BEYOND MORALITY

Richard Garner

Beyond MORALITY

Richard Garner

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To the memory of Leslie D. Krebs

A Good Father

Unthinking people have a tendency to assume that some things are just naturally good and others bad, and some actions right and some wrong, and that we need only to discover which is which.

—*Richard Taylor*

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PREFACE

SOON IT WILL be determined whether earth's experiment with humans was a success or a lethal mistake. If we were just another biological organism, we would be considered out of control—extinguishing species after species, devastating the environment with war and disregard, and magnifying our limited ability to do harm with diabolical inventions capable of poisoning all life and destroying the planet. But we are also capable of love and language, creation and understanding, and it is within our power to solve our problems, save the planet, and make happiness the rule rather than the exception. The problem is, and always has been, how to plant ourselves firmly on the path of creation, cooperation, and healthy competition, rather than the path of destruction, unhealthy cooperation, and lethal competition.

Some of those who have noticed that we remain the greatest threat to our own survival have sought ways to stop the destruction and mutual slaughter that have been with us for so long. But it is one thing to see a path, something else to take it, and something else again to persuade or convince others to take it. Morality, often supported by religion, points to virtues, values, duties, and demands. We are told that God commands us, or the Universe requires us, to act one way rather than another, to eat only certain things, to be unselfish, honest, courageous, or celibate. We are also told that these are not just requirements we have placed on ourselves. But what if they are?

Morality and religion have always tried to guide us to a "better" world, but the actual effect of moral and religious commandments is debatable. We learn that God commands us not to steal or kill, and that everyone has a right to life; but we also learn that God has ordered massacres, that every rule has exceptions, and that there are rights capable of overriding even a person's right to life. Because of their flexibility, neither morality nor religion is good at dealing with people who reject their requirements, and, to be honest, both are easy to doubt and dismiss.

Anyone who looks closely at what is happening in the world will be saddened by our treatment of each other, by the pain and misery we inflict on other sensitive creatures, by the damage we are doing to the environment, and by the legacy of debt and decay we are about to leave for our children and grandchildren. But none of this has to happen. We can change most of the things we want to change, fix most of the things that are broken, achieve most of the goals we are capable of setting for ourselves—if we are willing to make the appropriate choices.

What we have tried so far has not worked, or it has only worked well enough to get us into our present trouble. Morality and religion have failed because they are based on duplicity and fantasy. We need something new, and I believe that if we can get beyond the fictions and deception inherent in religion and morality, the traps set for us by our language and those who use it for manipulation, we can find what we need. Only then, I argue, will we be able to develop the beliefs, attitudes, and habits that will result in the kind of world we want. Paternalistic lies and convenient fictions give us a warped picture of reality and necessarily result in inappropriate behavior. What will actually heal us is a radical diet of true beliefs, as fully understood and as deeply realized as possible. The choices we make will not be appropriate if we do not understand the context in which they take place, and as long as people are not telling us relevant details, and we are not capable of listening when they are, we will not understand what is really going on.

I hope I have not offended anyone by my attitude toward religion and morality, but I truly believe that many of the goals cherished by religious thinkers and moralists will never be sufficiently realized till religion and morality are left behind. But even if I am mistaken about this, the position I present is shared by more people than you are likely to think. Some of the kindest, most gentle, most helpful people I know are motivated neither by religion nor by morality, and this leads me to hope that my suggestion that we leave those illusions behind us, restrain our habits of moralizing, and learn to listen to others and to ourselves may be exactly what we need to lead us out of the darkness.

Throughout this book you will find boxes containing quotations. They illuminate and illustrate things being said in the text, but I do not discuss them explicitly. I trust my readers to make appropriate connections. In the text, double quotation marks are used around quoted phrases or sentences, or as "scare quotes" to draw attention to

some peculiarity warranting note but not mention. Single quotation marks signal that the item inside is being exhibited or mentioned—there is a 'cat' but no cat in 'catalog'.

Indian words are written with the standard marks scholars use to guide pronunciation. An *r̥* is pronounced with a light trill, and both *ś* and *ṣ* are pronounced *sh*, as in 'ship'. An *ā* is prolonged, as in 'father'. For more help with pronunciation, see the appendix on pronunciation and accents in Radhakrishnan and Moore.

I have adopted the pinyin spelling of Chinese words favored by the Chinese government, but in Chapter 6, on the first occurrence of a Chinese term, I provide the once-standard Wade-Giles romanization if it differs from the pinyin. 'Daoism' is a good example. The Wade-Giles spelling of the word is 'Taoism', but the pinyin romanization makes it 'Daoism'. This makes sense because the Chinese way of *saying* the word is with an initial *d* sound. I shall spell it with the *D*, but in translations and quotations from other sources it will often turn up as 'Taoism'. The *Dao De Jing* and its legendary author Lao Zi turn up as the *Tao Te Ching* and as Lao Tzu in quotations or bibliographic references, where proper names are written as they appear in the original. Throughout, I remain faithful to Chinese authors' spellings of their own names.

I owe a debt of gratitude to many people who have encouraged and criticized me through the years. Richard Taylor, Tom Regan, Ray Martin, Andy Oldenquist, Kathy Bohstedt, Wayne Alt, and Justin Schwartz read all or part of the manuscript and made many helpful suggestions, only a few of which I ignored. My students and colleagues encouraged me to persevere, showed me things I needed to see, and taught me things I needed to know. Scott Lloyd helped in countless ways with the preparation of the manuscript. Everyone at Temple University Press has been reasonable, helpful, and cooperative. We should all be grateful to Jane Cullen, whose advice helped me to write a shorter and a better book, and to Lesley Beneke, the best copy editor on the planet. I am particularly grateful to The Ohio State University for my Faculty Professional Leave during the academic year 1990–1991. Without that, this book would still be on my hard disk.

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Introduction

WE HAVE convinced ourselves, and taught our young, that our conventions, laws, practices, and principles are subject to "higher" standards. We subscribe to natural laws, acknowledge eternal values, respect inalienable rights, and agree that we ought to avoid evil. We fear that if morality were "merely" conventional, "merely" a product of evolution and intelligence, it would lose its authority and become, in Immanuel Kant's words, "a mere phantom of the brain" (Kant [3], 48).

We learn our lessons and our language so well that the lines we are taught to draw appear as inherent features of an independently organized reality. We qualify as "moralists" if we believe the world contains values to discover, rules to follow, or rights to recognize. Moralists take morality seriously, believe in its authority, and consider themselves and others bound by its requirements. Amoralists, on the other hand, believe morality *is* a phantom of the brain, a projection, an invention, a convenient fiction, a subterfuge that works only when we mistake it for something it is not.

Moral emotions, moral judgments, and moral arguments permeate our social life and our private thoughts. Someone who does not know "the difference between right and wrong" cannot even be tried in court and held responsible. As we live our lives, we assimilate moral concepts, distinctions, slogans, assumptions, argument-fragments, principles, dogmas, and guilt. In this way our lives, our behavior, and even our desires are regulated.

Familiar traditions and practices have a built-in moral weight, a presumption of correctness, a moral inertia. Any attempt to alter

them is resisted on moral grounds, and unless reformers meet this resistance with moral arguments of their own, they can forget about trying to change things. As new issues are propelled into the public consciousness by this or that disaster, network special, protest, or scandal, the one thing that remains constant is the moral tone of the discussion. Whatever the topic, we find people occupying both extremes of the spectrum of possible positions and all the points in between. Everyone claims to have correct answers, and everyone has plenty of reasons and arguments to defend their preferred options.

I call this book *Beyond Morality* because I believe that this moralist approach to questions about how to live and act is inherently flawed. It is too easy to find moral arguments to support both sides of any dispute, too hard to explain the claim that we are bound or required by morality, and too unsettling to see such widespread and apparently irreconcilable moral divergence among even well-meaning humans. It is time to face these facts and to explore other alternatives, such as the informed, compassionate amoralism I recommend.

Moralists assume more than they can prove and promise more than they can give. They say we are "subject to" objectively binding moral requirements but never explain what this means or why it is so. For example, strong moralist pronouncements appear in a recent book by Jeffrey Stout, who writes that it is a knowable truth, independent of human contrivance or agreement, that "slavery is evil" and that "knowingly and willingly torturing innocents is wrong, impermissible, unjust" (Stout, 245). He says he is more certain of these things than he is of anything he might use to support them—so he does not support them. The skeptical amoralist reminds us that neither Stout's strong belief nor his inability to support his moral intuitions is evidence for the truth of what he claims.

The amoralist rejects Stout's dogmatic intuitionism, and all the other forms of moralism, whether offered by Hindus, Platonists, Buddhists, Christians, or atheistic proponents of natural laws and rights. What is required from the amoralist is not a collection of refutations of an endless column of moralists so much as a responsible and critical survey of the case for and against moralism, followed by an attempt to explain why people hold the moral beliefs, and beliefs about morality, they do. In the first eleven chapters I treat the origin, history, and nature of morality, and I explain and defend the amoralist alternative. In the final four chapters, I explore a variety of ways to achieve the very goals some moralists set for themselves, and for

others: a reduction in suffering and an increase in the happiness and contentment of those capable of happiness and contentment.

Amoralism, the rejection of the characteristic claims of moralists, is neither a philosophy of life nor a guide to conduct. But neither is moralism, as such. Everything depends on which moral principles one holds, and then on how closely one follows them. I argue that we can easily do without morality if we can supplement our amoralism with *compassion*, a desire to know what is going on, and a disposition to be non-duplicitous. By 'doing without morality' I do not mean doing without kindness, or turning ourselves into sociopathic predators. I simply mean rejecting the idea that there are intrinsic values, non-conventional obligations, objective duties, natural rights, or any of the other peremptory items moralists cherish. To reject morality is to reject these beliefs, something very few people have ever been willing to do.

In the final chapters of the book, I explain why informed and compassionate amoralism offers a better chance to create the kind of world we want to inhabit than does any moral system ever invented. Before we are through, I hope to have explained what morality is; what is wrong with it and right with amoralism; and what we can do to construct, without self-deception, superstition, or duplicity, a satisfying personal and social strategy for living.

1

Moral Arguments and Morality

I like parties. I don't think there's anything wrong with that at all. And if people think that's glamorous, fine. But if people think that's something bad, I'd like some reasons for it.

—*Simon Le Bon of Duran Duran*

Conversations and Conventions

WE SPEAK so effortlessly that we rarely notice how remarkable the use of language is. Our ability to communicate links us with others as nothing else could. Language is a group creation, nourishing and nourished by shared beliefs and conventions. Conventions, which are like unspoken agreements to conform to certain ways of doing things, can be found at every level of interaction. Shaking hands is a conventional act used to say hello or goodbye, to seal an agreement, to congratulate, to end an argument, and even to make fun of people who shake hands. The act "means" what it does, when and where it does, because of the beliefs, thoughts, and intentions of the shakers, and the conventions in force among them. Flapping your hand, firing your pistol, and hitting your forehead with the side of your hand only amount to saying goodbye, starting a race, and saluting because of conventions in force among people who do those things in those ways.

Words are conventional instruments for modifying the world, including the minds of others. The thoughts, intentions, expectations, and behavior of those who use the word 'dog' generate the conven-

tions that give that word the power it has to play a role in episodes of communication. When we combine words into sentences we exploit further conventions—the conventions of grammar. Although these conventions are so complicated that philosophers of language and linguists are only beginning to understand them, *we* follow them without any conscious awareness.

By using words, sentences, and other signs, we get into and out of contracts, we transfer ownership, we notify and announce, we warn, blame, promise, bet, encourage, argue, and assert. We perform these "speech acts" by exploiting conventional rules, but only when the surrounding circumstances and accompanying intentions are in order. If I *warn* you, I am supposed to be trying to alert you to some danger—real, possible, or imagined. If you are already taking the danger into consideration or if there is no danger, the warning is compromised, inappropriate, unnecessary, or pointless. We might say that it was not a warning at all. What we finally say will depend on how we understand the circumstances and the conventions about warning.

Our words, with their conventional meanings, are combined according to the conventions of grammar to make sentences. Thanks to further conventions, we use these sentences to perform speech acts. Other conventions determine who gets to talk and when, tell us how to interrupt or change the subject, and even regulate the way we talk over the phone. There are conventional rituals of greeting, parting, bargaining, and rebuking, and there are conventional and comfortable patterns of small talk. Finally, there are conventional ways to discuss subjects such as sex, politics, religion, and morality.

Unless alerted by some peculiarity of expression or context, we habitually (and usually correctly) assume that people who are talking to us intend to be heard and understood in a straightforward way. But when messages are vague or ambiguous, directions unclear, words mumbled, mispronounced, or unfamiliar, we resort to familiar ways to ask for help. It is nearly always appropriate to ask a speaker to repeat something we have simply not heard. When we have heard what was said but failed to understand it fully or sufficiently, we may ask for a clarification; though there are times when "What did you say?" is appropriate and "What did you mean (by ———)?" is not. Both questions are normally in order because of the natural, but perhaps optimistic and certainly too simple, assumption that the point of talking is to be heard and understood.

One other question permitted by the conventions of conversation,

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