

Living A Psychology
Morally of
Moral
Character

LAURENCE
THOMAS

*Living
Morally* _A
Psychology
of
Moral
Character

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THOMAS



Temple
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*To my aunt, Mariam Lupeter Dobson,
an ole-fashioned Jamaican woman
who never allowed me to wallow
in the valley of despair.*

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Preface

A theory of morality is about what is right and wrong. This book is not about what is right and wrong: it does not attempt to offer such a theory. Nor does it attempt to bring into sharper focus any existing account of what is right and wrong—either by examining a rich theoretical account such as Donagan's or Gewirth's or by trying to give structure to our pretheoretical intuitions in the way that Thomson, with great skill and ingenuity, takes up an issue in moral and social philosophy. Rather, I am interested in moral motivation; and I assume without really much argument that to be moral is to be altruistic—that the true morality is an altruistic one, that is, an other-regarding morality. Specifically, then, I am interested in the extent to which people are motivated to act in accordance with an altruistic morality.

Interestingly, most contemporary writers—Baier (1958), Darwall (1983), Gauthier (1986), Gewirth (1978), Nagel (1970), and Rawls (1971), to name a few—defend an altruistic conception of morality yet, presuppose a self-interested conception of human motivation. Thus, as these writers conceive of things, being moral turns out to be very much a matter of going against the grain of what we are as human beings, in that self-interested individuals are called upon to follow the requirements of an altruistic morality. Accordingly, much moral philosophy has struck me as a kind of philosophical sleight of hand, a kind of moral magic: starting with quintessentially self-interested creatures, one then proceeds to show by some very elabo-

rate, sometimes ingenious, argument that they can be moved to act in accordance with the requirements of an altruistic morality. I think that Sidgwick (1907) saw as clearly as anyone that self-interest and altruism do not sit comfortably together, suggesting that a person could be both an egoist and a utilitarian only in a world rather unlike this one, namely, one where every act that maximized the individual's happiness also maximized the total amount of happiness.

Believing that there is no gainsaying Sidgwick on this matter and also believing that the true morality is an altruistic one, I am ineluctably drawn to the idea that there has to be more altruism in our bones, so to speak, than contemporary moral philosophers have allowed—if, that is, there really is much to be said for the view that we should act in accordance with the requirements of an altruistic morality. To make good this idea is essentially the aim of this project. My view is that while human beings are perhaps not entirely altruistic, we have a considerable capacity for altruism, and, what is more, our having this capacity is due to our biological make-up. Indeed, I regard the capacity to be altruistic rather like a natural gift or talent to sing or to play the piano or to draw or to do mathematics. Like any other natural endowment, whether our capacity to be altruistic flourishes is contingent upon the nature of our social environment. Those who have a gift for singing must take care of their bodies and they must practice; they do not sing well come what may and regardless of how they live. In a like manner, our altruistic capacity is most fully realized when social conditions are as they should be. I attach enormous weight to the parent-child relationship, companion friendships (assumed throughout to be between adults), and the beliefs that we have in general about how others will treat us. I believe that when these things are as they should be, our capacity to be altruistic flowers; and by acting in accordance with the demands of an altruistic morality, a person can thus obtain a purchase on living well.

In a word, this essay is a defense of a very old ideal, one that goes back to Plato and Aristotle. The ideal can be simply stated: moral flourishing and human flourishing are inextricably linked.

This ideal can be defended from so many different directions and quarters that it is extremely difficult to know when to leave well enough alone. My focus has been upon social interaction as played out through a biological and psychological make-up that is congruent with the claims of an altruistic morality—so I believe. Biology is my

point of departure because I believe that if, indeed, we are quintessentially self-interested—if this quality characterizes our motivational structure through and through (Gauthier 1986), then there really is no chance of the traditional virtues' ever obtaining a secure footing in our lives. If we are self-interested to the core, no Kantian argument will render us otherwise (contra Darwall 1983; Nagel 1970). If we are self-interested to the core, a profound alteration in our motivational structure would have to take place in order for an altruistic morality to hold an attraction for us. But I write in the hopes that we are not. A great deal of altruism can be found in the biological and psychological make-up of human beings—so I believe and argue (cf. Brandt 1976, 1978).

There is surely much that remains to be dealt with, as a complete defense of the view that moral and human flourishing are tied together would have to deal with the traditional moral virtues in a systematic way. I have not given all the areas of psychology that bear upon the themes of this essay the attention they deserve. The issue of self-deception comes readily to mind here: a complete account of human flourishing would have to speak to the ways in which we are susceptible to self-deception, the ways in which we can minimize self-deception in our lives, and so on. I have not done so here. Nor do I say as much about the role of the emotions in our lives as perhaps one might (cf. de Sousa 1987; Greenspan 1988). While I discuss various emotions, I have not attempted to offer a systematic account of the human emotions generally or, for that matter, any particular emotion.

A mark of maturity is knowing when to leave well enough alone, as John Cooper once told me. I have tried to exhibit that maturity throughout this book. This work is not complete, but I shall be most content if I have managed to say something that serves to keep alive the ideal that moral and human well-being are inextricably connected.

It may seem to some that this work amounts to nothing more than an exercise in pop psychology, floundering in a sea of intuitions about our psychological make-up and social interaction. Well, unsubstantiated intuitions are just that, whether they appear in game theory, where they do appear in abundance (cf. Gauthier 1986; Rawls 1971), or anywhere else. The fact that one set of intuitions admits of mathematical rigor and another does not hardly shows, in and of itself, that the latter intuitions are unacceptable; for mathematical rigor and truth are not one and the same. In the end, we must judge the plausibility

of our intuitive assumptions by the extent to which they illuminate their subject matter—human beings, in the case at hand. I have been guided by the following intuitions: (i) social cooperation is the key to human survival; (ii) there can be no genuine cooperation in the absence of altruism; (iii) the very nature of both parental love and friendship would suggest that human beings are capable of considerable altruism; and (iv) the realization of altruism in our lives contributes to our living well. My hope is that when these considerations are reflected upon jointly, they will provide us with a new vantage point—one that departs from the economic model of humans as relentlessly self-interested maximizers—from which to take the measure of humankind. I believe that love gives morality a place in our lives that it would not otherwise have. If you will, love anchors morality in our lives; for it is in virtue of love that doing what is right has ontological priority in our lives. It is not because we are moral that we love, as perhaps Kantians would have it; rather, it is because we love that we are moral. And if love is a good, then the right, namely morality, is anchored in the good.

The topic of evil is not addressed in this book. But I endeavor to do so in another work now in progress: *Vessels of Evil: Philosophical Reflections on Slavery and the Holocaust*.

I provide no direct commentary in the present work. There is much in the literature that I should like to have explicitly discussed, but I bowed to considerations of length. This work brings together ideas that I have developed in a number of papers over the years, especially: "Morality and Our Self-Concept" (1978); "Ethical Egoism and Our Psychological Dispositions" (1980a); "Law, Morality, and Our Psychological Nature" (1983); "Morality, the Self, and Our Natural Sentiments" (1983a); "Love and Morality: The Possibility of Altruism" (1985b); "Beliefs and the Motivation to Be Just" (1985a); "Justice, Happiness, and Self-Knowledge" (1986); and "Friendship" (1987a). I trust that I have taken what was good from these essays and ignored what was bad.

In writing this book, I have been so fortunate as to receive institutional support on a number of occasions: an Andrew W. Mellon Faculty Fellowship at Harvard University (1978–79); a fellowship at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina (1982–83); an office campus assignment from the University of North Carolina at Chapel

Hill (1982–83); a grant from the Earhart Foundation for a research assistant (1985–86); and a research appointment from Oberlin College (1987–88). Without the freedom from normal teaching responsibilities and duties, it would not have been possible for me to give my inchoate ideas what little structure they now exhibit. I am very, very pleased to acknowledge the support of these institutions.

On a more personal note: I must mention Bernard Boxill, Lawrence Thomas Ellis, Jr., and Howard McGary, Jr. Each, in his own way, forced me to take the philosophical implications of the black experience more seriously than I might ever have been willing to do, and in doing so helped me to grasp more clearly the character of my own thought. Likewise for Christine Lee. Brad Goodman, Terrence McConnell, and David Weissbord have been privy to the many highs and lows of writing this book, and each always responded in the appropriate way. Robert Audi, Kathryn Jackson, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael S. Pritchard, and Judith Jarvis Thomson have offered very encouraging words at some quite crucial junctures. Thanks are owed to my former colleagues at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill—especially E. M. Adams, William G. Lycan, and Jay Rosenberg.

Over the years Thomas Nagel has listened to and read many of the ideas in this book. For this I am most grateful; he has been a natural sounding board for my thought because in many respects, our views about moral motivation have often differed at just the right junctures. John Rawls has been an enormous source of philosophical inspiration; in particular, it was conversations with him (1978–79) that rekindled my interest in (socio)biology.

I should like to mention just a few others. When I joined the faculty at Oberlin College, I met Norman Care, Michael Stocker (who was visiting), and Ira Yankwitt. Their enthusiasm and interest in my work could not have been more propitious. With one exception, no other undergraduate has (to this date) contributed as much to my moral and intellectual flourishing as has Yankwitt. Care listened to my various germinating ideas, and often made it possible for me to separate the wheat from the chaff. In general, my colleagues at Oberlin were extremely tolerant of my moods and fits as I labored to complete this book; and it was Alfred MacKay, in his role as dean, who made it possible for me, in only my second year at Oberlin, to be free from teaching duties. Stocker read the manuscript in its entirety and commented on it with great wisdom. His groundbreaking work (see, for

example, Stocker 1976, 1981) was pivotal in shaping my philosophical interests. Jane Cullen, Senior Acquisitions Officer in Philosophy at Temple University Press, was a godsend. I could not have asked for a better or more encouraging and supportive editor to work with. My student Steven A. Friedman proofread, and commented upon, all but two of the chapters of this book. He was never reluctant to tell me when he thought poorly of what I had written—but then again, he was never reluctant to tell me when he thought I had done a wonderful job. Jane Barry and John Ziff did an excellent job of copyediting the manuscript.

Last, but certainly not least, I want to mention Kurt Baier (with whom I wrote my doctoral thesis) and Annette Baier. Having read their Aristotle, they have so very often said the right thing to me at the right time and in the right way. My intellectual and spiritual debt to them, individually and collectively, is greater than words can tell. So is my gratitude.

Few things are more precious than the good will of others, especially their confidence in one. The harsh reality, however, is that for women and minorities this confidence has not always been easy to come by. To the various individuals—some mentioned above, some not—whose confidence in me has made my writing of this book possible: THANK YOU.

Laurence Thomas
Oberlin, Ohio

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*Living
Morally*

CHAPTER ONE

Moral Character and Moral Theories

Social interaction is the thread from which the fabric of moral character is woven.¹ For it is social interaction that informs the way in which each of us conceives of both ourselves and one another. Indeed, it is such interaction that makes it possible for us to conceive of ourselves as agents among agents; and only beings who so conceive of themselves can have a moral character of any kind. My aim in this essay is to offer an account of how individuals come to have and to maintain a good moral character. That is, I want to offer an account of the wherewithal necessary to lead a moral life and of how this wherewithal is acquired and sustained. As the beginning sentence suggests, I shall be particularly concerned to show that social interaction plays a pivotal role in this regard. Friendship and parental upbringing are

¹ In *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith wrote: "Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place without any communication with his own species. He could no more think of his character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty of his own face. . . . Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before" (III.i.3). Before him, David Hume wrote: "The minds of men are mirrors to one another, not only because they reflect each other's emotions, but also because those rays of passions, sentiments, and opinions may be often reverberated." (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, II.ii.5).

the two forms of social interaction that figure most prominently in the theory I shall offer.

A rich description of the subject of this essay, namely, the morally good individual, is initially presented. An attempt is made to give some structure to our basic intuitions about the morally good person. Along the way, I do some refashioning. Thus, the description offered is not without normative import.

1. Persons of Good Moral Character

Doing what is morally right, that is, leading a morally good life, is an abiding and overriding concern of persons of good moral character. But while such persons may be of one heart, they are not necessarily of one mind. Perhaps one of the most fascinating observations that one can make is that persons of good moral character do not all hold identical moral views, even with respect to substantive moral issues.

Currently, there are some substantive moral issues over which morally good persons may, and sometimes do, hold widely disparate views, the issue of abortion being a case in point. From the fact that a person is a decent and upright individual, it hardly seems that one can infer whether she is a liberal, conservative, or moderate on the abortion issue (Wertheimer 1971). Again, some morally good individuals believe that if we refrain from helping someone, then we are just as culpable for the harm that the person experiences as if we had actually taken steps to cause that harm. Others do not believe this.² And again, it does not seem that one can infer where any given decent and upright individual stands on this issue.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, I am not suggesting that these matters do not admit of a correct answer. Perhaps they do; and surely some people think that they do. The point, rather, is that having a good moral character does not seem to be tied to subscribing to that answer. For not only are we unable to infer where a person stands on such issues, but we are often reluctant to say that a person's moral character is blemished on account of her stand.

² Reference here is to the debate over whether or not there is a morally relevant difference between acts and omissions. For a discussion of these issues, see, for example, Bennett (1981), Foot (1984), Rachels (1975), and Trammell (1975).

Now, it might seem that the explanation for this is that our moral views are simply not settled concerning abortion or the moral equivalency of harming someone and of refraining from helping him. It might be thought that when it comes to settled moral views, at least concerning issues of great significance, a person's moral character is immediately called into question if he fails to subscribe to the correct moral view. But this conclusion is too hasty.

Tradition has it that Socrates, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr., are exemplars of good moral character.³ And if there is any settled moral view nowadays, it is that slavery is wrong. Yet Socrates was more accepting of slavery than Lincoln, who was more accepting of it than King, who was against not just the peculiar institution of American slavery, but all forms of slavery. Undoubtedly part of the explanation for why their views concerning so important a moral issue as slavery differed is that they lived during quite different eras. Still, as exemplars of good moral character Socrates and Lincoln present a problem for the thesis that persons of good moral character subscribe to the correct view concerning settled moral matters. That is, this thesis will have to be suitably modified if we are going to insist, on the one hand, that all three of these individuals are persons of good moral character and, on the other, that it is incontrovertible that slavery is morally wrong. And that modification notwithstanding, the observation that persons of good moral character can differ concerning their moral views will remain unvitiated.

There can be no doubt that historical contexts do make a significant difference in how people think about matters. And it might be tempting to say that people of good moral character will not differ on substantive moral issues, provided that they live in the same time period. However, this would seem to be nothing more than an ad hoc move designed to save appearances. Different historical contexts represent nothing more than different social milieus. But the social milieus of contemporaries can vary widely; and there is no in-

³ See Lawrence Kohlberg (1981), for example, "Justice as Reversibility: The Claim to Moral Adequacy of a Highest Stage of Moral Judgment." That all or any one of these individuals should in fact have considerably less of an anchored moral character than tradition makes them out to have had does not militate against the point being made here. For the view, whether truth or myth, that these were all individuals of exemplary moral character certainly makes sense to us. I have learned much from Kurt Baier's excellent discussion of Kohlberg's views. See K. Baier (1974).

principle reason to suppose that they cannot vary widely enough to account for the fact that people of good moral character differ in their moral views concerning some matter.

This last remark brings us back to the issue of abortion. This moral issue shows that different historical contexts are not always the explanation for why individuals of good moral character sharply differ on substantive moral issues. People of good moral character with quite similar social backgrounds as determined by wealth, education, and so forth disagree about the moral status of the fetus, though they in no way disagree on matters of fact, such as its origin, biological make-up, and so on. Some take the fetus to be a full-fledged person from the outset; others think the very idea is absurd.

My claim has been that not all people of good moral character hold identical moral views, even with respect to substantive moral issues. I regard the issues of abortion and slavery as jointly providing formidable support for the truth of this view. The latter reveals that from a historical perspective persons of good moral character cannot be identified solely by the content of their views. At least this holds so long as we continue to regard Socrates, Lincoln, and King as exemplars of persons of good moral character despite their differences concerning the morality of slavery. The issue of abortion shows that people cannot be so identified among contemporaries with similar social backgrounds and with no disagreement over the facts as such.

At first blush, the idea that a person of good moral character need not subscribe to the correct set of moral views might seem counter-intuitive. One might be inclined to think that a person has a good moral character only if all or, at any rate, enough of the moral views to which he subscribes are (objectively) correct. The problem with this criterion is that it is too stringent. It ties having a good moral character to having moral knowledge. By this criterion, a person lacks a good moral character, no matter how defensible his moral views might be, if these moral views should turn out to be wrong. Insufficient weight is attached to the defensibility of a person's moral views.

Necessarily, reasoning and reflection occur against a particular backdrop of views, attitudes, and so on. What we are justified in believing, what we find plausible, and what we find manifestly obvious are tied to the circumstances of our lives (cf. Simon 1983, ch. 1). Moral reasoning and reflection have no immunity in this regard. This fact cannot be completely irrelevant in our assessment of whether or not