" I don't mean my friend's reply (although *I* do find *that* hilarious) but *his and my* dialectic. Our analyses are mirror images. To my mind my friend doth protest too much; I find his account ridiculous. But of course he thinks the same way about mine, and is even suggesting that my presumed amoralism is displaying distinctly moralist tendencies (such as my feeling "ashamed"). For a third party to determine which of us is "right" would be impossible; and more likely a third party would wash her hands of any such task. Or not just wash her hands, but consign us both to the devil: "A pox on both your houses!" Only two analytic ethicists (who may both be moralists to boot) could so tease apart (or, really, entangle) their mutual actions and emotions. (I think of my own unkind *amusement* upon hearing the news that my neighbors, both of whom are divorce attorneys, were getting a divorce.) But I am content with that meta-diagnosis, since it only serves to strengthen the point I was trying to illustrate with the floor-fan episode, namely, that moralism can make us crazy . . . defensive . . . paranoid (among many other baneful things).

However, "can" is weak, and "moralism" is ambiguous. It is hardly an indictment of morality to show that moral consciousness *carried to excess* can have unwanted consequences. Indeed, the key objection to the amoralist argument could be that it conflates or equivocates over two

distinct senses of "moralism." So let me tackle the problem yet again with another tale of jousting with a friendly interlocutor, which might therefore be called . . .

Mora a Mora

A friend of mine who is a moralist has made up his mind that eating animals under most circumstances of modern life is wrong and that therefore he ought to become a vegan. Now he is trying to figure out how to do that. I have been questioning him closely in an effort to assist. For instance I asked him the following:

> So what is it that now stands in the way of your becoming a vegan? Is it that you are unfamiliar with vegan foods? or that the ones you know about do not appeal to your taste buds sufficiently to assure a long-term commitment? or that you don't know how to prepare such meals, or it seems a hassle to acquire the ingredients and learn how to use them? or that it is inconvenient for you to find vegan options at your local eateries? or that you are unsure of what supplements you would need to take to assure that your diet is nutritionally adequate? or that your intention to become a vegan, while a moral one of which you are quite convinced, is nevertheless not all that motivating for you because, frankly, you just don't care that much about animals, even though you firmly believe it is wrong to cause them unnecessary harm, etc.? or that you are loath to become the center of awkward moral conversations at the homes of nonvegan friends and relatives and colleagues? or all of the above and more?

Daunting indeed. But these are all purely practical problems, and for me, a desirist, that is what matters about ethics, that it be practicable. And I happen to be well-equipped to address all of my friend's questions, having "answered" them on my own vegan adventure. The only ingredient he needs to supply is an initial motivation, which I can help strengthen by providing him with various kinds of practical advice (for example, consult the VeganHealth Website for a concise summary of the supplements you will need to take), information (nearby Edge of the

Woods has a great vegan food bar and a vegan bakery to die for), and experience (regale him with a delicious vegan meal; take him to a local showing of Tribe of Heart's film, *Peaceable Kingdom*).

When I emailed my list of questions to my friend, his response was most interesting, to wit:

> You left out *the* major factors. I very dislike making others feel that I am morally judging them, and also think it can be a moral failing to be "moralistic." I do not want to ruin the occasion by making them feel guilty. Further I do not want to inconvenience them by cooking something special for me, or in a collective ordering (Indian, Chinese, Thai restaurants) having to order dishes to accommodate me. It is not that I will feel awkward, it is my distaste for making things awkward for them.

My friend further clarified for me that his "dislike" or "distaste" for inconveniencing his hosts, etc., is nonmoral, possibly even immoral or "weakness of will." If anything he thinks he *should* be making a social pain of himself on behalf of the animals, but is inhibited by social squeamishness or egoistic concerns (not to be viewed as annoying) or even empathetic caring (not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings). So his conflicted state is quite complex by his reckoning, involving both opposing duties and duties opposed by nonmoral or even immoral desires.

This makes my point perfectly, I think, that moralism is more trouble than it's worth. One thing I address at once, however, is my friend's distinguishing between being moral and being moralistic. He defines the latter as "using moral principles, which others accept but find hard to live up to, to enhance one's status by making others feel morally inadequate, and usually involving being smug and more certain of one's position than reason warrants." This is a familiar distinction, but one that I mean to undermine; and his remarks show why. He is conflicted by feeling he ought to stick to his veganism and also, presumably, influence others to be vegan on one hand, and, on the other, feeling he ought not to impose his views on others in a way that is moralistic, and not wanting to otherwise discommode or disconcert them. But this leaves very little maneuvering room for being a moral agent, it seems to me.

My friend is fighting his inner battle, and it's anybody's guess whether or how he will negotiate furthering his own veganism and promoting the cause without turning others off to it or making himself feel miserable. But I find all of his concerns to be counterproductive and unnecessary. Suppose, for example, that he decided on some occasion to remain omnivorous so as not to offend or inconvenience his hosts or put the other guests on the defensive and ruin the festivities. Then subsequently the hosts learn of his (purported) veganism. What are they likely to think? I imagine the hosts might be hurt that he had made them unwittingly displease him. They might also be offended that he was so morally condescending as to assume they would only be annoyed by his having "sensitive" moral scruples that they lacked or could not appreciate. (Perhaps they themselves are sympathetic to veganism and were compromising their own values out of similar concerns to my friend's.) Finally, they might view my friend as a hypocrite (and all the more likely if they themselves are feeling guilty about eating animals and looking for a way to assuage their feeling without changing their behavior). So they could confront my friend. "What do you mean you're a vegan? We saw you helping yourself to seconds of turkey at the party. And you proclaimed that the cream pie was to die for! You did not seem to be talking about the animals that died in its production!" How successfully could my friend reply? "Oh but I felt terribly guilty about it. Here, let me give you all the arguments why I, and you, should be vegan." How could they take him seriously?

But damned if he doesn't and damned if he does. For suppose my friend overcomes his inhibitions and does what he really thinks he ought to do, namely, lay a guilt trip on his hosts or dining companions, and otherwise diminish their enjoyment of the evening by adding burdens or removing food options, all the while trying to avoid being moralistic. Isn't it likely that he will be hurting his own cause by arousing resentment rather than reform? Absolutely nobody likes to be thought in the moral wrong; it is one of the most aversive feelings known to humanity. It may even be almost impossible to believe that it is true: "What, me in the wrong?!" So every manner of defensive reaction will come to the rescue. "What a stuck-up ass he is. He thinks he knows right from wrong and we don't? And what an ingrate and party pooper. I don't go out of my way on festive occasions to inform him of his own moral failings.

And his arguments don't even make sense in the first place." Of course what my friend is hoping for is, "Ah yes, it is true. We should not be doing what we are doing. We really already knew that but needed your timely reminder to bring us to our senses. Let us stop eating these foods, now and forevermore." I don't think so. And all this Sturm und Drang for what? Just so that my friend's friends would, at best, end up in the same impotent bind he finds himself in?

Contrast my friend's situation to a similar one I found myself in.[31] When one of my nonvegan hosts asked me, over a delicious vegan dinner graciously prepared by his wife, why I am a vegan, I said something like this:

> Because the production of food from animals involves every kind of cruelty to those animals, and I don't want that to happen. And since human beings – at least people in this society without special medical needs – can get along perfectly well without eating any animals or animal products, I am a vegan.

As previously explained, I find this statement disarming because it is really only or primarily about myself: *I don't want* animals to suffer or be killed needlessly. I am not asserting that it is morally wrong to make them suffer needlessly or to contribute to their needless suffering nor even that it is inherently bad for them to suffer needlessly. Hence I am not imputing any cause for moral guilt to my questioner. Nevertheless my statement is powerful for the information it conveys (that animals are made to suffer needlessly by our dietary habits) and the likely effect of that information on an auditor.

Now my vegan-aspiring friend would no doubt cry foul at this point. Isn't my argument comparing apples and oranges and hence plainly tendentious? After all, my friend could *also* be said to be speaking about himself – could he not? – since he would never be so bold as to "assert" that the others were doing something morally wrong, but only that *he thought* they were. So I am talking about what I desire and he is talking

[31] Which I introduced for a different purpose in "Explanations and Reasons" in Chap. 3.

about what he believes: same difference. OK, fair enough. Then I revise my argument thus: As I noted above, we all utterly hate *being thought* in the wrong (I suspect even more than we hate *the thought* that we *are* in the wrong). But then my friend could still cry foul: Is not this new argument yet another distinction without a practical difference? For do we not also hate being thought *cruel* and insensitive? So I desire that my hosts cease being cruel, which implies that I believe they are being cruel, while my friend desires that his hosts stop doing some wrong. How am I therefore at an advantage in "disarming" people?

That objection also has merit. Furthermore, I certainly grant that the effect of my answer could be complex. For one thing my host was not an amoralist, so he could very well feel guilt even if that were not my intention nor even an appropriate response (given that morality is a myth). But I also acknowledge that my own motives were probably not pure (i.e., purely amoral). I don't think I will ever rid myself of moralistic responses and impulses (no more than I expect ever to stop seeing straight sticks appear to be bent at the water's surface). So it would be disingenuous for me to claim that I was not feeling a bit smug at the thought that he might be feeling guilty. I was also taking advantage of his having put himself on the moral spot in the eyes of some others at the table; so he could be feeling abashed as well as guilty.

But my overt and, I think, sincere effort was only to tap into his natural feelings for suffering others. I wanted to move him (ultimately to action), not chastise him or humiliate him. And, even acknowledging the adulterated feelings of us who are human oh so human, I think this came across for the most part. Thus, the dinner proceeded without a ruining awkwardness, and yet I had made my point and perhaps achieved my aim (if only in the long run by planting a seed). But, again, I could easily imagine my vegan-aspiring friend claiming that he too wants to move people and not chastise or humiliate them; this is precisely what he means by avoiding moralism while still upholding morality. So in the end all I can say is that I believe one is more likely to avoid both the actuality and the appearance (in the eyes of moralist others with whom you disagree) of moralism and condescension and other off-putting and counterproductive attitudes, to the degree that one

has truly forsaken morality. Thus, my advice to my friend who has moral scruples about being moralistic is . . . to give up morality.

I feel I was successful in my own dinner party situation, as evidenced by the dinner invitation itself. It turns out that my interlocutor's wife is from a country, Georgia, whose cuisine lends itself well to veganism. I would never have guessed this . . . and perhaps never have found it out had I not been upfront about my dietary preference. She is delighted to have the opportunity to show off this aspect of her homeland to someone who will really appreciate it.

But there can be more at stake than whether steak is on the menu at a dinner party.[32] Let me illustrate this with an episode where policy was on the line, and, once again, the avoidance of moralism in my friend's sense was facilitated by the absence of moralism in my sense. I was one of ten experts who participated in a two-day workshop on the ethics of animal experimentation. I have deep feelings about this issue, and in my moralist days could only view animal experimenters as equivalent to sadistic Nazis.[33] Since my amoralist turn, however, I have actually befriended some of them, recognizing their deep devotion to promoting human health and even genuine caring about the animals they are using. Nevertheless, if I could push a button to end all such research, I would do so; my preferences, based on my personal biases (for instance, hating any kind of exploitation of the helpless no matter how noble the purpose) and my (imaginatively empathetic) experience, trump the utilitarian calculus in this case.

So when I made my own presentation at the workshop, I chose to emphasize how bogus is the claim made by animal experimenters, including some of my fellow workshop participants, that their work is done humanely. They only get away with this by meaning something technical by "humanely," namely, done in accordance with institutional

[32] And of course even then there is, namely, the cow.

[33] Of course "sadistic Nazis" is itself to some degree a caricature, but even if it weren't, it too has lost its moral significance for me qua amoralist. My point here is that, even qua amoralist, I remain highly averse to the intentional infliction of pain and death on innocent and innocuous individuals (human or nonhuman) solely for the benefit of other individuals, but need no longer gussy up this aversion with the further and gratuitous imputation of sadistic enjoyment of the infliction by the inflictors.

guidelines. But those guidelines permit any treatment of the animals whatsoever, no matter how painful or gruesome (and almost always fatal), provided the use of the animals is deemed necessary to fulfill the purposes of research otherwise deemed scientifically valid. The general public, however, who have ultimate authority in this area via government oversight, have no inkling of this linguistic ploy.[34]

Yet I did not wax morally indignant or outraged at all. This certainly would have had the opposite of my intended effect, since no doubt most of the others in attendance would have waxed indignant themselves at my not only implicitly impugning the motives of some of them but also ignoring the important research they believe experimentation makes possible. Instead I simply presented the evidence of actual gruesome research that is performed on animals and technically deemed humane. At one point one of the other participants objected, "Such things are not done to animals anymore." And then occurred one of those Great Moments. Another participant, who was respected by all as an authority, said, "Oh yes they are. It is routine in my own laboratory." *Quod erat demonstrandum*, as we logicians say.

But what was I trying to demonstrate? Only that animal experimentation is not humane. It was still up to the experimenters or the committees that approve their work or the legislators who permit it or the institutions and the general public who fund it, to continue to endorse animal experimentation. After all, they may still value human well-being over nonhuman well-being. But I feel I have in my own small way helped to speed up the demise of such research by making it clear to an influential group of experts that the question is not whether to pursue both medical and basic research of certain kinds by means of humane experimentation on other animals, but rather whether to pursue such research by means of *inhumane* experimentation on other animals.

The moral of this amoral story, and my ultimate reply to my friend's *tu quoque* objection to my critique of his dinner party predicament, is that the amoralist's advantage is that he or she need not adduce supposed moral

[34] I provide detailed illustrations of the abuse of language in support of the abuse of animals in Marks (2015a).

facts to win the day, but only empirical facts. It is a purely empirical fact that animal agriculture is premised on cruelty to animals and that animal experimentation is premised on inhumane treatment of animals.[35] The amoralist need not convince anyone that, *therefore*, or *furthermore*, animal agriculture and animal experimentation are *bad*, and eating animals and experimenting on them are *wrong*. The latter assertions (or "conclusions") allow the carnivore and the researcher too much wiggle room to evade the charges and defend their practices. Yes, they could try to deny the empirical facts as well. One thinks of the tobacco industry's denials of the cancer link, and many Republicans' denial of climate change. But ultimately the facts will out. And my experience, as related in both my professional example of the workshop and my personal example of dinner at my friends', is that the facts can be instantaneously effective.

Why is there this asymmetry between empirical facts and moral facts? This is the clincher: precisely because *there are no moral facts*. This is why they can be debated forever. And now we see the practical upshot. It is not the dismal one that moralists (and some existentialists) bemoan and decry. It is, on the contrary, a very hopeful result. This is where the buck stops. The facts speak for themselves. It is then left up to the decision-maker's or policy-maker's heart to respond to these newly appreciated facts.

So here is how I advised my vegan-aspiring friend. Far from being an occasion to risk inconveniencing (not to mention, insulting) hosts or companions, why not think of a meal with others as a teachable moment? Would not one who had animal suffering in view seek rather than shun occasions to influence people? Why not let them see you enjoying a vegan meal, and give them the opportunity to try it out themselves? So conceptualize your hosts and dining companions not so much as people who might feel insulted or inconvenienced, as people who want their guests or companions to feel welcome and have a good time. Requesting vegan food need be no more off-putting or out-putting

[35] As "purely" as can ever be, that is; for all "empirical facts" depend on conceptual determinations as well. As I just illustrated, for instance, whether animal experimentation is humane depends on the definition of "humane." That is one reason why my presence was called for at the workshop on animal experimentation, since philosophers are specially adept at analyzing concepts, no matter what the practical field of application.

than keeping kosher or halal or having a food allergy or passing up the revolting fruit cake, provided you also pass up the moralism, that is, *morality*. See this, then, not as a chance for winning an argument, but as an opportunity to actually move people to act as you wish they would.

More Amoral Moments

In this book I have examined theoretical minutiae to buttress the case for desirism. But it was not analysis that first made me an amoralist – rather a revelation.[36] And it was continual experiment and experience over the ensuing years that confirmed this "faith," as evidenced by the method I have employed herein. After all, the worst indictment of any idea is that "it may be good in theory, but it won't work in practice." So, having now done my best to settle any remaining doubts about the plausibility of the theory, but also in the process raised new doubts (particularly in this chapter) about its practicability and even about how this might be shown, let me return to the roots and relate one more batch[37] of episodes of morality versus amorality, in hopes both to clarify further what I mean by desirism and to bolster its appeal as an ethics.

One final feature I wish to underscore: Since the episodes are for the most part drawn from my experience, and my life has been fairly humdrum, so too are most of the episodes. Yet I find them a bottomless fount of insights into the human condition, and am myself convinced (correctly or incorrectly I could not tell you) that the source of the most extreme and/or world-shaking human actions and undertakings is to be found in the everyday.[38] For me, as is certainly obvious to the reader by

[36] The "anti-epiphany" referred to in Chap. 1 and discussed at length in Marks (2013c).

[37] See also the second half of Marks (2013e), from which the title of this section is derived.

[38] But I do as well collect countless (paper and digital) clippings of public and world events that could themselves serve as excellent illustrations of moralism and desirism at work . . . were I in any position to hunt down the full stories behind them as confirmation of what they appear to be. As my amoral moments show, doing this even in situations where I am a full participant is bedeviling enough, albeit, granted, sometimes *not* being a full participant would facilitate the greater reliability (this being the pitfall of *my* method).

now, the example par excellence of this relation is the perpetration of the most immense and horrific holocaust of all time by perfectly ordinary human beings indulging in their perfectly ordinary eating habits. I therefore believe that nothing less than a revolution of consciousness (among human beings) stands any hope of improving our lot (where "our" encompasses all sentient beings). And this means exposing the all-pervasiveness of moralist thinking in even the most commonplace transactions of daily life in order to root it out.

A Moralist Crosses the Street

I have always had a problem with insincerity. Even as a child I found it difficult, for example, to say "Thank you" if I did not really feel grateful. (Note that this is a separate matter from whether I was being inappropriately ungrateful, which is likely, given my, well, childishness.) Far into adulthood I struggled with asking "How are you?" if I really was not prepared to stick around long enough for a truthful answer; and in my turn when asked, I certainly had to grit my teeth to say "Fine" if I felt anything but.

Just so into recent times I have balked at waving a "Thank you" to a driver at an intersection who stops to let me cross the street. But here the reason has been more sophisticated than simple childish ingratitude or inhibition to play the social game. It was a principled reason, a *moral* reason – or more precisely, a *moralist* reason. My thinking was that any driver *ought* to let a pedestrian cross. Thus, the driver's action was his or her *obligation* and was my *due*: It was *owed* to me. Had the driver *not* stopped he or she would have been doing something *wrong*. Therefore, I implicitly reasoned, there was no cause for *gratitude* on my part. No more than I should be grateful for somebody not shooting me if they happened to feel like doing so just for fun. Gratitude seems called for only if someone has done you a good turn over and above their duty. Therefore the driver had done nothing to *deserve* my gratitude.

Or so I felt as a moralist. This is no longer my view at all, now that I have turned amoralist. I no longer believe that anybody owes anybody anything. There simply is no such thing as right and wrong.

So what do I do now when I cross the street in front of an accommodating motorist? Why, I give a grateful wave, of course. This is for two distinct reasons, one intrinsic and the other instrumental. For I am now genuinely grateful to the driver for doing something that he or she had no obligation to do. And I also want to encourage the driver to act that way in future by "rewarding" him or her with my acknowledgment. There is no more chip on my shoulder waiting for somebody else to commit an infraction.

Life seems now a little lighter, a little brighter.

Smile

I know someone who always keeps her lips tightly shut when not speaking or eating, and especially when somebody points a camera at her. I eventually learned that the reason is her shame at having somewhat crooked teeth. And why this shame? Apparently something to do with being made fun of as a child.

My accustomed response was to chaff her for being ridiculous when she looks perfectly fine with her mouth open in a smile. I did this, I thought, in a good-meaning way – intending to put stress on how good she looks. But I can see now that what came across to her was the ridicule part, for this fed directly into the originating cause of her close-mouthedness. As a child she was mocked for having crooked teeth, and here I was mocking her for minding that she has crooked teeth. Unfortunately this psychological homeopathy does not work.

It finally became clear to me that she had every reason to resent my behavior, just as she did the childhood mocking. For my mocking was not mere chaffing after all but genuine chastisement. How do I know? Because I jumped from the good-natured extreme of assuring her she looks so much better, so lovely, with a full smile . . . to being *angry* (or at least peeved) with her for still resisting my good-natured encouragement. I now think this indicates that I thought she was *doing something wrong* by hiding her teeth.

But now, as an amoralist, I can also see so clearly that all that judgmental stuff was superfluous and counterproductive. The bottom

line was that I *wanted* her to smile naturally . . . for the camera . . . and was not getting what I wanted. But we are so wired as to interpret not getting what we want from somebody as the other person being somehow in the wrong. So it was easy for me to conceive her balking as evidence of her violating some objective principle. Perhaps it was not even a principle of morality, strictly speaking, but one of prudence. For it was obvious to me that she was making her own life worse off by contorting her face with an unnatural smile through her whole life. She looked downright silly when she smiled, as if she (were trying to hide the fact that she) had no teeth at all. So, dammit, I wanted to *help* her. Couldn't she understand how *stupid* she was being?

But of course it was I who was being stupid, and silly and ridiculous, by expecting such an attitude as mine to work to her benefit, not to mention mine. At best I might expect to win the battle of getting her to open her mouth but lose the war of making her feel better about herself. But I did not even win the battle. Instead I probably earned the resentment she harbored against all those who had mocked her as a child. It made no difference that I was mocking her for the very opposite of what they had mocked her for. What mattered to her was that she was being seen as ridiculous.

The layers of moralism pile on top of one another in this episode. There may be some truth to my assessment of her response as ridiculous. Was it not her own belief in objective values that made her feel that crooked teeth were a judgment against her? But my point is that it is hardly likely to help disabuse a person of such a view to make her feel that her belief in objective values counted as a judgment against her. Furthermore, her resentment against my "chaffing," not to mention my follow-up annoyance, is of course itself a judgment of wrong-doing. And this naturally exacerbates *my* annoyance at *her* so that it could blossom into full-blown anger. And so it goes.

Smile? Ha! We should all be frowning . . . and we were. So this does strike me as a perfect amoral moment.

The way a desirist would approach the situation is to consider what he or she wanted and then how to get it. What I wanted, had I reflected fully on the matter, was (1) to get my friend to smile for the camera, (2)

for her to look more attractive not just then but always for her sake and not just mine when I happened to be around, (3) for her to feel better about herself in general, and (4) for our friendship to be nurtured or at least maintained. Right and wrong, good and bad, have nothing to do with it. And, as shown, they are almost perfectly designed to frustrate these ends.

How, then, to achieve these goals? Maybe they cannot all be achieved, so it is important to order them by priority. And, on reflection, getting her to smile naturally on that occasion was of the least importance to me of my four desires.

I would like to end there, but I will note that a moralist could object that I have hardly proved by this example that we would be better off without the belief in morality. All I have shown is that getting someone to smile naturally for the camera is not a moral matter to begin with. Morality has not been shown wanting, but only my inappropriately waxing moralistic on this type of occasion. And that was itself certainly wrong, and not just a frustrating of my own desires as I have made it out to be. I myself was causing real damage and should be contrite about it.

My reply to that objection is that I am not trying to prove that anything is better, since that would be an objective judgment in the realm of values. I have only been giving my reasons for preferring something, namely, desirism over moralism, and attempting to make my reasons sound attractive to the reader so as to induce the same preference in him or her. Meanwhile, I have made amends to my friend and reformed my ways regarding her smiling. So the moralist is free to hold on to his or her moralism. But my general argument rests on the metaphysical claim that morality does not exist and the empirical hunch that the belief in morality tends to engender episodes of the kind I have just related rather than contribute to a world we would all prefer to live in.

Business Sense

Video stores are a thing of the past . . . except for one lone outpost a few towns over from where I live . . . which is also the best video store in the world. It always was, but now it is by default since all of the others have

gone out of business. There is simply no film, no matter how old or obscure, that one cannot discover in the sublime stacks of this store. What dismay, then, to receive a letter from this one that they too saw the writing on the wall (or the picture on the screen?). It is simple economics: Even though they had made the transition to DVDs some years back, and more recently installed a bakery and a wine bar, and then began to offer in-house entertainment with local performers . . . it has apparently all come to naught in the face of online-by-demand services.

Truth be told, I did them little good either, since I do not own a television set and prefer to see movies on the big screen to begin with, and in any case I no longer live near them. To me this store is more like wild animals in the wilderness: I want very much for them to exist even if I don't visit them. But while a policy of letting animals alone could help them survive, neglect is not benign to a struggling business. The letter from the store was a last-ditch pitch to faithful customers to purchase their holiday gift certificates and whatnot to help them stay afloat. Obviously this is a measure of desperation, since informing the clientele that you may close is hardly an incentive to purchase gift certificates. It becomes an act of faith. But I dare say the store's customers are loyal enough to respond to the call; and I myself resolved to make a trip to pick up a gift certificate for friends who live near the store (and love movies and have a television set).

Several weeks went by, however, before I had an opportunity to go there. As I approached the location I was uncertain if the store would even still exist. But, I saw with relief, the lights were on, and inside everything looked normal. I went up to the front desk and began to express my relief, as well as concern about their continuing prospects. The young man who was behind the counter did not respond as I had expected. He began to chastise me! "Why didn't you come in sooner if you like the place so much?" Whoa.

The manager quickly approached and said, gently (for his worker's sake as well as mine), "Ignore him. How can I help you?" Somewhat taken aback I explained that I was there in response to their appeal and would really like to help and asked if it would still make sense for me to purchase a gift certificate in light of the store's uncertain future. The manager could only sort of shrug. But that was enough for me, because

I had come with an intention that was based more on feeling than on calculation. So I indicated a generous figure to be placed on the certificate, paid for it, wished him good luck, and then headed for the exit.

In doing so I was walking past the young man who had first berated me. In the spirit of the holiday season, I threw him a hearty "Goodbye" rather than just ignore him. But he only looked at me with a scowl. This instantly engaged my moralist reflexes, making me want to lash out as follows:

> Look, fellow, in the first place you have no business sense. Do you really think you are helping this store avoid bankruptcy by being surly to the customers? But furthermore, you are being just plain unfair to me. I happen not to live near here. And even if I did, I don't own a television, believe it or not. And I am a big screen fan so am even less likely to want to watch a movie on my computer. But I love this store – to me it's like a marvelous museum, or a giant store window to peer in yearningly. I support you however I can, such as occasionally renting a video when I'm in the neighborhood visiting some friends who do have a TV and like to watch movies. And I even came here today with the special intention of making what may be in effect a charitable donation to the store (not tax-deductible) since buying this gift certificate was an act of faith that it will ever be used. And even if it does get used, I never would have made such a large purchase if not for my wanting to help you out. *So don't give me that look.*

Then I would have walked out in a huff. How satisfying! Venting righteous anger. Getting the guy in trouble with his boss. "Teaching him a lesson." Surely morality is its own reward.

Of course now, being an amoralist, I believe that's all poppycock. Morality is the favorite resort of anger, arrogance, revenge, and other low emotions (i.e., emotions I don't like). The store clerk did nothing wrong in scowling. Hence I would not have been justified to chastise him in return. But neither would my chastising of him have been wrong any more than was his of me. Both are nothing but the playing out of beliefs and desires, causes, and effects.

So given that I did *not* believe that the clerk had done anything *wrong* in chastising me, I was able to avoid chastising him in return by thinking as follows:

> The poor kid is obviously worried about losing his job, and during the current recession no less, not to mention no longer working in a neat place like this one. And since he is a moralist, he conceptualizes the world in terms of good and bad, right and wrong, and so naturally he interprets the store's and his ill fortune to someone's not doing their moral duty, which in this case would be me, a supposed fan of the store who has shirked his responsibility to come to the rescue in their hour of need.

And so a crisis is avoided as the amoralist walks out the door and the credits begin to roll.

Ego, Moral and Amoral

Ego, I proclaim as a perhaps failed Buddhist, is inescapable. But I see very different roles for ego in morality and amorality – opposite really. The following examples will illustrate my meaning.

I observed a double dose of moral ego at a recent academic colloquium. Person A asked the speaker a question before her talk was done. The speaker's response then prompted me to ask a question, and then a long series of others chimed in. Meanwhile Person B, seated next to me, was becoming annoyed, to the point of muttering. B's complaint was that the speaker should be permitted to finish her talk.

It struck me that this was a perfect example of moral egotism. (Let me express the usual, and obvious, caveat that all that I herein relate is my own take on what was occurring. I could be factually in error about various aspects of the situation.) B had a desire that the speaker finish her talk. Maybe this desire was prompted by curiosity, impatience, courtesy, a sense of how seminars ought to be run to best effect, or even just hunger (since we break for dinner at the end of the talk and before the formal Q&A begin). Meanwhile all of the people asking questions had the desire to pursue a point with the speaker right then and there. But by

implicitly framing the situation as moral (as evidenced by his wording and manner of speaking), B felt that his own desire *trumped* the conflicting desires of some of the rest of us.

Furthermore, by the expression on B's face (scrunching it up as if in the presence of a foul odor) and the intonation of his voice it was clear to me that he was holding others in *contempt*. Also, his muttering was directed specifically against the moderator, who B felt should be calling a halt to the questioning; so the moral nature of B's attitude authorized the invocation of *power* or coercion to have his desire prevail over other people's. Here we have in microcosm how a graduation from desire to moral judgment brings noxious forces into play in world affairs.

Note that I do not mean to be morally condemning either B's moralizing or B's preference that the talk resume. Regarding the former, I am only expressing my sense that it represents a tendency to attitudes and actions I don't like (such as egotism and anger and meddling), and one which is based on a false belief (namely in the objective reality of right and wrong). Regarding B's preference, I am actually in sympathy, since I too usually prefer to have Q&A held mostly in abeyance until after a speaker has finished. The critical difference between the moralist and amoralist responses to the premature Q&A, however, is that the amoralist sees only differences of desire, without one having some presumed objective or "absolute" priority over the other, or some "command" quality that licenses having denigrating feelings or even the use of force. And it does definitely seem to me – perhaps from having been sensitized by Buddhist analyses of the human condition – that an exalted concern with one's own welfare and importance lies at the bottom of the moralist's objectification of the subjective.

The second appearance of moralist ego occurred a few minutes later when, the colloquium finally breaking for dinner, Person A came up to me and proceeded to verbally assault me. She was speaking so quickly and so heatedly that I literally could not even understand what words she was uttering, and I certainly had no idea what she was talking about or why she was so angry, not to mention, at me. When I told her this and asked her to repeat more slowly, I finally grasped that she had taken my remark to the speaker to be some kind of put-down of her – A's – opening question. This had been the farthest thing from my mind,

but I could see now how A might have come to this conclusion. A's question had pertained to a personal experience, about which she had deep feelings. Moralistic feelings, I might add. So my having immediately followed with a comment that appeared to her to trend in an opposite direction was at once appropriated by her morally and emotionally primed mind as an attack on her and, indeed, as morally bad. (Again: This is obviously my interpretation – in an effort to understand what the hell was going on; and naturally it too is colored by attitudes and preferences, in this case, mine.)

Fortunately I was able to hold my own atavistic moralist emotions in check in response to this onslaught, so that the exchange did not escalate into an argument. I found myself amazingly unruffled by it all – quite a change from my preamoral days. And this also enabled me to listen more carefully to what she was saying, not only to diagnose her obvious moralist affliction but also to glean useful information about how I myself come across to others and would be well-advised to modify my behavior accordingly if I want to preclude unpleasant surprises such as A's reaction (which I at once put to good use in the postprandial Q&A session). But I am afraid that A was left feeling a venomous mix of self-righteousness and abashment (for having lost control of herself) such that it may be psychologically necessary for her to conduct a shadowy campaign of denigration against me by way of self-vindication.[39] God, do I not like morality.

(But I am happy to report that that prediction has proved false. A has since gone out of her way to be friendly to me. I would like to think that my having refrained from huffing moralistically back at her contributed to this outcome.)

Contrast all of the above to the role ego plays in amorality. Here I have in mind the literary term "egotism" to refer to the frequent use of the first-person pronoun. I use "I" and "me" and "my" more and more in my speaking and writing as I settle into amoralism. This is considered very bad form by editors in most technical disciplines, not to mention by critics of conversation. But as I see it, my emphasis on

[39] If I may wax Rousseauian.

myself in my writing is an expression of humility. For what I mean to be conveying is that everything I say is only how I see things and not necessarily the way things are. Indeed, when it comes to ethics, my assumption is that there is no way that things "are" and there are only subjective preferences.[40]

So when moralists assert that something is right or wrong or good or bad, I will only chime in with either "After having thought about this matter and heard you out, I have the same preference you do" or "After having thought about this matter and heard you out, I feel differently from you, and here's why." Just talking about myself. But not being egotistical at all. Yes, a moralist can also be humble: "*I think* x is wrong." But when the stakes are high, the more natural tendency is simply to declare, "X is wrong!" This is an assertion of (presumed) objective fact, with presumed imperative force, to which the speaker has (presumed) privileged access. Whereas in a similar situation I could only say, "I don't want you to do x!" This is an assertion of a subjective fact, albeit intended to influence the state of affairs.

Stop the World

The environmental movement is hardly monolithic, but one main strand has always struck me as religiously inspired. That is explicitly the case for those who cite the Biblical stewardship God assigned us in Genesis. But I have more in mind an implicit religiosity, and indeed Biblicality, that not only goes unremarked but might be emphatically denied by some supposedly secular environmentalists. One aspect of this is the apparent extra-scientific faith in an all-good providence, who guarantees that what is most fundamentally good for human beings could never be in conflict with the welfare of other animals. In other words, some environmentalists appear to presume a preestablished harmony in this best of all possible worlds, such that humans would

[40] Well, not *only*, since our preferences are based on (partially caused by) beliefs which have some objective truth value (true *or* false). But the point is: Opposing preferences can be based on identical and rationally-held beliefs.

never be called upon to make a genuine sacrifice on behalf of other species (or vice versa).

Witness the joy of veganism, which not only spares animals but also assures optimal human health. In a truly secular world, this convergence would be a merely contingent, empirical fact . . . or more humbly, hypothesis. We have obvious – which is not to say always easy – ways to go about testing its truth, and more specifically, investigating whether a vegan diet really is healthier than, or at least as healthy as, any alternative diet for (most) human beings. I myself am fairly convinced that it is, but I am far from certain about that, for two reasons: There has never been a fully vegan culture in the entire history of the world that we know of; and nutrition science, while currently albeit not unanimously supportive of a vegan diet, is notoriously fickle in its dietary advisories due to the inherent difficulties of longitudinal studies involving countless ingredients. So I recognize that my personal belief in the nutritional adequacy of a carefully thought out vegan diet is in part a matter of benefit of the doubt, and indeed the taking on of a degree of personal risk, where I am being motivated more by concern about other animals than about my own health.

Yet my sense is that many other so-called ethical vegans are much less skeptical than I am about the health benefits of veganism, and I am attributing this to a remnant religiosity that rules out the very conceivability of an unjust universe, which would require the killing of innocent creatures for our own essential benefit. It is useful to recall, in this regard, that a key influence on Darwin's (likely) atheism was his recognition that no good and loving (and all-powerful and all-knowing) God would have created a system like natural selection, which is premised on ceaseless competition unto death. So to be so certain that this "rule of the jungle" does *not* apply to the *human* relation to other animals strikes me as "unscientific" in its coincidence with a belief in a harmonious universe. The harmoniousness of the *actual* universe, and specifically the "ecological balance" among species, has been hard-won, as much so as, say, the smooth-functioning of modern American society, which masks a frightful history of repressions, exterminations, and wars that have brought us to this place. Indeed, I see few human beings

shedding a tear over the extinction of the dinosaurs by cometary impact, which made our very existence as a species possible.

A second "Biblical" assumption of much contemporary environmentalism is that the current "ecological balance" merits preservation. It is, for example, taken as a given that the encroachment of climate change on polar bear habitats is *bad*. That what has been happening is disconcerting to polar bears seems well-established. But whence cometh the impassioned judgment that this fact places some kind of obligation on us humans? I cannot help but see a parallel between this and the very unscientific view that all existing species have been here since Day One, having been brought into being by the direct willing of God, and hence merit, indeed demand our keeping them going, whether this be by bringing them into an ark or by reducing carbon emissions.

Again, just as with veganism, my own heart and mind and actions are on the side of the beleaguered animals. But, again, I would provide a very different explanation for this from the implicitly (not to mention explicitly) religious one (that all extant species are sacred). I do admit that, for all I know, my preferences might have been in part *caused by* my lifelong exposure to religious stories and even previous religious beliefs. But that would not be a religious fact but only a biographical one. The *salient* fact for me now is that I care about polar bears . . . compassion and other positive feelings toward them are elicited from my breast when I picture their plight . . . and this even though they prey on seals, whom I care about just as much.[41] For that matter, I care about the *human* communities worldwide that are similarly being encroached on by climate change. So I do indeed have a certain preference for the climate status quo, but I need not base it on anything sacred about an original "creation."

The issue of mythic and specifically Biblical influence on environmentalism becomes particularly acute when its recommendations are downright *harmful* to animals. Consider the very idea of "endangered species." Why do *species* matter? And if they matter, do they matter *more*

[41] Recall from "What Is the Value of Humanity?" in Chap. 1 that contradiction is no longer the hobgoblin it used to be for me when I was a moralist.

than individual animals? I cannot help but sense a Biblical resonance to this "mattering," given again the mythic notion of a direct creation of all and only the species that exist today. But this has led to some truly perverse "conservation" policies, such as eradicating the individual members of an "invasive species" that is wreaking havoc with some indigenous species. Of course this can be given an ecological spin; but it seems to me far more probable that science is the tail, and preference by those in power is the dog.

I am calling, therefore, for an environmentalism that is at one and the same time cold-eyed and compassionate. For while I have a distaste for mythic aggrandizement of the state of affairs, I *would* like to see a *rational/emotive* "aggrandizement" of our concern. The question I would pose is therefore quite straightforward and practical: What kind of world do we want, once we have adequately reflected on relevant information and experience, and how can we attain it, whether this be via preservation and/or changes? It is not obvious, by the way, that everybody will arrive at the same answer. Enter politics.

Incantation

Philosopher A was presenting a new theory of ethics at a seminar with an eye toward improving our treatment of other animals. Its essence was empathy. The thrust of the argument appeared to be that empathy would make for a *more effective* ethics than the kinds beloved to most ethicists, which emphasize abstract principles. Whereupon Philosopher B interjected: "But how does this theory *justify* having obligations to other animals? Doesn't your theory merely *presume* that other animals are morally considerable and only on that basis recommend itself as a superior theory because it is more effective at achieving what morality already prescribes?" Philosopher A lamented that she had not worked that out yet.

This prompted me to ask: "But why do you care about that? Isn't it enough that [Philosopher A] may have come up with a more effective strategy for achieving what all of us here desire, namely, the welfare of other animals?"

Philosopher B, a torch-bearer for morality, responded: "But if we don't insist that our view is right and what they are doing is wrong, *what can we say to the factory farmers?*"

I could only chaff him: "As if 'It's wrong' is an incantation that has magical powers!"

Desirism replaces justification with strategy.

Adding Insult to Injury

Physician/philosopher Raymond Tallis and I once got into a bit of a tiff about the moral status of nonhuman animals, which played out in our respective columns for *Philosophy Now* magazine.[42] Tallis (2012) summed up his position as follows:

> So the case for animal research is clear cut; or it is if one subscribes to the view that human suffering and premature death is more important than animal suffering and premature death. And I do subscribe to such a view. It may be "speciesism" to care more for humans than animals, but this is a charge to which I plead guilty: I am willing to sacrifice mice in order to cure children – not because we are more rational than animals (as this would lead to valuing infants and mentally-impaired humans less), but because humans properly have priority for humans. The world would be a ghastly place if people placed the suffering of frogs or badgers on a par with that of their own children, or would be happy to allow their neighbours to starve if this were necessary to keep animals well fed.

My main objection to this passage is not the preferences expressed, with which I am in partial agreement. It is rather the moralism of it. For example, it is not enough for Tallis to "care more" for humans than other animals; he feels it necessary to insist that human suffering and premature death are "more important" than that of other animals. Furthermore, it is not enough that he is "willing" to kill mice to aid

[42] Much of the content following is taken from my letter to the editor in issue no. 89 (2012), p. 40.

humans; his so willing is also deemed "proper." It's this moralist version of God-is-on-our-side that I find most difficult to swallow.[43] The world might be "a ghastly place" *for humans* "if people placed the suffering of frogs or badgers on a par with that of their own children," but not so for the frogs and badgers.

That we human beings often show a preference to our fellow humans over our fellow animals, who would deny? But this is no argument for there being an objective imprimatur on what we quite naturally prefer. After all, I would show certain preferences to my children over those of my good neighbor Tallis. But I would not do so on the basis of my children having greater inherent worth than his.

Nor is this just a matter of not adding insult to injury, since attitudes themselves have consequences. Thus, I would wager that the researcher who kills mice to "cure children," but *without* attempting to justify this by any presumed human prerogative, will be less likely (than a colleague who does see it as justified) to countenance the killing of young cows and chickens and salmon and pigs and so on simply because he or she would enjoy eating them.

Tallis does not in fact explicitly claim any kind of superiority for humans, nor use the notorious expression "*lower* animals." But I cannot help but think he is scrupulously avoiding doing that in an attempt to distinguish his speciesism from racism and sexism. He does instead speak of "difference" (10 times by my "Search" count), of how very very *different* we are from other animals. But this just gets him out of the frying pan and into the fire. For this argument is wholly unsound, both because it has a false (or at least moot) premise and is invalid:

We are very different from other animals.
Therefore we can, in a pinch, do with them as we please.

[43] God is more directly implicit in this remark by Gellman (2013) in his God Squad column: "There is reason to believe that living beings occupy different levels of moral significance. Eating a chicken may be morally wrong but it's clearly not the same moral transgression as eating a person." Baloney. There is no "reason to believe" such a thing other than the felt need to justify doing what you want despite the cruelty and killing it engenders. Just say you can't control your appetite for chicken tissue; don't insult the ravaged animal in the process.

What I want (yes, want) to stress about efforts to *justify* one's preferences and behaviors is that doing so is itself motivated. In other words, we often want to make our wants appear to be more than just wants; or to use my favorite phrasing, the urge to justify is itself *just a feeling*. Recognizing this myself, I hardly feel compelled to justify my desire to point this out; it is enough for me that, after having pondered desirism these many years, I am so motivated. But for you, the reader, this entire book can serve as the articulation of my justification.

Given that working premise (that efforts to justify are motivated), I find Tallis's offhand justification of exploiting nonhuman animals to be doubly suspect: first because it is inherently weak (mere difference as grounds), and second because the human and medical biases motivating it are obvious (Tallis being a double beneficiary as human being and physician).

All I ask, then, is that we talk about our desires and why we have them, rather than why what we want conforms to some mythical and absolute standard of rightness or goodness or inherent worth, etc. – a simple (albeit devilishly difficult) Gestalt shift of thinking and speaking, yet one having significant practical implications.

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