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THE ARCHIMEDEAN POINT

A note of urgency can sometimes be heard, even in otherwise unhurried writers, when they ask for a justification of morality. Unless the ethical life, or (more narrowly) morality, can be justified by philosophy, we shall be open to relativism, amoralism, and disorder. As they often put it: when an amoralist calls ethical considerations in doubt, and suggests that there is no reason to follow the requirements of morality, *what can we say to him?*

But what can we say to him if there is a justification of morality? Well, we can put the justification before him. But why should he be expected to stay where we have put it? Why should he listen? The amoralist, or even his more theoretical associate the relativist, is represented in these writings as an alarming figure, a threat. Why should it make any difference to such a person whether there is a philosophical justification of the ethical life?

Once at least in the history of philosophy the amoralist has been concretely represented as an alarming figure, in the character of Callicles who appears in Plato's dialogue the *Gorgias*.

Callicles, indeed, under the conventions of Platonic dialogue, engages in rational conversation and stays to be humbled by Socrates' argument (an argument so unconvincing, in fact, that Plato later had to write the *Republic* to improve on it). What is unnerving about him, however, is something that Plato displays and that is also the subject of the dialogue: he has a glistening contempt for philosophy itself, and it is only by condescension or to amuse himself that he stays to listen to its arguments at all.

—That is not the point. The question is not whether he will be convinced, but whether he ought to be convinced.

—But is it? The writers' note of urgency suggests something else, that what will happen could turn on the outcome of these arguments, that the justification of the ethical life could be a *force*. If we are to take this seriously, then it is a real question, who is supposed to be listening? Why are they supposed to be listening? What will the professor's justification do, when they break down the door, smash his spectacles, take him away?

In any case, even if there is something that the rest of us would count as a justification of morality or the ethical life, is it true that the amoralist, call him Callicles, *ought* to be convinced? Is it meant only that it would be a good thing if he were convinced? It would no doubt be a good thing for us, but that is hardly the point. Is it meant to be a good thing for him? Is he being imprudent, for instance, acting against his own best interests? Or is he irrational in a more abstract sense, contradicting himself or going against the rules of logic? And if he is, why must he worry about that? Robert Nozick has well raised the question of what force the charge of inconsistency has against the "immoral man":

> Suppose that we show that some X he holds or accepts or does commits him to behaving morally. He now must give up at least one of the following: (a) behaving immorally, (b) maintaining X, (c) being consistent about this matter in this respect.

> The immoral man tells us, "To tell you the truth, if I had to make the choice, I would give up being consistent."[1]

It is not obvious what a justification of the ethical life should try to do, or why we should need such a thing. We should ask a pretended justification three questions: To whom is it addressed? From where? Against what? Against what, first of all, since we must ask what is being proposed as an alternative to the ethical life. It is important that there are alternatives to it. "The amoralist" is the name of somebody. This helps to define these questions in relation to a recurrent philosophical concern, skepticism. Skepticism can touch every kind of thing people claim to know: that there is an "external" world; that other people have experiences (that there are other people, one may also say); that scientific inquiry can yield knowledge; that ethical considerations have force. Philosophical skepticism touches all these things, but in very different ways and with very different effects. In the case of the external world, the real question raised by skepticism, for any sane person, is not whether any of what we say about the world is true, or even whether we know any of it to be true, but how we know any of it to be true, and how much. There is no alternative within life to such beliefs: any alternative would have to be an alternative to life. In the case of "other minds," as that problem is often called, much the same is true, within the limits of sanity, but the problem shifts disquietingly toward *how much?* Certainly we know that other people have feelings, but how much do we know about those feelings? This is, in part, a philosophical question, one that has more practical effect than the mere question "how do I know?"

Ethical skepticism, in these respects, is at the opposite end of a line from skepticism about the external world. It is not, on the other hand, like skepticism about psychical research or psychoanalysis, where a real doubt is raised that might come eventually to be accepted, with the result that these activities would meet

the same fate as phrenology: we would come to reject them altogether, finding that their claims to knowledge or even reasoned belief were baseless. It is not possible for ethical considerations to meet a collective rejection of that sort. For the individual, however, there does seem to be an alternative to accepting ethical considerations. It lies in a life that is not an ethical life.

Ethical skepticism of this sort differs so much from skepticism about the external world that it cannot be treated by the same methods. Moore famously disconcerted the skeptic about material objects by confronting him with one, Moore's hand (at any rate, it would have been a confrontation if such a skeptic had been there).[2] There has been much discussion about the effect of Moore's gesture—as, for instance, whether it begged the question—but it undoubtedly has some effect, in reminding us that to take such a skeptic seriously might be to take him literally, and that there is some problem about what counts as doing that. There is no analogy here to the ethical. It may possibly be that if there are any ethical truths, some of them can be displayed as certain: given the choice, say, one should not surgically operate on a child without an anaesthetic;[3] but the production of such an example does not have the same disquieting effect on the ethical skeptic as the display of Moore's hand on the other kind. For one thing, one detached proposition known to be true about a material object will finish that first kind of skeptic: Moore's hand is an example of a material object, and, as *one* refutes *none*, so *certainly one* refutes *possibly none*. But the example of the child, or any other detached case of a striking sort, will count as an example of the ethical only to one who recognizes the ethical. The amoralist, Callicles himself if it took him that way, could help or spare a child. A limited benevolent or altruistic sentiment may move almost anyone to think that he should act in a certain way on a given occasion, but that fact does not present him with the ethical, as Moore's hand presented the skeptic with something material. The ethical involves more, a whole network of

considerations, and the ethical skeptic could have a life that ignored such considerations altogether.

The traditional skeptic was basically a skeptic about *knowledge*, but an ethical skeptic is not necessarily the same as someone who doubts whether there is any ethical knowledge. In my sense, to be skeptical about ethics is to be skeptical about the force of ethical considerations; someone may grant them force, and so not be a skeptic, but still not think that they constitute knowledge because he does not think that the point lies in their being knowledge. (For the question whether there is ethical knowledge, see Chapter 8.) But, even when ethical skepticism is taken in this way, we should not assume that the skeptic must be someone who leads a life that goes against ethical considerations. Perhaps we should rather say that he leaves room for such a life. A skeptic, after all, is merely skeptical. As far as possible, he neither asserts nor denies, and the total skeptic, the Pyrrhonian of antiquity, was supposed neither to assert nor to deny anything. He could not bring it off,[4] and it is doubtful that the ethical skeptic could bring *that* off—engage himself to use the ethical vocabulary, but with regard to every ethical question, suspend judgment. There are difficulties in the very idea of doing that. It is hard, for instance, to use the vocabulary of promising and at the same time to sustain the position that there is nothing decisive to be said, for or against, on the question whether one ought to keep promises. Moreover, the skeptic has to act, and if he includes himself in the world of ethical discourse at all, then what he does must be taken as expressing thoughts he has within that world. If he speaks in terms of actions being ethically all right or not, and he cheerfully does a certain action, then we must take him to regard it as all right. So this is not an option for ethical skepticism. But there is another, which is to opt out of using ethical discourse altogether, except perhaps to deceive. While it is not an easy thing to do, the skeptic might be able to establish himself as one who is not at all concerned with ethical

considerations. One can then see the force of the point that there are alternatives. He is not left with nothing to do.

The motivations the amoralist could be left with constitute one thing that the ethical claims might seek a justification *against*. Yet it is a mistake (as we shall see in the next chapter) to think that there is some objective presumption in favor of the nonethical life, that ethical skepticism is the natural state, and that the person we have been imagining is what we all would want to be if there were no justification for the ethical life and we had discovered that there was none. The moral philosopher in search of justifications sometimes pretends that this is so, overestimating in this respect the need for a justification just as he had overestimated its effect—its effect, at least, on the practicing skeptic.

This returns us to the question of "to whom?" When the philosopher raised the question of what we shall have to say to the skeptic or amoralist, he should rather have asked what we shall have to say about him. The justification he is looking for is in fact designed for the people who are largely within the ethical world, and the aim of the discourse is not to deal with someone who probably will not listen to it, but to reassure, strengthen, and give insight to those who will. This puts into a different perspective the idea we saw rather optimistically deployed in the case of the amoralist, that a justification of the ethical would be a force. Plato, who saw more deeply than any other philosopher into the questions raised by the possibility of a life outside the ethical, did not himself take it for granted that a justification of the ethical life would be a force. He thought that the power of the ethical was the power of reason, and that it had to be *made* into a force. He saw it as a problem of politics, and so it is. But he believed that the justification was intellectual and very difficult and, further, that everyone had some natural inclination to break out of the ethical order and destroy it. This inclination was a constant presence in most people, who lacked the capacity to master the justi-

fication and hence themselves.[5] For Plato, the political problem of making the ethical into a force was the problem of making society embody the rational justification, and that problem could only have an authoritarian solution. If, by contrast, the justification is addressed to a community that is already an ethical one, then the politics of ethical discourse, including moral philosophy, are significantly different. The aim is not to control the enemies of the community or its shirkers but, by giving reason to people already disposed to hear it, to help in continually creating a community held together by that same disposition.

So far I have assumed for the most part that if we can engage in rational argument with someone, then we and that person are both within some ethical life (though not necessarily the same one): people outside any ethical life are unlikely to argue with us, and we have no great reason to trust them if they do. But that is not necessarily so. Leaving aside the desultory or, indeed, artificial motives that Callicles had for his conversation with Socrates, there is the important fact that people may be driven by a common need—at the limit, by a common fear of disaster—to negotiate understandings of limited cooperation or at least of nonaggression. There are inherent reasons why such agreements, without some external sanction, are bound to be unstable.[6] In any case, they do not in themselves issue in any shared ethical understanding. This is enough to show that people can have a rational discussion without sharing an ethical system. Perhaps, for a limited purpose, they could rationally discuss without any of them having an ethical system. Yet for the most part this is not possible, because rational conversation between two parties, as an actual event, needs something to hold it together. This may, of course, be some particular relationship that does not extend more generally to the ethical, but if it is not that, and not the condescension of Callicles or the needs shared by those in a common emergency, then it must involve some minimal trace of an ethical consciousness.

This brings out once more the platitude that not all members of a community can live outside ethical life. But one person may be able to live outside it. This leads us to a first-personal form of the question whether it is possible to justify ethical considerations from the ground up. An agent who is asking Socrates' question may wonder whether he could come to have reason for the ethical life, granted only some minimal structure of action, desire, or belief. This agent does not have to be someone who actually possesses only the minimum: he does not have to be outside the ethical world trying to see whether there is a way into it. He may as well, indeed better, be someone in it, who is considering what kinds of reasons he has for being there. (Again, how he might understand his reflection will itself be affected by its results.) Here we have no problem with the question "to whom?" The important question now is the last of our original three, "from what?" What is the minimum this person is assumed to have? If he is trying to justify the ethical life from the ground up, what is the ground?

In another well-worn image, where is there an Archimedean point? That question is not only worn, but profoundly discouraging for any inquiry it is taken to represent. In the case of some inquiries, we are so familiar with the discouragement that we find it hard to imagine what could count as success. If we were now set the task of finding some position outside all our knowledge and belief from which we could validate them, we might not understand the idea enough even to recognize it as a task. In the ethical case, however, we do have a better idea of what the task would look like. We would need to find a point of leverage in the idea of rational action. That idea in itself, as we have seen, does not immediately display a commitment to the ethical. That is why Socrates' question is not already an ethical one, and also why the amoralist or skeptic seems to hold out the possibility of a rational life outside ethical considerations. Still, perhaps that is merely how it seems before one has reflected enough. The question itself

did not use any specifically ethical terms, and that remains a fact. Nonetheless, it might turn out that when we properly think about it, we shall find that we are committed to an ethical life, merely because we are rational agents. Some philosophers believe that this is true. If they are right, then there is what I have called an Archimedean point: something to which even the amoralist or the skeptic is committed but which, properly thought through, will show us that he is irrational, or unreasonable, or at any rate mistaken.

There are two basic types of philosophical venture that fit this pattern. One of them works from the minimal and most abstract possible conception of rational agency. This will concern us in Chapter 4. The other, which we shall turn to immediately, assumes a richer and more determinate view of what rational agency is, taking it to be expressed in living a specifically human life. Both sets of ideas are rooted in past philosophies, the richer and more determinate conception in Aristotle, the more abstract in Kant. Neither of those philosophers, however, thinks that Socrates' question can be taken simply as it stands, as a question, so to speak, waiting to be answered. Each of them redefines the search for an Archimedean point. They do so in different ways—but they have something important in common, which connects them with Soccrates' original questioning, as contrasted with other and less fruitful lines in the history of moral philosophy. Each of them yields an argument in practical reason. Neither aims in the first instance to prove the truth of some ethical proposition, which we are then asked to accept in virtue of our interest in believing the truth. Each of them rather commends certain action to us because of our interest in acting rationally or leading a satisfying human life. For both Aristotle and Kant, the justification of ethical propositions will come only from this, that they will be propositions accepted by one who acts rationally or leads such a life.