

LIBERALISM, RELIGION,
AND
THE SOURCES OF VALUE

by

SIMON BLACKBURN



The Lindley Lecture
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2004

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Lindley Lecture
Liberalism, Religion, and The Sources of Value

Simon Blackburn

I

In this lecture I want to argue for a satisfying approach to moral philosophy which has consequences for the two other matters on my agenda: religion on the one hand, and liberalism on the other. This may seem surprising. The approach which I shall recommend lies squarely in 'meta-ethics'—the theory of ethics, and its relationship to things like truth and reason and objectivity. It is not clear what the route can be from theories in that area to more first-order or practical matters. It might seem that you could have any of a variety of theories about what human ethical thought actually consists in, yet be yourself hot or cold, opinionated or not, in pursuit of whichever practical code or ethics or politics appeals to you. To put it bluntly, you could read much of my writing without knowing which party I vote for.

However, although the connections may not be clear, it is surely evident that human beings generally do feel that there is such a route. Positions like subjectivism and relativism, or nihilism or scepticism may be theoretical positions about the status of some discourse or another, but they are certainly felt to have first-order impact. Most obviously, there is the feeling that they destroy confidence, and sometimes this is their avowed intent. Perhaps they do not imply that you would vote one way or the other, but they may imply that you are less likely to vote at all. Postmodern celebrations of relativism such as that popularly associated with Richard Rorty (who nevertheless repudiates the label) counsel us to remember that all our vocabularies are provisional and situated, historically conditioned, and inevitably due for subduction beneath others as the plates of human thought shift in response to new human purposes and problems. This is supposed to beget 'liberal irony', which, whatever else it might enjoin, is clearly something less than conviction, something unselfconfident, appropriate to a mode of thought that half sees itself as due to be debunked or undermined.

When people draw in their breath and excoriate its absurdities, it is often forgotten how much modern philosophy of the most sober kind

nevertheless flows the way of postmodernism. Once, perhaps there were authoritative observations, and uniquely rational ways of synthesizing, testing, and eventually accepting theories on their basis. There were rules of reason, applying not only in science but equally in practical affairs. All we had to do was display those rules, and the human animal would fall into epistemological line, pointing at the true, and avoiding the false. But if there ever was such confidence, the late twentieth century could not rediscover it. Sellars and Quine stressed the difficulties, and even the cultural relativity, in the process of observation. Goodman and Hempel, not to mention the eventual failure of Carnap's confirmation theory as a program, destroyed any confidence that there would be one right way of taking observation, even if we were more confident in it. Popper and a following generation of philosophers of science such as Kuhn and Feyerabend, stressed the provisional and insecure nature of any acceptance of scientific theory.

Wittgenstein and Quine made it worse, undermining the rationality of classification itself, seeing the application and reapplication of words to things more as an exercise of subjectivity than a response to anything objectively given. All these tendencies suggest that we no longer maintain a sense of the *authority* of any norms to which we conform or which we demand from others. Instead of seeing such authority, we see *through* it. The way is cleared for a plurality of competing 'narratives', none commanding assent, but all, somehow, commanding equal 'respect'. This might sound liberal, but I would deny that it is. There is a grave question about whether that respect can be more than a sham, given that the respect we would really like for an opinion or belief is that it is *true*. But the notion of *truth* is one of those that has been deconstructed, made ironic. Nobody but a metaphysical prig believes in truth any more. Respect therefore becomes something pallid, and eventually demeaning: the respect of toleration, of the passive-aggressive sneer 'whatever', or the kind of provocative fake respect parents give to their childrens' music: put up with it, but that is all.

If this has been our situation in theorising about the norms that are to govern sober science, it has been much worse in thinking about other areas, such as ethics.

Obviously, when postmodernism is the prevailing wind, there is going to be a reaction. Philosophically, I think we should distinguish two classes of reaction. One, most appropriate to science, is just the brutal reminder that it works, and that you rely on it all the time. Popper may have thought that the scientific assertion that arsenic poisons

is but a bold conjecture, like the conjecture that an asteroid will destroy life on earth within five hundred years. But he would not have been treating it as a mere conjecture as he snatched the arsenic from a child's hands, or refused the tea into which it had been poured. Confirmation and falsification determine practice. Philosophers may worry about reason and truth, but they know where utility lies, just like the rest of us. This is pragmatism, and it has much to be said for it.

But the other reaction is more ambitious. It worries that pragmatism does not, in Bernard Williams' phrase, give truth a life of its own. To the pragmatist, for example, it makes no difference whether a scientific theory is literally true, or whether it is a useful fiction, so that nature gives us observations and rewards us for practising as if it is true. Many people were shocked by William James's original presentation of pragmatism, since it seemed to elide the difference between a religious belief being true, and it being expedient to believe it. There is in us a desire not just for utility but for understanding. So the more ambitious reaction, and the particular *bête noire* of pragmatists, is to provide a way of feeding this desire. It is not just that some of our opinions enable us to cope, but that they do so by representing the world properly. Authority, and truth, are to be restored in themselves, and it is only when they are that our basic self-confidence is recovered.

Against this background I should now like to say something about my own view of ethics. It has three building blocks. First, I see our propensity for norms of thought and conduct in practical terms. We talk of duties, obligations, rights, and values in order to orientate ourselves towards conduct. This is what this talk (including talk to ourselves in self-conscious reflection, or to others in discourse) is for, and without their life in human, self-conscious and self-reflective agents, the categories we use as we go in for it are nothing.

I work this out by accepting a distinction first made prominent by Elizabeth Anscombe. Some states of mind are representational. They purport to represent how the world is. Others are not: their point is to orientate ourselves to the world as we take it to be in order to act upon it. The paradigm of the first kind of state is a belief, and of the second a desire or an intention. Anscombe illustrated the difference with the example of a shopping list. Normally a shopping list is used to steer your selections: the point is to get the shopping bag to conform to the shopping list. But a detective or a sociologist might follow you round making a list of what is in your bag. His list a representation. It is responsive to the contents of your bag. The second building block of my view is that ethics is to be explained in terms

of the practical kind of mental state, the one with the world to word direction of fit.

One might think that if that is so, it is a pity that ethics mimics other sciences: we talk of moral remarks as true or false, we talk of moral knowledge, and so on. Shouldn't we regret all that, once the practical nature of morals is impressed upon us? Some moral thinkers have famously supposed so. They think that in an honest language, as it were, our practical stances would be communicated by simple prescriptions, like orders, or by spontaneous outbursts, like expressions of joy or surprise. These writers are called error theorists, because, like postmodernists, they see our normal ways of thought as based on self-deception and error. I disagree. I see the way in which ethics gets expressed as perfectly in order: we have tailored the language to meet our needs for discussion, reflection, and inference.

Some postmodern authors reject the Anscombe distinction. They rail against the very idea of 'representation', and hence the contrast that Anscombe draws (they can hardly deny the distinction between the shopper and the detective, but they can deny its applicability to states of mind). They return to pragmatism, asserting in Rorty's terms that all language is for coping, not for copying, and hence that ethics is no different from any other enterprise of thought. I hold that they are wrong. The idea of representation, for me, is the idea of an explanation of success in action. And some things explain in a way that duties, obligations, and the rest do not (in fact, this is why we can rely on Anscombe's contrast).

Let me expand this for a moment. It is no good asserting that a map or a chart is for coping, not copying. A chart enables you to cope, certainly, but it does so because it depicts or represents the lie of the land. It is no miracle that it enables you to cope. It does so by being a depiction in which things such as rocks and headlands, and features such as their position, heights, and geometrical relations, are mirrored by isomorphic features of the map. We might say that the map enters into an explanatory relationship, first with the landscape and second with our success in coping with it. When we cope well by using it, we know why, and the answer lies in its representative nature. There is no other answer.

Similarly once we accept a science, we accept its explanations of why we cope using the science. Our so coping is just one of the natural phenomena that falls within the scope of scientific explanation. Our rocket lands on the moon because our astronomical data told us that the moon would be at place X, and that is where it was. There is

nothing viciously circular about such an explanation. Rorty once wrote that

A pragmatist in the philosophy of science cannot use the truth of Galileo's views as an explanation either of his success at prediction or of his gradually increasing fame.¹

But this is a *reductio* of pragmatism. If a theory is *our* theory we only bracket its truth by ignoring something which we in fact accept: our own explanation of the phenomena that led to the theory in the first place. And that explanation is exactly the one provided by the theory itself.

The point is obvious applied to common-sense rather than science in all its glory. Suppose I come into the room, open the door and see the cat, and thereby come to believe that there is a cat there. Suppose someone sets out to explain why I believe that there is a cat there. He *could* proceed by resolutely 'bracketing' the question of whether there is a cat about (some sociologists of science, proponents of the so-called Strong Program, have said that he must). He might start, for instance, behind my eyeballs, and put down only talk of the energies hitting my retina. And for some purposes, in cognitive science, say, this may have a point. If he is only interested in the pathways from retinal excitation to belief, it is indifferent to him how the retinal excitation was caused.

A different investigator in a different context might bracket the question of what was there as well. Suppose I have been prepared for this occasion by being carefully briefed that the room is going to contain holographic illusions of cats. If in spite of this I happily jump to the conclusion that it is a cat, my overconfidence seems odd and might require explanation, even on an occasion when I am in fact right. But this is an unusual context, although it could have parallels in science. There could be occasions when an investigator knows that there are other equally likely explanations of his evidence, but suppresses them, and this would require sociological explanation, even if he turned out, luckily, to have been right.

But in most contexts of explanation, truth makes all the difference. If our investigator is not a cognitive scientist but a psychiatrist, puzzling himself over me as patient, then there is all the difference in the world between my tendency to believe that there is a cat in the room when

¹ Rorty, 'Feminism and Pragmatism', Tanner Lecture delivered at the University of Michigan, 1990.

there is and I have seen it, and a tendency to believe it when there is nothing that even looks like a cat, or when I have neither been in the room nor received any information indirectly about it. In the first case I am normal, and in the second prone to delusions. In the first case, there is nothing out of the ordinary to say, whereas in the second case I am a nuisance to myself and to others, and more unusual diagnoses and remedies may be required.

The off-key feature of Rorty's remark (and the Strong Program) is that it seems to want to put Galileo, and the scientific civilization that followed him, into something like the second category. Whereas in fact, it is in the first. Jupiter's four moons explained Galileo's sighting and his belief, just as the cat explains my more everyday belief. And just as we do not have to draw upon sinister dark social forces to explain my status as an announcer of cats, so we do not have to resort to dark social forces swaying Galileo and his posterity in that case either.

Returning to Anscombe, I deny that rights, obligations and the rest fall into the same explanatory clinch with the world and our sayings about it. We may be more successful by conforming to our duties to be good parents—indeed, I very much hope and believe we are—but that is not *because* we are conforming to duty. It is because in doing so we treat children in a way that promotes their flourishing. We could go into more detail about what we do and why it works, but the general shape of the explanation keeps us *away* from normative categories.

This is why there is scope for a special kind of theory of ethics—expressivism, or non-representative functionalism, if we like. It acknowledges the special failure, in the case of evaluative and normative discourse, of the explanatory clinch that locks together representation and sober empirical fact. But to repeat, it does not regret or lament either our propensity to ethics in general, or the way we express ourselves in terms of moral propositions. It is not a reforming project, but an interpretative one.

Here I must confess that, having explored and promoted this general line on ethics for some thirty years, I am still surprised how difficult it is for many writers, even or especially in the little world of moral theory to accept it. The rhetoric is telling: the expressivist is billed as little better than a relativist or nihilist. He doesn't really believe in truth in ethics. He has no proper conception of authority. He thinks that duties, obligations and the rest are fictions (even the great David Lewis made this charge). Others talk of 'attitudinizing' or 'mere' imagination or 'mere' culture. The expressivist is actually no better than the

ironists and the debunkers. Only something more robust, a *realism* about moral fact, will restore to us the self-confidence we want.

Rorty likes to compare this kind of hankering for a potent kind of authority, with the religious desire to be saved. And although I disagree with him about representation in general, here I believe he is right. There is nothing wrong or inflationary about seeing the cartographer as responsive or receptive to the position of the rock. It is no more than common sense knowledge of how the world works. But the philosopher who finds it important to see us as responsive or receptive to values or obligations is going out on a limb, beyond causation and common-sense understanding of how things work. He is indeed analogous to the religious believer who supposes that he can be told or has been told what to think about these things by the authoritative voice of God. In each case, with the right state of grace, the truth can be impressed upon us, but without that state of grace, be it a gift of culture or reason, grace or *bildung*, we are lost. With it we are not responsible, but responsive. We only need to listen properly, or look clearly. How else are we to characterise authority, real authority, except in terms of external impression, the stamp of a reality outside of us?

To use an analogy made by the Australian philosopher Huw Price, it is as if we approach the subject of political authority, and start with the idea of the divine right of kings. If that idea subsides under us, as it did in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it would be tempting to slide to anarchism. Since authority needed divine right, and divine right has turned turtle, there is no such thing as political authority. As Price notes, this is a false dichotomy: it skips over what he calls the Republican option, whereby we create our own structures of moral and political authority, which are nonetheless real, and legitimate, for all that.

Yet it is incredibly difficult for people to understand this. Indeed I suspect that in the world at large there is little hope for people doing so. It is well-attested in social anthropology that communities without a religious ideology that is common and publicly avowed survive worse than one with such a thing. We poor human animals seem incapable of acknowledging ourselves as the authors of norms that are nevertheless binding. We find a paradox in the idea that we can be bound by ourselves, and escape it only by displacing the authorship.

I like to illustrate the difficulty with a quotation from the late Jean Hampton talking of the shocking example from Gilbert Harman, in which the subject comes upon some ghastly children pouring gas on a cat, with the intention of burning it:

either we should believe that it really is true that burning cats is objectively wrong, or else we should believe that (some but not all) people make such a judgment because of certain psychological facts about them and the kind of society they have grown up in.

I want to reply to this by asking why we should not believe both. I think that burning cats is objectively wrong, and I also believe that some but not all people make this judgment because of certain psychological facts—namely, their hostile attitude to burning cats. In fact I hold that everyone sincere makes the judgment because they share that attitude. But some people perhaps do not hold the attitude, and may dissent from the judgment or mouth it insincerely. I also suppose that like me people have that attitude in part because of the kind of society they have grown up in: in this case, a liberal, humane society with sufficient imagination and sympathy with animals to find the childrens' behavior perfectly abhorrent. Also, I am proud to say, a society that on the whole attempts a good job of meeting its members needs, cultivating attitudes and sentiments that make for well-being, and is at least by historical standards, quite sensitive to the undoubted instances where we fall short.

The fear implicit in Hampton's remark is one of competition: it is set up as if the explanation in terms of a moral reality is threatened by the explanation in terms of imagination and culture, and can only maintain its credentials by elbowing it out, just as an explanation in terms of my having seen a cat would have to compete with an alternative in terms of my propensity to suffer from delusions. For the anti-realist, there is no competition and no threat. What my culture and upbringing have brought about is my propensity to feel horror at the childrens' action—and a good thing too. There is, indeed, an element of self-congratulation in that last remark, but that is inevitable. The pat on the back is no more worrying or undeserved than the scientist's view that the explanation of why his instrument gave him the reading it did was the very fact he inferred from the reading itself. It just means there is no skyhook, nowhere outside the swirl of attitude, from which to judge attitude. One must simply bring other attitudes to help out.

How can I hold that the children were doing something objectively wrong? Must I not hold that the opinion is purely subjective, or that we have at best a congruence of subjectivities: just us? Not at all. The right way to hear the issue of objectivity is in the, first-order, ethical

way. Then indeed someone might *think* the opinion 'subjective' in a number of ways. He might think it is whimsical, deriving from something very specific to me. He might be imputing a hidden agenda of self-advantage, as we do when we hear spokesmen for tobacco companies denying that smoking is bad. He might think that a better imaginative understanding of cats would overturn it. He might be vaunting a society where cruelty is a prelude to bravery in battle, and the children need to practice it. He might doubt whether our society deserves the little encomium I gave it above.

But I reject all of this. I have no temptation to admit even a bare possibility of a better point of view, from which burning cats begins to look tolerable, or in which mutual cruelties supplant the operations of mutual sympathy and civility in meeting our joint needs. I have taken in all the facts, seen the situation in the round, and I am reasonably sure that no hidden subjective agenda, such as a desire for my own advantage, is driving the attitude. This is all that objectivity is, or can be.²

Expressivism is not the only position that emphasizes the necessity of 'standing within', and allowing ourselves the resources of the rest of our network of norms when we work out responses to challenges directed at any one of them. Such a Neurathian epistemology obviously appeals far more widely. I do however believe that expressivism makes the real position uniquely clear. This is because, by highlighting disagreement in *attitude* (approval, prescription, choice) it alone makes it clear that we really are talking about *disagreement*. We are not about to find that our differences vanish into a kind of soggy appreciation of divergent responses, in the way that concentration upon divergent language-games, divergent ways of life, or even divergent secondary quality ascriptions might encourage. Thus, when different groups of people instance different responses, and when attempts to 'get them to see it our way' fail, approaches that highlight these things make it quixotic or mistaken to see ourselves as *right* and them as *wrong*. We do not automatically think there is a right and wrong about the cat's way of smelling the world, versus mine, or the world of sound

² Interestingly, the situation here is quite close to the way Kant perceived it in the case of the judgment of beauty in the first part of the *Critique of Judgment*. That judgment, thought Kant, derived from and expressed a certain aesthetic pleasure. But the judgment nevertheless can be 'demanded' from others, and forms a subject of communication, debate, and even dispute. This is because the pleasure is free of all concerns of the self. It is a disinterested aesthetic response, arising of course in response to perceptions of fitness and harmony.

available to the dog and that available to me. Here, the differences of response just encourage pluralism, and that of course is one of the main driving forces behind the notion that secondary qualities are 'in the mind'. In other contexts as well (notably those of style and fashion) we recognize that there are different groups, whose 'whirl of organism' has them pointing in different ways, and the thought indeed undermines any peculiar attachment to our way as the 'right' one.³

Why does the expressivism actually help to give the thought that our way is right such force as it deserves in ethics? Well, the first step is to realize that to say that one opinion is right and another opinion is wrong is not donning a priestly mantle. It is not standing above the fray, but simply making a move within the language game of rejection and opposition. In the cases of secondary qualities and fashion, it is these attitudes or activities—rejection and opposition—that are threatened by the naturalism, and rightly so. I do not reject or oppose the cat's way of smelling the world or the dog's way of hearing it. But in the case of ethics this is not so. If I have learned to stand on my own feet, my rejection of the attitude of (say) admiration of the Holocaust is as implacable as can be. It can even march alongside illiberal-sounding cousins: rejection of the attitude of toleration of the Holocaust, and rejection of the attitude of those who would tolerate admiration or even tolerate toleration of it. In other words, it is *because* we are in the domain of feeling and practice that we need feel no guilt in working out the imperatives of practical reasoning. We can also, as an aside, recognize the quite restricted domains of practical life where our stances are indeed whimsical, and talk of subjectivity, of different ways of looking at it being equally 'good', and the other tired tropes of relativism gain some kind of foothold.

Thomas Nagel talks of what he fears to be debunking naturalism, a corrosive imp on our shoulders that insists that, even at the end of the day, when we have trumpeted what we can about truth, authority, reason, and the rest, it is 'just us'.⁴ He is the latest exponent of a long tradition of moral thought that revolts against expressivism. From Iris Murdoch, through writers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, there is the same disapproving pursing of the lips, a *noli me tangere*, as if the very idea is like a leper. How can the pure and mighty light of moral illu-

³ For all the water that has flown under the bridge, I don't think the questions have ever been answered that I raised in 'Rule-Following and Moral Realism', in Holtzman, S. and Leich, S., eds. *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule*. London: Routledge, 1981. esp. pp. 170–4.

⁴ Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

mination turn out to be nothing but the 'banner of the questing will', the creation of our crooked timber, a creature of our selfish desires and jostlings for power, one over the other? And isn't this where we end up if the last word is that this is just us?

But the last word is never that 'this is just us'. For we can go on to describe the 'us' whom we are. In the case of science we might say: that is just us, informed, able to test drugs reliably, inheritors of a long and reasonably successful tradition of increasing understanding and control of many natural phenomena. In the case of logic we can say: that is just us, able to distinguish truth from falsehood, able to distinguish better from worse inferences, able to avoid what is necessarily not true.

In the case of ethics, we have an even longer list of virtues. We can say that indeed it is just us: liberal, humane, sympathetic, imaginative, able to admire attitudes and policies useful and agreeable to ourselves and others, capable of selecting what is better and rejecting what is worse, able to bring other genders, races, or even species within the folds of our concern. These are some of the last words of self-awareness. I should say, and encourage others to say, that words such as these are the reverse of embarrassing. They can ring happily in our ears, and make us proud, and be taken as compliments. And then the naturalism actually helps bolster our self-esteem. We can be proud of the long effort to enable our better selves to triumph over our worse selves. Far from debunking, naturalism bunks.

It might be unkind, but not inappropriate to take a leaf here from John Stuart Mill's response to critics who saw utilitarianism as a grubby feckless doctrine, fit only for people sunk in swinish pleasure. Mill replies that it is not utilitarianism, but the critics themselves who belittle and demean human nature, by thinking that this is the only kind of happiness human beings can find. Similarly, I am inclined to think that it is the highest-flown, most dismissive theorists, those who panic at the very word expressivism, who similarly demean us. For them the banner of the questing will is all that remains when some quasi-religious, external underpinning is rejected. In this, they cannot see the immense complexity of human love and admiration, the complex sources of pride and shame, or self-esteem and guilt. They see us as apt to charge around unguided and wanton, unless we are under the firm governorship of God or reason or *logos*, of which they are the guardians. I think they sell us short.

II

The distaste for having us stand on our own feet rapidly becomes religious fervour. Here, the need for authority is answered by a voice outside us, the voice of God. We only have to listen, and all is made clear. The idea is ultimately relaxing: it gives us, as William James said, a moral holiday. It substitutes responsiveness for responsibility.

Or rather, it appears to do so. For eventually it only defers the question of responsibility. In normal human affairs, a testimony can be no more reliable than the status of the speaker. If the witness turns out not to have been at the scene, he is discredited, however convincing or self-deceived he may be. People are no good when they testify to what they cannot know. God's voice, of course, is not subject to that difficulty. But then to know that the voice we hear is indeed God's voice becomes difficult, and it is here that responsibility returns. In saying this, incidentally, I am saying something perfectly orthodox: 1. John 4.1 tells us to 'Try the spirits that they be of God, for there are many false prophets gone out into the world'. In different places, God speaks in different accents, and there is no process of tracing the different voices back to the scene, as it were, and finding which was really there. John unfortunately does not tell us how to try the spirits, or in other words what to substitute for the mundane process of tracing the voices back to their source. The human response is to hunker down within a cultural tradition, but that has little except conservatism and tribalism to recommend it.

We all have to discard most purported Gods, and the only impartial path of justice is to discard all, and start again. There are no moral holidays. For human beings, there is no escaping human responsibility.

Bernard Williams once remarked that an atheist who thinks that, because of the death of God anything goes, is not really emancipated from theism. I think that is right, and the charge stands against post-modernism. Here I should also like to add that taking naturalism as somehow inevitably debunking is a rather specifically modern thing to do. Nobody acquainted with the history of philosophy could think that the authors of naturalistic explanations always thought of them this way. Aristotle is usually hailed as a naturalist so, clearly, there is within the naturalistic tradition an alternative view to postmodernism. Hume, a card-carrying naturalist, said that 'those who have denied the reality of moral distinctions may be reckoned among the disingenuous disputants'.⁵ Hume did not intend his approach to moral reasoning

to be in any way debunking

There are further materials in the tradition to describe the attitudes associated with ethics. We are social animals, constantly conscious of the potential voice of criticism from without. In Hume's wonderful and typically down-to-earth example, 'a man will be mortified if you tell him he has a stinking breath, 'though 'tis evidently of no inconvenience to himself'. When we try to achieve a general point of view, simply 'liking' something turns into 'endorsing' it. Here we enter the realm of values. We put forward a public claim, and as a result need to be aware of our own potential for exciting the hostility or praise of others, according to whether they concur with our endorsement. In our own minds, we should have a voice within representing their voice without, but hoping for a "common point of view" in which our endorsement meets general concurrence. The construction here touches on similar themes to the contractarian tradition in ethics, which sees us as aware of potential criticism on grounds of injustice, when we ourselves could not accept the procedures we intend to foist upon others. The common point of view stressed by Smith and Hume, and perhaps more recently by such writers as Rawls, Habermas, or Scanlon, is one in which our desires as thought of as submitted to a kind of public discourse, whose verdict is then able to endorse them or reject them.

III

With these remarks in place, I would now like to conclude by suggesting a connection to liberalism. This may seem sacrilegious in a different dimension. It is still impossible to talk about liberalism without walking in the shadow of John Rawls, and if there is one thing Rawls was not, it was a Humean naturalist. Rawls had little sympathy with metaethics in general, none that I am aware of with anything deep in Hume, and none at all with the idea of a quasi-realist construction of our right to talk of truth, knowledge, or objectivity when we are expressing our attitudes. Certainly in the *Theory of Justice* the Kantianism, and the sense of the theory of justice as a kind of second tier of authority, standing above and beyond any mere conception of the good, are unhappy bed-fellows with the package I have been defending.

However, these are just the elements that offended many critics, and especially communitarians such as Taylor, MacIntyre, Sandel,

⁵ Hume, David. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby Bigge. 3rd edn. Revised by P. H. Niddich. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1975, p. 169.

and many more. They are also the elements that Rawls muted in his later work, where instead of liberalism emerging as a kind of theorem of rational contract, it became more like a pragmatic device for managing a pluralistic democracy in which different competing conceptions of the good life needed to find an accommodation with each other.

Well, there are many different conceptions of liberalism. A liberal, it is said, is someone who cannot take his own side in an argument. In other words, liberalism is identified with the postmodernist even-handedness or relativism, the equal 'respect' accorded to any old view. Obviously, I have no truck with that: republican authority is real authority. Liberalism, it is also said, trades on the fantasy of dissociating the true self from its cultural identity, asking us to pay respect to artificially constructed situations of choice, in which we are stripped of everything that makes us what we are: our gender or class, our loyalties, affiliations, social identities, and even our conception of what makes life worth living. Perhaps that is a valid criticism of Rawls. But there is something close to Rawls of which it is not a valid criticism. This is the imperative towards finding a 'common point of view', or a language for discussing policy that abstracts from an individual's own position. There are many ways, from Hume in the eighteenth century to Scanlon in the present, of describing this imperative. Hume put it in terms of finding a language common to all mankind, a language in which the question becomes what *we* are to decide, about some policy or decision or character, rather than how it affects *me*. A liberal society, we might say, is one in which the substantial conditions for such free discussion are implemented to the fullest possible extent. Those substantial conditions include, obviously enough, the rule of law, equality before the law, sufficient freedom of speech and inquiry, sufficient understanding, and therefore education, to assimilate and respond to the reasons of others, and institutional checks on coercion and force, or what Philip Pettit calls domination. They provide the cultural background within which the free exchange of reasons is the motor that drives peoples' minds.

The contrast here is with authoritarianism. In an authoritarian society the way you think is controlled by forces of which you may well be unaware, but which cannot be challenged by rational discourse. As Orwell showed in *1984* the ideal mind control is one that is invisible to those who are controlled by it. It is easy to fear that other people are in that condition: we might tend to suppose that institutions of brainwashing, such as Islamic schools or madrassas, are uniquely other peoples' problem. I do not think that is true. A dominant culture does not

have to be politically visible to act as a dark force on peoples' minds. A common example is the devaluation of womens' voices or minority voices, and the role of narratives such as pornography in providing a climate in which that invisibly happens.

But we should not leap from that caution to the postmodernist conclusion that therefore it is always coercion, or that the reign of rational discourse is a fantasy. It is an ideal, and one to which we can further and further approximate. That is why science is science, not the hegemony of a patriarchal power. What is true is that asymmetries of power, trailing habits of unexamined culture and background, have to be watched out for and sometimes exorcised. But we know the liberal remedy, since it has happened all around us. It lies in speech, and eventually speech that is heard and respected, taken on board as we say. Once people know they have a blind spot, they know when to apply extra vigilance. A critical liberal education teaches us to be especially wary to proceed cautiously, when we are especially enamoured of a single point of view. But it does not tell us always to retreat.

I do not want to go further into practical politics, nor into pessimism about the survival of liberal values into a century which shows every sign of domination by coercion and blind conviction, nor the polarisation of people who refuse to think in terms of we and us, and think only of me and mine, where that includes my tribe, my faith, my culture. Equally, although I am also pessimistic about this, I do not want to dwell on the threat from private ownership of the channels of mass communication that we see all around us. The cognitive incapacities of many human beings—their domination by untrue and unlikely beliefs, destructive and self-destructive emotions, misleading paradigms and heuristics, is another melancholy topic. As many critics have claimed, the 'ideal speech situation' of pure transparent shared rationality, celebrated by Jurgen Habermasⁱⁱ, may be a rare bird indeed.

What I do want to say is that we have to keep the ideals of liberalism alive and well, and that they deserve our loyalty. And I want to say that no postmodern irony, no soggy pluralism or communitarianism, provides any similar vision. Finally, I want to associate a republican understanding of the sources of value with a political implementation of these ideals. When we create our own authority, we are forced to recognize our own responsibility, and we know that we have to monitor it to keep it civilized. When we hanker after external authority and end up believing we have found it, we listen only to voices from without, and then we cannot monitor ourselves properly, and we risk sinking back into barbarism. It is as simple as that.

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* Pamphlet out of print.

† Reprinted in *Freedom and Morality*.

†† Printed only in *Freedom and Morality*.

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