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The Spectre of Morality

The Case against Neo-Puritanism



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I have always been a bit suspicious of the idea of morality.

Those who know me would be surprised to say the least to learn that I am writing about this subject. I do not believe in morality and never have. More specifically, I do not believe in the particular brand of morality that we hold so dear in the West today. This does not mean that I take issue with the majority of humanity in its desire to do good. I respect the ten commandments, though I remain convinced that their origin far predates Judaism. Now, if I have nothing against the ten commandments, why go after morality, you might wonder.

In fact, it was my recent discovery of how Nietzsche described consciousness, which he saw as superfluous and superficial, that rekindled my interest in morality. If consciousness is superfluous and superficial, where does that leave its miserable runt morality? I am not a scholar, but a free-thinker, a libertine in the true sense of the word, and I worry that morality is regaining its hold on our society. Just as we thought we could lay to rest monotheistic religion, morality is making a come-back in the discourse of neo-puritans, the ideologues-in-chief of our time.

You only need to follow the news to see the Good camp regaining ground each week. Whether in the world of politics or art, these new puritans are ready and waiting to stand in moral judgment of their enemies. In March 2020, a French politician, Benjamin Griveaux, was their target. After a huge scandal whipped up by videos published on activist Piotr Pavlenski's website "Pornopolitique," the Paris mayoral candidate was forced to stand down. This militant stunt was presented as an act of resistance against the "hypocrisy" of a candidate who, according to the activist, had "used his family by holding himself up as an icon for all the fathers and husbands of Paris."

One might wonder if this morality the militant calls "revolutionary" is not instead a symptom of a society that has become obsessed with the politically correct. After all, what does it matter to us if a man filmed videos of himself naked to send to a young woman? The scandal

clearly lies elsewhere. It is underpinned by the implicit argument that since the man is free he should control his desire and if he fails to do so, he is in some way morally deficient. Worse still, if the man had this desire, it is because nature itself is defective, imperfect, and we must fight against it. I wonder how our society can continue to accept this misleading syllogism.

Spinoza joyously declared that “desire is the essence of a man”. If, by nature, we are all libertines, then why rail against a man who is only being true to his nature? And what if he had spent the evening in a swingers club with one of his mistresses, would he have done wrong? In my opinion, no.

I must admit that the idea of such a moralising society has always scared me. How can we accept that a man can be publicly lynched for having hidden the existence of his mistress? It is time that we took a stand against what could be considered a return to a moral order. It is not the first time a man has been attacked for matters that concern his private life. I sometimes think about what the great golf champion Tiger Woods, who changed the lives of thousands of young Americans, went through in 2009 when a list of his affairs with several women, including a model, waitress and pin-up model, was made public in the press. I still remember the madness that took hold in the United States. For several months, the golfer was made an example of by the whole country, and all because he had cheated on his wife. The message was that this idealised family man, this model sportsman, was not allowed any escape from a staid, boring and altogether miserable marriage!

The new puritans would like to impose on our society an unattainable and, more importantly, unnatural ideal of purity, conjured up by sick men imprisoned by their powerlessness. Their “superfluous” morality creates two distinct realities and cuts us adrift from life. In their ideal world, they would like to be able to differentiate between body and consciousness, nature and desire.

With their system, values no longer stem from a survival instinct but instead from a desire to self-destruct or, as Nietzsche termed it, “a negation of life.” These preachers of virtue who dream of cutting humanity off from this essential element of desire must understand this. They forget that man is made up of different and contradictory passions. The world they want to create is uniform.

These anecdotes immediately bring to mind the concept of the “tyranny of the majority,» put forward by Alexis de Tocqueville in his analysis of American democracy over a century ago. Under the cover of the truth, life in society is tyrannised by the masses, a majority of individuals blinkered by the same passion for the truth and the morally acceptable.

This creates a cycle in which the powerful are automatically deemed guilty without trial, bringing to mind the worst moments in history. But it is not too late to turn back. We can reclaim a sort of wisdom if we are willing to think for ourselves and not just parrot the words of others.

We must free ourselves from this tyranny, from these people who seek to prevent us from enjoying the pleasures of life. No one has better encapsulated this attitude than the ancient poet Horace, who said, “Seize the day, put very little trust in tomorrow” — *carpe diem quam minimum credula postero*. If such an attitude is possible, this seems to me to be the only true philosophy, and one which he entreats us to defend.

I would like to see a way of living, not of thinking, where instincts can be expressed at every opportunity, and enhanced and asserted for our own pleasure. It is about time we got rid of this other morality, the superfluous and superficial one dictated to us by society, the bad conscience. It takes away our freedom to act, deprives us of our individuality and takes all the pleasure out of life. It is, in a word, the enemy.

Does this mean that morality has to go? Can we conceive of the existence of a form of morality that both respects desire and the power of the individual while at the same time establishing harmony among us?

My criticism of the current state of morality does not necessarily mean we have to wipe the slate clean by removing the moral standards of traditional societies laid down by the Holy Book and the Church. What I do want is for them to take a back seat and no longer encroach on public life, freedom of expression or personal matters such as sexual behaviour. Our societies, in theory, stand for a free and secular environment that we must protect. In challenging this morality, that is all I am doing.

People have always had similar rules designed to preserve their existence in the face of external threats. My intention is not to claim that they did not need them. I am not naive.

However, it seems to me that all the morality needed by humans is contained in the criminal and civil codes. Moreover, their inventors wisely stated that the only laws man needed were already present in nature.

I have written this essay to present in more detail the reflections, influences and many reasons behind my objection to the “moralising” climate of Western societies. I want to talk about the origins and manifestations of this growing widespread pressure, which weighs on the behaviour and thoughts of individuals.

While there is no reason for God or any other absolute to still have any authority over the way of life in Western societies, I have, nonetheless, paradoxically observed the return of a restrictive form of morality. Combining ideology and moral conformism, this neo-puritanism has declared war on freedom of expression, diversity of opinion and sexual emancipation.

Western society might very well have overturned its traditional idols, God and the Church, but it still feels the need for morality. So the question comes down to whether a form of morality that allows us to be ourselves and exist in harmony with others, instead of curtailing our desires and personality, can exist.

Social Morality, Numbed Morality

According to Nietzsche, social morality is superfluous and superficial in that it conceals the decline of man. Rooted in monotheism, an unnatural doctrine that represses passions and desires, it has today become one of the new leftist puritanical dogmas that exerts a restrictive power on individuals, and in particular on their bodies and freedom of speech. Calling on great thinkers such as Nietzsche, Spinoza, Tocqueville and Hegel, my analysis goes right back to the origins of social morality and explores its manifestations.

To start with, I consider the problem of morality by looking at two premises:

- God exists, everything is simple, the absolute orders the existence of a strict and necessary moral framework.
- God does not exist. So why multiply the entities? If God does not exist, then everything is permitted...outside the golden rule of ethics.

We know that religious belief in our societies has collapsed. But does this mean we have all become depraved, seasoned criminals? No! It seems the moral problem is not really a problem after all.

The Myth of Good and Evil

In the course of his ethical reflections, Spinoza, before Nietzsche, demonstrated the illusory quality of Good and Evil as absolute values. He redefined them as relative values — what is good or bad for me — marking a radical departure from Greek idealism which presented Good as an absolute idea, separate from the world and from nature. He thus distances himself from the philosophy of Plato, for whom Good is what human reason must aspire to, and is alone capable of inspiring and guiding our actions.

In my view, where the philosophical tradition has always gone wrong is in considering morality as immutable, transcendent and eternal. We are still living with the consequences of this. In contrast, for Nietzsche, like Spinoza, the idea of Good and Evil are not realities that are external to man and the world. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche said, “Truly, I say to you: imperishable good and evil—do not exist!” Morality is therefore the product of the relationship between man’s body, its instincts and its emotions, and real life experience.

Nietzsche’s entire philosophical work on this subject seeks to determine the extra-moral origins of morality — or forms of morality that existed historically.

Like any philosophical, religious or political doctrine, morality in Nietzsche’s work is an interpretation of reality made by each individual, based on his life circumstances. This is why there is no single morality but different moralities dependent on space and time, varying across different places and cultures, always part of a history and a wider process. We can only really understand the concept of morality when we consider it in the plural, as there are many varied moralities. Morality therefore has no absolute value.

Nietzsche is therefore aware that different forms of morality exist.

But he still speaks of “morality” in the singular because he sees a common feature in all its forms: an absolute confidence in the mind, reason, objectivity, and science, and in parallel a suspicion or even hatred of the body and its passions. He notes that being virtuous always means affirming the will of the mind over the pleasures of the body, which boils down to a negation of life. But rather than defining morality as a set of rules, Nietzsche offers an original interpretation, viewing it as a symptom of a sickness. He argues that by imposing morality on ourselves, we prove our powerlessness to accept life as it is. It is an admission of our discomfort when confronted with the power of the instincts that come from our body and its inability to refine them.

For Nietzsche, the body must be understood as a network of forces, instincts and impulses that fight against each other in a battle for domination. The body is a sort of chaos where what an individual will do, think and say is decided. In other words, it is the body that decides everything, leaving man with only the illusion of making a decision himself once he becomes aware of his own thoughts. Put simply, he does not think for himself, he is thought by his own impulses, he is decided by his own instincts. This is why Nietzsche says “It thinks” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, I, 17). Down with the so-called absolute power of reason, the body is in the driving seat!

In these conditions, man is a mystery unto himself and life is even more so. Impulses such as aggressiveness or sensuality are unfathomable mysteries but they are life itself, which plays out in the body before rising to the consciousness. Nietzsche calls this phenomenon “an interpretation,» meaning the domination of an impulse over all the others. Fundamentally, our thoughts are just interpretations since they are the product of the domination process of an impulse. For Nietzsche, there are only interpretations, never facts, certainties or truths. Morality misleadingly labels an interpretation as the truth, which is a lie and even weakens man by reducing him to a single perspective.

Ultimately, it is life itself that is weakened, by being denied its richness and power. For Nietzsche, evaluating and criticising life, subjecting it to categorical judgment, or even to a single interpretation is what is actually immoral!

Morality as a Weapon of War

With this type of morality, man becomes a sort of mindless bovine animal — Nietzsche never tires of reminding us that morality is how a herd is driven. Today this brings to mind the passive consumer, the conformist citizen, in short, the sort of individual who revels in his mediocrity. Because surrendering to mediocrity is obeying a fabricated morality that is completely removed from the spontaneous tendencies of human nature, submitting our individual freedom and values to an unfounded duty. It means mutilating our own nature, writing off our potential, curbing the momentum of life, sapping our energy and strength, denying the very movement of life and cutting man adrift from himself. This is what we get from this superficial and deadly morality that Nietzsche condemns.

Moreover, Nietzsche understands that beneath this repression of life by morality, lurks a passion, a resentment, a hatred. In other words, the lofty principles brandished at every opportunity are a symptom of a deeper-rooted ill — a resentment among the weak. By the “weak” Nietzsche means those who are unable to act on their own strengths but merely react to the actions of others, namely “the strong” or those who are free. The weak man is a reactive being, always defined in terms of an active one. He needs the example of others to exist but would struggle to lead his own life and to take full responsibility for who he is.

In this context, Nietzsche recognises that at the very heart of morality, lies a passion stronger than all the others, a great silent resentment masquerading as Good and truth. Having probed the origin of the values, he then takes aim at the value of this origin. But what

exactly is a value?

Well, it is by asking this question that Nietzsche sets himself apart from all other philosophers, who, according to him, have never questioned the very basis of their philosophy: the quest for truth. A value is a belief, so basically an interpretation, but one that established itself gradually over time — on a scale of several thousands of years — as a truth. It is a belief of which we have forgotten to question the origin and which we have invested with a regulatory power over man.

Consequently, Europeans have taken the truth for granted, so to speak, seeing it as a value that it is pointless to question. The truth — the first of all values — is good in itself; conversely, lying is evil. However, truth and falsehood are only constructions of morality, attempts to reduce life to something that can be studied and mastered.

It is from the “truth = good” equation that Nietzsche succeeds in re-defining morality as a process that has the formidable consequence of simplifying reality and making it comprehensible to intelligence. But reality is always a lot more complex than the representation we have of it. For example, every truth conceals a lie, Good conceals evil and morality conceals a will to dominate.

In all these cases, these are dominant interpretations masquerading as the truth. For Nietzsche, morality is always a weapon of war, an instrument of domination in the hands of those who seek to use it to impose their will: first priests (who impose themselves on servile beings by reducing life to morality) then philosophers (who impose themselves on ignorant people by reducing life to something that can be known). The link between moral good and truth could be summed up in one formula: it is by seeking the truth that we do good. Yet Nietzsche understands that it is by seeking the truth, or worse claiming to possess it, that we turn away from life. Let's be clear that Nietzsche does not dispute that certain things are true but he denies that any one interpretation can be presented as the truth to the exclusion of all other interpretations. Therein lies our problem;

morality presents itself as the truth while it is really only one interpretation.

The genealogical approach — *Genealogy of morality* — therefore consists in going back through the value creation process to see what lies beneath. For Nietzsche, it is no longer a question of wondering in a fairly conventional way if truth exists, nor of looking for it, but rather of asking where the need we have for it comes from. Why do we need any truth at all? And why does it come so naturally to us to believe that truth is necessary to life? You have to keep in mind that Nietzsche sees himself, as many others before him did, as a philosophy doctor. He seeks to understand where the suffering of his contemporaries, which he calls “nihilism,” comes from. Here, nihilism is the negation of life.

His diagnosis is that morality has penetrated people’s minds to such an extent that even if we have killed God — in other words, if we have challenged the domination of religion as the organising principle of modern societies — its shadow still looms large over us through its omnipresent heritage. Science, for example, is merely the extension of morality. Even though it played a part in the retreat of religious beliefs, it made living an object of knowledge without ever considering it as a will to power, as a multitude of interpretations that are the source of all its richness. Science, like morality, is therefore deadly. I could come up with endless other examples that show the shadow of God looming large over our civilisation today.

The Mechanics of a Tyrannical Morality

To better understand how this morality is rooted in our societies, I looked at Tocqueville’s work and in particular his reflections on the notion of public opinion.

Tocqueville is well known for his work on democracy, particularly in the United States, but perhaps less so for having been the first to un-

derstand the link between the democratic phenomenon and modern morality. According to Tocqueville, democracy is not merely a simple political regime with institutions that facilitate the free expression of citizens. For him, democracy is first and foremost a large-scale phenomenon that levelled social conditions and mentalities. In other words, democracy is about removing hierarchy from the relationship between man and his fellow men. All men are equal and the idea of equality is therefore at the centre not only of democracy but of all modernity. This constitutes the real Archimedes point of our time, even more so than the idea of liberty.

However, Tocqueville notes that this notion of equality will have unexpected consequences. So what are they? And what does this have to do with morality? The most obvious one to Tocqueville's mind lies in the emergence of individualism. Individuals desert the field of political deliberation to interest themselves in only their own private happiness, opening up the way for the development of an increasingly dominant public opinion. This public opinion, which generally thrives on citizens' lack of information, will gradually take hold as the product of society itself. Individuals, left to their own devices and without collective references, then have the duty to reproduce it as a moral law.

This is how a majority opinion in society takes hold as a moral standard and comes to be presented as the truth. From the moment the masses see themselves as the bearers of the truth, having a different opinion is no longer considered morally acceptable. On the pretext that an opinion is supported by the majority, it ceases to be considered as a mere opinion but as a moral imperative that is no longer up for debate. Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* called this phenomenon the "tyranny of the majority". Without realising it, it is the crowd that legislates what we must do and think.

What we get then is a people's court. Behind a smokescreen of truth, social life is tyrannised by the crowd, a majority of individuals blinkered by the same passion for the truth and the morally acceptable.

An individual can thus be ostracised for straying from the narrative laid down by this collective morality or lauded as a hero when he adopts the prevailing view. This repression of minority opinions is not achieved through the law but through social pressure. Thought crimes, though not sanctioned by law, very much exist within today's society. I'm thinking of social networks, for example. This not only has pernicious consequences for freedom of opinion, and therefore for democracy but also for society itself. Why is this?

The origins of this transformation of opinion into morality can be traced back to a failure to differentiate between rights and abilities. Tocqueville, as I mentioned above, defines democracy as a social levelling movement. It gives each individual the belief that he is on an equal footing with any other individual, which is all very well on paper. But it is false!

In reality, equality is never effective. We see that all around us, and it then gives rise to countless demands to establish true equality. But this pursuit of a perfect equality is dangerous as it can potentially lead to the denial of individual skills. It makes us think, "just because someone else is more skilled than I am, that doesn't mean I don't have the right to do the same as them, to speak in their place". And suddenly everyone is passing themselves off as a specialist. Now, this of course is within their rights, but only if it is underpinned by a self-awareness that acknowledges what they are expressing is in fact an opinion and not the truth.

But yet, it is precisely this conflation of the right to an opinion and the truth that has led us to this unhinged social morality, where the legitimacy of some people to speak up about what they know is no longer recognised. Social life has turned into a dictatorship of morality decreed by a majority who speak for everyone. In these conditions, the slightest misstep unleashes a tirade of tweets, forum posts and collective indignation. Every day, the thought police gain a bit more ground. This witch hunt empowers the crowd, a crowd that now takes the form of a virtual community or network where no

holds are barred to reduce the opponent to dust.

What Tocqueville understands is that the phenomenon that defines modernity, namely the levelling of conditions (democracy), carries with it the inherent danger of conformism. What he sees is that once people start making every man equal to all others, a morality emerges, which is tyrannically imposed on every individual.

The Sources of Neo-Puritanism

True justice maybe lies in respecting the strong or, in today's context, the person who is qualified to speak, rather than trying to take his place without having the means to do so. Here, I am thinking in particular of social media, where everyone becomes as an expert, journalist, professor, etc.

This transformation of the weak into the strong in the name of our rights did not happen by chance. It is all part of a wider effort to moralise minds which, as Nietzsche saw (in his *Genealogy of Morality*), is done by presenting the strong as the villain and the weak as a victim.

This morality has been transcribed into law to grant justice to the weak. It is in this light that we can really understand the modern rule of law as the ultimate culmination of a slavish morality built on incontestable absolute principles that are not up for debate and are placed above criticism. The principles that underpin modern societies (human rights in this case) are the ultimate evolution of Good and Christian morality. They pave the way for the modern puritanism that we find today in the posturing of a progressive left as they set themselves up as the defenders of the widow and orphan and the noble warriors against fascism and racism.

The expression cultural leftism was first coined by philosopher and sociologist Jean-Pierre Le Goff. The concept refers to a set of themes, ideas and representations that have played out in the media in Europe

for about 20 years, but have also carved out a place for themselves in the worlds of academia and culture, the voluntary sector and politics. Increasingly radical and often contradictory, the discourse of the radical left merges into a new form of puritanism. It is the contemporary manifestation of the morality of absolute values, which also pits Good against Evil, dividing people up into the good guys and the bad guys. I'll come back to this later.

It all started back in the 1960s in major American universities. At the time, debate in the United States centred around civil rights for black people. Violent protests quickly radicalised positions, resulting in an increasing moralisation of the political discourse. In short, white people were presented as racists and segregationists while black people were the innocent victims of a heritage of colonisation, slavery and racism. Far from clarifying the well-founded demands of minorities, this extreme simplification of the social and political debate only increased tensions between the do-gooders and the proponents of a more traditional vision for American society.

But it was not until the 2000s that this phenomenon really took off with the development of the Internet and social networks. To get a better understanding of the self-righteousness that has fuelled and focused social debate for several decades, I looked at Hegel's thoughts on what he means by the term moralism.

In his work *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel criticises what he calls the "beautiful soul" filled with noble and generous ideas about the world and humanity. He denounces the eagerness of the well-intentioned man to lose no time in imposing a moral ideal everywhere, even if the conditions (social, economic, legal, etc.) are not right to do so. The haste and impatience of the idealist to enact his values in the world is called "self-conceit".

For Hegel, it is important not to confuse real morality in action and moralism, which is basically good moral intentions. Moralism is incapable of contextualising a situation and forming a judgment based

on concrete realities. It is naively content to consider things only in terms of its own perspective and particular morality. Hegel condemns and ridicules the idealist moraliser who criticises the state of the world without going to the trouble of changing it. This beautiful soul never gets his hands dirty, prides himself on his good thoughts and big heart filled with charity and judges reality from the high horse of his moral ideal. This desire to bear moral judgment on everything can be seen as a form of narcissism, Hegel explains. Far from bringing forward any meaningful action or moral progress, the idealist wanting to ease his conscience in reality only embodies a figure of impotence, cowardliness and weakness.

This is the angelic but cowardly vision of the beautiful soul: it moralises and condemns the world while all the time standing apart from it as a spectator. This hypocritical attitude is not of a moral nature, warns Hegel. It is actually immoral, contrary to the loyalty of a man of honour and action who lives by the values he believes in. Rather than seeking action and engagement, the beautiful soul contents himself with the greatness and purity of his good thoughts, never running the risk of compromising himself by his acts, opening himself up to error or confronting the gritty reality on the ground.

Hegel firmly condemns the moralising idealism of the beautiful soul as this purely internal morality of the heart has no effective reality. Hegel makes a clear distinction between moralism — that is to say, the morality of the heart represented by lofty thoughts and noble arguments in defence of an ideal without taking reality into account — from morality, by which he means real engaged action in line with a set of moral values.

This moralism that Hegel analyses and unpicks for us raises the question of how we explain the feeling of superiority that emboldens this self-righteous and dominant morality today?

Self-righteousness in Power

As we have seen, this dominant, self-righteous social morality once embodied by Christian morality, is today what we call progressive morality. It dominates Europe and more generally the Western world. The primary characteristic of this morality and also what makes it both powerful and dangerous is the sense that it is driven by an almost prophetic mission, its belief that it is the repository of a certain idea of Good. To put it another way, it sees itself as the guardian of moral legitimacy and, in a certain sense, the holder of the absolute truth.

Such a line of thought, or rather such a belief, is a real weapon of war because it lends it the credibility to disqualify or discredit all forms of resistance and crush its adversaries. This is what I call variable geometry morality, where tolerance is always limited to an inner circle of sympathisers.

It is precisely this feeling, embraced by the proponents of this morality, which eases their conscience at very little cost, which divides the world as they see it into two camps, with the good guys on one side and the bad on the other. Those who have lost their way naturally must have a “guilty conscience” and strive to get back on the right path if they don’t want to be labelled as reactionaries. Any opposition to this morality (characterised by its denial of reality) is interpreted as a lack of charity, kindness and good feeling, a refusal to defend the weak.

This moral ideology established itself through areas closely linked to society such as the body, sexuality, the education of children, etc. It is this morality that now seeks to control daily life and social interactions by imposing its own ideological conceptions of what it considers Good in terms of our way of life and culture. In this sense, it has a totalitarian dimension represented by the emergence of a single form of thought and a political correctness that has no tolerance for

anything that steps outside its limits.

But progressive morality goes even further than writing off any form of critical thought as prejudice. It also actively seeks out any bad thoughts, unhealthy ideas, innuendos, allusions, bad taste jokes and guilty words, even going as far as reporting and pursuing them through the courts. There is a hypocritical Orwellian side to this invasive and vigilante approach. This morality ushers in a new age of suspicion and distrust in social interactions and the intellectual world. Judging everything by the yardstick of a certain conception of Good, it rehabilitates the idea of doing wrong or sinning though thought, words, action or even omission.

In the name of their principles, the new censors would like to ban plain speaking, banishing from our language all words that are not their own. In this newspeak, dictated to us by modern puritans, we should no longer say “blind” but “visually impaired”, we can no longer speak of “sex” but of “gender binary”. These words, which no longer mean anything at all, are gradually taking over our language and are used as a stick with which to beat comedians for crossing the line or even a dinner guest for making a dodgy joke.

This morality also tends towards sentimentality and excessive victimisation while skimming over the idea of responsibility. Here too, language is distorted in its use and stripped of its meaning, with a dishonest fervour. As well as the idea that the world is divided into two camps — the goodies on the one side and the baddies on the other — as I underlined earlier, the discourse of this morality is hinged on caricatures, pitting words such as “love”, “fraternity” and “generosity” against “hate”, “selfishness” and “closure”. Emotional blackmail based on a victim narrative, which plays on feelings of guilt or bad conscience, forms the foundation of debate. Anyone who does not sign up to this narrative, who does not submit to it, is basically the bad guy. If you do not aspire to saving humanity, standing up for victims of discrimination, the oppressed and the persecuted, if you are not driven by such noble and generous ideals, you are necessarily

suspected of working against the pursuit of everything that is Good and morally right.

The pressure on opinions and behaviour, orchestrated by the weak and their noble defenders, is such that it takes the form of a tyranny of the minority in the name of Good.

By tyranny of the minority, I am referring to the morality of neo-puritans that is imposed on the majority of public opinion and forbids certain thoughts, words and actions. Of course, these rules are not enforced by punishment, but rather by social exclusion. Anyone who dares to express themselves differently or raise a doubt must be dismissed as mentally ill, or even a fascist. This form of tyranny works by labelling the dissenter: he's as a madman, mentally ill, a nazi, an anti-semite, a racist, a monster, a beast... What is at stake here is nothing less than the very freedom to think for ourselves and raise questions.

Everything comes back to morality as if liberty were too great a danger, a risk that society is not able to shoulder. Even classical culture, which sets us free, opens the door to analysis and thought, is thrown into question. I remember, for example, performances of Greek tragedies (such as Aeschylus's *The Suppliants*) being cancelled following protests from leftist students who deemed them colonialist and racist.

Lastly, I note that this revival of puritanism in the form of tyranny reverses the relationship to the majority defined by Tocqueville. Indeed, the French philosopher saw in the democratic phenomenon a risk of a tyranny of the majority, that is to say a tyranny of the masses on the individual and minorities. Yet today, exactly the opposite is happening. We are witnessing a sort of tyranny of minorities over the majority.

When I talk about modern puritanism, I am referring to the drive to purify our speech, behaviour and general way of life to rid it of any

content that could deny the suffering of minorities at the hand of the establishment (political and economic powers and forces of order, etc.) over the course of history. The morality of the Good side is based entirely on the defence of minorities, automatically considered as oppressed even if, on the contrary, the establishment has taken on the mantle of progressive speech. That is the most outrageous part of all this; morality rages away to itself while the political power it opposes is actually already onboard. This allows the self-righteous protestor to pass himself off as a rebel, or even a hero, as he questions authority while in truth everyone is already in agreement with him, even the public authorities themselves! The modern moralist does nothing but parrot common opinion, without risk or danger, while taking all the glory for it. Around him, he creates a tyrannical reign of moral law, which is the law of public opinion, all while seeing himself as a revolutionary, which makes him all the more ridiculous.

To conclude, I would say that this shift in moralism in society is a large-scale ideological movement, which is very heterogeneous. One thing is certain though, this movement is very real. It seeks to discipline the human race and lay down imperatives for thought through different channels. However, by refusing to deal with the problem of the unease surrounding French and European identity, progressive moralism reveals itself as incapable of answering many of society's questions — on immigration, the history and demands of minorities, communitarianism, changing customs, etc. — which fuel public debate. We need another morality, one that is more in step with reality in all its complexity.

Natural Morality, from pleasure to meritocracy

The criticisms of progressive morality I have developed here do not stand alone. I do not want to open myself up to accusations of de-

constructing traditional morality without offering up any positive alternative. So what I propose is natural morality. In my eyes, this is the most effective means of regulating society.

In principle, it is difficult to define “natural morality” as that would amount to considering something we can’t know in the abstract. But we can try to consider which a priori elements, that is to say those that are universal and necessary, constitute morality before factoring in historical narratives, historical context and cultural markers.

Admittedly, all morality is bound up in a culture and is there to tame the natural instincts within us. However, this is exactly what Rousseau attempted in his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*. By looking back through the lens of a fictive but operational temporality, he managed to identify a morality in nature made up of two elements: pity and self-preservation, which is not linked to pride but rather a love for the human race mingled with a desire to protect one’s own life and species.

For Hobbes, peace and self-preservation were defended by and formed the basis of the laws of nature. He thus emphasises that natural law and civil law are not so different, both aiming for equity, even though they are different parts of law. Civil law and its attendant legislation, however, act as a check on the rights of nature — the natural freedom of man — to allow for the establishment of peace.

Without repeating the categories of Rousseau and Hobbes, I would like to identify three constituent elements of natural morality, or what we could call morality before morality. These three elements that I will outline below are: the total absence of absolute moral values within nature (such as Good and Evil), a relationship with the world founded on the denial of dualism, and the respect of a natural inequality between human beings.

A Trip into a World without Morality

So why theorise about an absence of Good and Evil? The answer is simple: if we take away all the cultural attributes, if we look outside of any historical narrative, then it becomes possible to see man as a being who simply wants to preserve his body and life without constraint or obligation. This preservation principle requires nothing more of the individual than the fulfilment of what is necessary to satisfy his needs. This creates a perfect balance between what he desires and what the world can offer him. In this sense, the desire he feels is not reprehensible but an expression of nature. He is perfectly innocent.

Before the emergence of any morality, of any notion of Good and Evil, we can imagine man in a state of nature living peacefully with himself, free from conflict with his peers and in harmony with the animal world. He hunts and fishes to feed himself in unspoiled lands where the notion of property does not yet exist, and therefore he does not steal anything from anyone. The very idea of theft is alien to him. He knows nothing of lies, dissimulation, cheating, jealousy. This man is not yet caught up in the spiral of socialisation in which constant comparisons with others are inevitable. He lives only in the moment, a sort of eternal present where the world corresponds to the desire he has for it.

Natural morality can be understood as a peaceful relationship between man and himself. That is to say, he is not subject to moral imperatives or commandments regarding an idea of Good, because he lives in a world without morality. The absence of morality implies an absence of duty. Nobody can impose any moral law on such a man, let us call him a natural man. Above all, desire in all its forms, starting with sexual desire, is not to be condemned. Pleasure is not forbidden. In this context, only one obligation can be imposed on him in terms of self-love and that is the respect of his own children. Clearly, a primordial taboo exists: incest. This constitutes the only form of mora-

lity, but it is there for reasons which consist in respecting humanity itself. The emergence of large moral categories in terms of Good and Evil is an extremely complicated question to which there is no clear answer. It at least appears as though they cannot be the product of a direct relationship between man and nature, as we explained it in the light of Rousseau. To put it another way: Good and Evil can only emerge from an upheaval in the relationship between man and nature, or in his way of living and accepting his own nature. For Rousseau, the effect of socialisation could have had such consequences.

I could also have turned to Claude Lévi-Strauss, who says in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* that any society is underpinned by the elementary structures of marriage and the prohibition of incest. But in any case, the existence of a primordial taboo does not provide the key to understanding its appearance, and still less the legitimacy of moral values as we know them. In other words, Good can only be an invention, a fabrication and therefore a lie.

That said, it is clearly an effective lie since it is the cornerstone of Christianity and therefore of Western civilisation and beyond. As we have seen with Nietzsche, Good is a value, that is to say an interpretation of the world, the origin of which we have forgotten to question and which is presented as a self-evident truth. This is the problem with absolute truths, by definition they are not questioned and still less challenged. But what legitimacy can we continue to accord to such thoughtless assumptions. And what value can we attribute to any value as soon as we start to probe what lies beneath and look into the void.

Values are pillars which, when tapped, give off a muffled, hollow and inconsistent echo. This is why a morality of absolute values is always illusory and untrue. By contrast, a natural morality embraces the fact that life is without reason, explication or justification. It is a question of giving up the absolute to better understand the essence of the very movement of the world. Without this, we risk falling into the fanaticism of those who believe themselves to be the holders of the

definitive truth.

The Reunification of the World

From the moment we can imagine such a relationship with the world and question Good itself, dualism is opened up to challenge. Clearly, the world does not find its justification in a higher reality, in a world beyond the world we experience. This dualism has nonetheless shaped most of our understanding of reality from Plato and his intelligible world until the advent of Judaeo-Christianity. To see the world through the lens of an idealised Good, pitted against Evil, has helped separate two realities (sensory-intelligible), one of which is only transitory and imperfect and the other an impassable horizon.

In other words, “superfluous” (unnatural) morality, or fabricated morality sets out two realities, while the morality we defined as natural and primordial sees the world as a whole. In the second form of morality, there is only one world, one reality. In short, everything is already there, there is no salvation after life, no paradise to hope for. In fact, all of the traditional societies of Antiquity saw the world as its own end and not as a passage to another form of life. The world here had no meaning other than itself, no horizon other than its own limits, no finality other than death.

With this vision, the world is entirely knowable in terms of its functioning through the development of science, but is underpinned by an absence of a double ideal that would justify it and therefore by a mystery with no answer. Everything in the world is knowable but the origin of the world itself is a mystery that cannot be solved. In this sense, natural morality is about accepting the world as it is, and not lamenting the fact that it does not match up to our expectations. We understand that this refusal of dualism means we cannot seek to justify life, deplore or curse what it is (to paraphrase Spinoza). The world, and more generally life, just are. It is up to men to live this life, which they certainly have not asked for and which is without justifi-

cation, and draw on their dignity to accept this and build something, even in the absence of meaning.

Such morality is fundamentally tragic in the Greek sense of the term, that is to say it faces up to the impossible, a senseless world, without hiding behind the lies of morality in the guise of monotheism. We can call it a superior morality, or even a morality for superior men. By this, I mean a morality for free men, a morality of the pure pleasure of existing, without obligation or constraint.

But just as the sensory-intelligible dualism is being laid to rest, along comes another (hiding behind the first): the mind-body dualism. In other words, if the world is without a superior reality, then man himself is not split into two: a spiritual component which would control the other physical one. I'll come back to this a bit later with Spinoza. All morality of Good, especially in its religious guise of monotheism, by its very nature, devalues the body, its instincts and desire. But does true morality not mean respecting life without judgment? And therefore not moralising its sensory aspect?

If natural morality is underpinned by a rejection of dualism, then we need to go back to the body as the foundation of morality. This does not mean that we are just bodies without minds, but rather that the body and mind are one. So true morality is a spiritualisation of the body and an incarnation of the mind. Spiritualising the body means accepting our instincts which are the very mark of life, which alone is sacred. Embodying the mind means opening up our physical representations of the spiritual and mental to the senses, through art for example. Like a form of sublimation of man by himself through a creative effort. Life is about nothing more than creation, so all our efforts should go into it. From this point of view, we understand that it is man who is divine and God is no more than one of many representations, some borne of fears some of hopes from anguished or ill beings.

Different is not bad

It is clear that our idea of natural morality was the norm, so to speak, in traditional societies unlike in modern ones. By traditional societies, I mean those which based their social and political organisation on a principle already present at the time they were founded and in which they found their justification. The very meaning of life in society was therefore to enact this principle in all aspects of collective life.

In today's modern societies, we tend to view such social organisation as folkloric, backwards or even reactionary, precisely because modern societies understand their own story as a wrench away from their past and a leap into the future, in what they see as a permanent quest for progress. Yet what is considered fair in the eyes of traditional societies? And what is their reference in this respect? It is for everyone to have their own place, the one given to them by nature. And not just to accept it but to thrive in it. Thriving in a place that is one's own is the true face of a just society for the Ancients.

With that in mind, we have to understand that the differences that naturally exist between humans should be valued rather than rejected. Nature made us all different because we all have our own role to play to contribute to an overall harmony. To get a better understanding of this idea let's take the image of the biosphere, where life is a kingdom and each species, each individual has their own role to play in maintaining a balance that is bigger than them. In other words, the whole is more important than its parts, even if they are all needed to make up the whole.

Better still, natural morality not only respects inequalities but also values hierarchy. Make no mistake, our modern and democratic societies also have hierarchies. The difference is that in traditional societies the hierarchy is a natural one, rather than the elective hierarchies of democratic societies.

This is how, for example, Aristotle justified slavery as natural in his

Politics. Of course, to the contemporary eye, this seems abhorrent. Without going that far, however, can we at least raise the question of hierarchy? To put it another way, all beings are not destined to do the same things, to hold the same functions, or live the same lives. In this sense, the democratic illusion here creates the impression that equal rights means equal abilities. And perhaps what we are seeing in the notion of human rights is a political transposition of a fundamental Christian moral idea: the equality of all individuals regardless of their differences. The law intends to rectify what seems unfair to us in nature. But, as Callicles asked Socrates, is the law here not just an instrument of the weak to triumph over the strong? Is nature really unjust? The answer lies with Spinoza.

Desire is untouchable

So what does Spinoza say about nature and what is its relationship with morality? Very simply, the philosopher wants to remove desire and passion from the realm of morality. In *Ethics*, as I mentioned earlier, he shows the illusory quality of Good and Evil as absolute values. Good then is nothing more than what is useful to me. He lays out a gradual path to liberty and joy through the emancipation of man from morality.

To achieve this, nature must be reasserted — and in particular our own nature, that is to say desire and its affects — independently of any morality. Desire cannot be condemned as it is natural. It is just the manifestation of a vital force. It is not an evil in itself, but can only become so by taking into account its potential consequences or social pressures. Conversely, if evil is seen as an essential property of desire it is only because of the religious mythologies of original sin, which condemn it as wrong.

Behind this idea that desire is inherently bad and should therefore be condemned lies the more fundamental error, highlighted by Spinoza, of considering the mind as independent of the body, and,

in particular, seeing it as a higher authority that commands it. This idea, already present in Plato, that the body is the tomb of the soul is one of the main points of contention for Spinoza. For him, the body and mind are one and the same thing: man. He is a form of nature. Consequently, man's desire is nothing more than an expression of nature and is therefore amoral — that is to say outside any morality, neither inherently good nor bad.

In other words, if there is no separation between body and mind, that means that the mind is not superior to the body and it does not control the body by will. This here is the first mistake moralists make: they separate body and mind and think man is capable by his will alone of controlling his desire and its affects, therefore deducing that he is endowed with his own free will.

For Spinoza, however, it is appetite and desire and not the free will of the mind that prompts us to act. The mind is therefore determined by the body (as in Nietzsche later). Our actions, ideas, dreams or volitions come from the body and not from a judgment of the mind to determine our will. It is always a spontaneous movement of the body. In short, freedom of the mind does not exist and to believe otherwise is an illusion.

This is where these moralists make their second mistake. They believe that man is free and should therefore exert control over himself so as not to give in to desire, which is by its nature an evil that must be avoided. Man must not trip up on pain of being written off as perverted or depraved. But Spinoza notes that it is impossible to control our desires and to stop desiring, simply because desire is the very essence of what we are! Renouncing our desire means renouncing our nature and therefore ourselves. This helps us understand that desire is not a mere affectation, it is instead the very life of the mind, the essence of man.

Spinoza therefore asserts that true freedom does not lie in so-called free will but in the power to understand nature, and to strive for

greater perfection, by freeing ourselves from moral prejudices. This liberation is completely rational. It is therefore absurd to reject our own desire under the pretext of respecting an illusory Good. As desire is always part of the common order of nature, it is not immoral and still less irrational. It is natural and therefore rational.

This means that desire is not the mark of an evil mind. Absolute values can be written off as superstition. True Good is not a value, it can be achieved simply by man recognising his nature as necessary and knowing how to enjoy what it is.

The whole Spinozist approach navigates its way around two pitfalls: first, the idea of Good and Evil, which are specific to theological morality and imply transcendent values, and on the other extreme, a complete relativism, which puts forward the case (like Ivan Karamazov) that since God does not exist, everything is permitted.

Now let's look at what Nietzsche, partly influenced by Spinoza on these questions, subsequently proposed to elevate man to superhuman status.

Following our Nature to become Superhuman

Nietzsche was constantly searching for the ennoblement of man. What would he say if he were alive today? Towards the end of his life, Nietzsche says that he wants to see a superhuman emerge, but he is afraid that the last man is coming — the man of today. The last man is the one who has no more desire, who is happy to just survive, who delights in mediocrity. The last man is exhausted physiologically and nervously. He no longer believes in much, he does not want to work. Nietzsche would perhaps say that our age claims to be one of passion, but it is, in reality, lukewarm and devoid of spontaneity.

The last man is depicted as the antithesis of the superhuman. There is a choice to make, you have to actively want to be a superhuman, whereas the path to becoming the last man is presented as a downward slope that you can slide down without noticing. Passiveness takes hold in our lives without us realising. We don't need to take the slope at speed, we slowly but surely descend into nothingness (a void of thought, culture, etc.). This descent, this decline is a slow one and requires no resistance. This is why Nietzsche says that we must actively resist so we do not slip down.

Nietzsche does not want to leave our way of life to chance, he wants to be disciplined. We must be "five steps from tyranny", without going as far as tyranny, because that leads to monomania. Discipline must be great but not taken to the extreme, so as not to diminish our energy through excessive direction. We must give our "wild dogs," our impulses, some freedom while not giving them totally free rein. He does not want us to analyse our impulses so we can manage them, but rather to let them be spontaneous. They can remain unconscious, provided they find a space for expression.

In the same way, Nietzsche says that the worst crime against life is to prevent ourselves from being what we are, for example denying a living thing the chance to realise its potential or express what it is. In this context, the only good is what allows us to reach an even greater perfection of human nature, and the only bad is what goes against this nature. This greater perfection manifests itself in the joy we feel when we are aligned with our desire.

In other words, when my actions are channelled into strengthening my being and I accomplish what I am capable of, I feel joy. True virtue is nothing other than this accomplishment of myself. Therein lies the most important point: true virtue and power are one and the same. The nature or essence of man lies in what he has the power to do, and his virtue or power is in doing it, not preventing himself from doing it as theological morality dictates. We understand that virtue is about fulfilling our being and not respecting moral Good. This virtue

can therefore be identified in whatever is useful to me to achieve this fulfilment and found in the effort to persevere in our being. What is truly moral is quite simply becoming what we are.

It is in this sense that we can also understand the question of libertinism. Dom Juan, for example, goes from conquest to conquest because he is a man and therefore free and as such his desire exceeds all norms. From a moralising point of view, it could be argued that Dom Juan is evil or even sick.

But living according to natural morality would mean not judging Dom Juan, since it is his nature he is fulfilling. A libertine — from the Latin *libertinus*, “a newly freed slave”, is someone who challenges certain established dogmas, a free-thinker unconstrained by metaphysics and religious ethics in particular.

Natural morality requires us to assume our humanity, to resist a propensity to cowardice and to love life with all its risks. It helps us to accept our desire as it is and adopt a morality without obligation or sanction, one that is deeply rooted in life, fuelled by courage and geared towards elevation, creation and the pleasures of existence.

Ultimately, natural morality can be seen as a simple and limited set of life principles. We have to live to assume our humanity and to create — for example, having children is creating new forms of life. We should not lament that the world is not ideal, but instead love it as it is. We have to accept our own desires without repressing them with moral obligations. Finally, it is important to take our own nature as far as we can, as far as its power extends without trying to be something we are not.

Adhering to these life principles frees us from hidden determinisms. It is a way of affirming our power of being, of becoming Nietzsche’s superhuman. It is a way of becoming a cosmic individual who seizes the whole universe, all the world’s history and raises himself above it. It is a way of transcending our personal lives, beating a new path and

setting the standard of what man should be. The liberated individual shows us the way up. He lives under the auspices of the Dionysian.

The Dionysian is a notion that Nietzsche defines in the first paragraphs of his first book *The Birth of Tragedy*, setting it against the Apollonian. The Dionysian and Apollonian dichotomy offers us two ways of approaching and understanding life. The Apollonian is a clear and rational representation of the world, which is reassuring. The Apollonian allows us to organise our lives and soothes our anguish in the face of the violence of the world. The Dionysian, is the world of our irrational desire, what Nietzsche calls power, which always overcomes the reasoned and reassuring principle of the Apollonian.

Living according to the Dionysian principle means embracing the creative power of life, its vital thrust, but it also means accepting the feeling of horror and terror that life can arouse when we get too close or live it too intensely. Tasting the power of life is not an experience that should be taken lightly, it does not come for free and is a gateway to emotion.

To conclude, I want to quote Bergson and his lecture on morality given at the Lycée Henri IV in 1893. In his words, I see clearly how life, nature and morality are articulated in a single movement that leads to the full realisation of man: *"But if we take nature in all its fullness, if behind the condition we seek the trend, behind the fact the reason sensed by the mind which explains it, we start to notice that pleasure, feeling, development and intellectual aspirations are all just the fulfilment of a single force, the manifestation of a single movement, the movement that drives man to be more and more himself, to better realise the potential for ideal humanity that is within him, and in this sense morality is no more than the complete expansion of nature"*.

To your "great health" !

If the aim is to get rid of progressive morality, what is certain is that

one man alone cannot succeed. And perhaps it is already too late. We cannot fight against a tidal wave. Having said that, Nietzsche thought that the cycles that make up the history of humanity can exhaust themselves to make way for new forms of life. Maybe we have to wait until this cycle peters out and comes to an end. Maybe we can also follow the lessons of Zarathustra and respond with laughter. First, because laughter is pacifist — at least not violent — and above all because it is a life-affirming and therefore a powerful riposte to those who want to silence the strong. “You higher men, learn, I pray you — to laugh!”, is the message of Zarathustra. In this sense, the possibilities for mocking, deriding and exposing the absurdity of leftist morality are endless.

To affirm life, we need to go back to man’s natural state. In a sense, all our efforts are about rediscovering this “great health” that Nietzsche spoke of. It is this naturalness that we must seek out, and this innocence, of which Zarathustra speaks, which is the spice of life. It is as though we had to learn to love what destiny gives us — *amor fati*.

So what does all this mean for us, for our lives? Do you really love your mistress? Then don’t be ashamed to invite her for dinner with your most “loyal” friends, those who are happily married and have never strayed. Life is short, you have to know how to love it, risks and all, to find the true sense of the Dionysian, and respect your own desires. Go all out with your own nature, embrace this drunkenness that makes existence and passions worth living. In a nutshell, the next time you get invited to an orgy, don’t go alone. Bring your mistress!



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