

Beyond Religion and Enlightenment

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We need an understanding of morality that is equal to our unprecedented intellectual situation — a situation that is beyond religion and Enlightenment. This understanding can be found in combining a conception of reason which is at home in historical contingency with the acknowledgement that our form of life involves a commitment to a universal ethic of categorical duties.

I.

God is so great, he does not have to exist. This is the essence of the process of secularization that has so profoundly shaped modern society. The repudiation of idols, the respect for God's transcendence, is what has led to relieving God from the task of being the ultimate explanation for the order of nature and the course of history. To explain something in terms of divine action or Providence always amounts to placing God among the finite causes we have already found or can imagine discovering. Once we have resolved to let God be God, we can no longer use God for our own cognitive ends. A similar unburdening of God seems appropriate in the domain of morality. When the validity of a moral imperative is understood in terms of being God's command, the motive of the moral life becomes the desire to please God, as though we could help him or should fear him. Such a conception of God must appear as an all-too-human projection, if we assume that God must transcend such human needs and passions. We respect God as God, when we learn to value the moral life for itself, without appeal to God's purposes (though we

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may still believe that God loves what is good and right).

This view of the modern process of secularization has two important consequences. The first is that the process is rooted in Judeo-Christian monotheism itself. The God of the *Bible* is a jealous God: at the head of the Decalogue stands the prohibition of idols. It was thus God's fate, slowly worked out through the centuries, to be freed from the human tasks of this world, from our need to explain nature and to found morality. Thus, secularization does not consist in the illegitimate expropriation of the divine attributes and in their Promethean transference to man. On this point Hans Blumenberg, the great advocate of the legitimacy of the modern age, is certainly right. But Blumenberg is wrong to lay such emphasis on the idea that secularization has freed us from an incoherent theology which dealt in questions (such as how an omnipotent God could create a world in which there is evil) that could not be answered.¹ The alternative view I wish to propose is that secularization is instead the inner logic of Judeo-Christian monotheism.

I should observe that this view is not the same as Max Weber's famous thesis that certain forms of monotheism (particularly the Calvinist sects that tied the doctrine of justification by faith alone to the need for works as proof of election) led to the "innerworldly asceticism" which created the modern world. It is rather a generalization of Weber's results: God's transcendence has led to his withdrawal from the world and thus to the autonomy of the world, even where (as in morality) the world has not become, as Weber thought, the object of rational *domination*. In a recent work, *Le désenchantement du monde*, Marcel Gauchet has developed this view in a very persuasive way. He has shown that Christian monotheism has been "the religion for leaving religion behind," a way of eliminating the sacred within the world *ad majorem gloriam Dei*. "*Plus les dieux sont grands,*" he writes, "*plus les hommes sont libres*" ("The more the gods are great, the more men are free.")² The same idea can be found in the famous letters Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to Eberhard Bethge, in which Bonhoeffer sought to distinguish true faith from religion, which is an expression of human weakness.³

In putting forward this conception, I do not want to suggest that

1. HANS BLUMENBERG, *SÄKULARISIERUNG UND SELBSTBEHAUPTUNG* 44, 134, 201, 208f (1974) (English translation: *THE LEGITIMACY OF THE MODERN AGE* 34, 115-16, 172, 177-78 (Robert M. Wallace trans., 1983)).

2. MARCEL GAUCHET, *LE DÉSENCHANTEMENT DU MONDE: UNE HISTOIRE POLITIQUE DE LA RELIGION* 53 (1985). See also PETER L. BERGER, *THE SACRED CANOPY: ELEMENTS OF A SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY OF RELIGION* 105-25 (1967).

3. Letters from Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Eberhard Bethge (Apr. 30, June 8, July 8, and July 16, 1944), in DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, *LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON* 151-55, 177-82, 190-97 (Eberhard Bethge ed., Reginald Fuller trans., 3d ed. 1967).

the Judeo-Christian tradition has tended uniformly toward secularization. Catholic thought, by stressing the need for mediation between the individual conscience and God (through the Church, the sacraments, and the saints), has certainly been less favorable to this tendency than Protestant or Jewish thought. In addition, the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation can easily be seen as reintroducing the sacred into the world — although it can also be understood as the divine affirmation of the intrinsic value of the world, and in this form it has been indeed an essential element in the process of secularization I have described. The “Judeo-Christian” tradition is obviously not all of a piece. What I wish to maintain is that God’s transcendence, if thought through consistently to the end, must lead to secularization.

From this point of view, there is no deep opposition between monotheism and modernity. Or at least this is so, in so far as monotheism heeds God’s transcendence, and as modernity requires the purely naturalistic explanation of nature and a purely human understanding of morality. Modernity has been a way of fulfilling Judeo-Christian monotheism. By this I do not mean that the two are the same, that every exponent of modernity is, at least implicitly, a believer in the One God. The point is rather that not only are the two largely compatible, but also that monotheism paved the way for the successes of modernity. Only thus can we explain why a society that had defined itself by religious ideals for centuries could so quickly welcome the autonomy of science and morality.

The second consequence of this theory of secularization is that the autonomy of science and morality does not imply that faith must disappear. Otherwise, the theory would scarcely be plausible, for faith is far from dying out. What it asserts is instead that religion can no longer fulfill certain functions that belonged to it before, in pre-modern societies. We can no longer expect religion to provide ultimate explanations of nature or ultimate justifications of morality. It is in this that the so-called “death of God” consists. But this outcome does not exclude the possibility that we may still find in God an answer to the question of the meaning of life. Indeed, it is possible to affirm with Jean-Luc Marion that “*la <<mort de Dieu>> [est] le visage moderne de son insistante et éternelle fidélité*” (“The death of God is the *modern* visage of his persistent and eternal fidelity.”).⁴

4. JEAN-LUC MARION, *L'IDOLE ET LA DISTANCE: CINQ ÉTUDES* 11 (1977).

Religious experience, prayer and commitment may still remain important, and perhaps only acquire their true significance, to the extent we do not fall prey to the illusion that knowledge and duty, however essential they may be, embody all our aspirations.

So when at the beginning I described modern secularization as the realization that "God is so great, he does not have to exist," I did not mean that God does not exist or that his nonexistence is implied by the outlook of modernity. I meant that he does not *need* to exist, though it may well be true that he exists. We no longer need God to explain the world and to ground the rules of our common life. *Si Dieu n'existait pas, il ne faudrait plus l'inventer* ("If God did not exist it would no longer be necessary to invent him."). This means a liberation of man. It also means a liberation of God. If we follow Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and identify "religion" with the use of God for cosmological and moral purposes, distinguishing it from faith, we can say that modern society is beyond religion.

II.

So much for what seems already settled. Now we come to the real problems. Are the leading ideas of the Enlightenment, in which the outlook of modernity has so often found expression, able to take over the functions from which God has been discharged? Even if God transcends these functions, it need not follow that Man, his heir, is equal to such new responsibilities. In the domain of the sciences there arises the following question: In what sense can we speak of the *truth* of theories that we may well have good reasons to *accept*, if we lack a divine guarantee that our reason (that is, our capacity to recognize the validity of reasons) is adequate to the world? In the domain of morality there is an analogous question: What *authority* can moral imperatives claim to govern our conduct, once we have given up the perspective in which moral imperatives are seen as the commandments of a superior being? It seems that there can be no law, and so no moral law, without a legislator. Who can function as moral legislator after the withdrawal of God?

I shall leave aside the question about the truth of the sciences, in part because it is not particularly urgent. At least it is not so for the sciences, though it may be urgent for philosophy. Modern (natural) science has learned how to proceed according to internal criteria, which can in principle be satisfied on the basis of experimental evidence which must itself conform to scientific requirements. In this way progress, the reasoned preference for one scientific claim or theory over others, becomes possible. The scientist can dispense with the external, purely philosophical question about the relation between this process of science and the world itself. He need not ask whether

a theory that is supported and favored by good experimental evidence therefore corresponds to reality, whether it is "true."

The situation appears very different in the domain of morality. If we believe we are subject to certain moral duties, from which we cannot be excused just because we are not interested in complying with them, we are thinking of them as constraints or laws. They are "categorical," as Kant would say, yet in a sense that has nothing to do with the peculiarities of Kantian ethics. Even "consequentialist" (e.g., utilitarian) views of morality rely on a categorical "ought." The obligation to do the action which brings about the most good overall is held by consequentialists to be binding on us whatever our other interests. The idea of categorical obligation is, for reasons I shall examine later, characteristic of the modern understanding of morality. (Not all of the ordinary morality we recognize can be understood as categorical, but certainly a significant part presents itself in these terms.)⁵ Now quite possibly we can be accustomed to seeing ourselves as subject of these laws without having some notion of their source, of a legislator. But this frame of mind is by its nature unstable. The very idea of law impels us to look for its legislator. We thus see ourselves forced, either to determine the source of moral laws, or to call into question the very idea of a moral law. In this regard, an understanding of the foundations of morality is therefore not a purely philosophical matter. It belongs to the survival conditions of morality itself.

Now to what extent are the characteristic forms of Enlightenment thought able to solve this problem? Despite the obvious danger in defining a movement so complex as the Enlightenment, I believe we may consider as one of its most important legacies the project of locating the source of moral norms, no longer in God, but in the nature of Man. Within this movement of thought there were, of course, significant points of disagreement. One of them concerned the way in which human nature was supposed to serve as the source of morality. Do moral norms derive their very existence from human nature, or do they consist in independent truths whose authority human nature on its own, without appeal to God, is able to recognize? There was also the disagreement about which aspect of human nature was supposed to be decisive — sentiment or reason. The sentimentalist alternative quickly revealed itself to be rather unpromising. Feelings of approval and disapproval are too variable, from

5. See CHARLES E. LARMORE, *PATTERNS OF MORAL COMPLEXITY* 79, 132 (1987).

person to person, from situation to situation, from culture to culture, to serve as the basis of a universal morality, to ground a morality of duties and rights valid for everyone. This is the conclusion to which Diderot came in *Le neveu de Rameau*,⁶ after having given up his first enthusiasm for the sentimentalist ethics he found in Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. If feelings play a role in a universal morality, then it is only to the extent that they are corrected and guided by reflection. And this seems to lead to the second, rationalist alternative.

In the rationalist view, it is practical reason itself which serves as the source for moral laws. As I have indicated, this view can take two forms. One is that practical reason is thought able to construct such laws, as in Kant's ethics. The other is that practical reason is thought able on its own to recognize (some would say by "intuition") the authority for our conduct of certain abstract principles, as in the early 18th century ethics of Samuel Clarke. In one or the other of these versions, the rationalist conception remains one of the most vital currents in contemporary ethics (on the "constructivist" side there are R.M. Hare, D. Gauthier, and J. Habermas; on the "intuitionist" side, Th. Nagel).⁷ Their common conviction is that simply in undertaking to be rational agents, we must accept certain norms of conduct with regard to other agents, whatever may be the other beliefs we have.

Before going further, I should observe that this way of understanding morality is not exactly that of Kant himself. Though he indeed believed that categorical duties represent the laws a rational being would impose on himself, Kant did not think (at least beginning with the *Critique of Practical Reason*⁸) that this could serve as an argument for showing that we are subject to categorical duties. According to Kant, practical reason can be legislative only if it is free, only if it transcends all empirically conditioned interests (since it is upon these interests, after all, that it is to impose its authority). But this means that it can never be an object of our knowledge, and so can never be used to prove that we are under moral obligations. In Kant's view, our only grounds for believing that reason is the source of morality arise from our prior conviction (which he calls a "fact of reason") that we are bound by categorical obligations.⁹ Further on, I shall reject the idea that reason can be the source of morality — what Kant himself proposed as an *explanation* of morality. But I

6. DENIS DIDEROT, *LE NEVEU DE RAMEAU* (Garnier-Flammarion 1967).

7. For an important discussion of the differences between these two versions see John Rawls, *Themes in Kant's Moral Philosophy*, in *KANT'S TRANSCENDENTAL DEDUCTIONS: THE THREE Critiques and the Opus Postumum* 95-102 (Eckart Förster ed., 1989).

8. IMMANUEL KANT, *CRITIQUE OF PRACTICAL REASON* (Lewis W. Beck trans., 3d ed. 1993).

9. See Charles Larmore, *The Right and the Good*, 20 *PHILOSOPHIA* 15, 15-32 (1990).

believe that the other part of his doctrine, the idea that there are moral convictions it cannot be the task of moral philosophy to *justify*, but which must be accepted as the framework within which we reason, is closer to the truth.

The project of grounding morality in practical reason is better exemplified by the contemporary philosophers I mentioned before, who intend to do without a metaphysics of freedom. The general pattern of their argument, common to both "constructivist" and "intuitionist" versions, is this: (1) To act rationally, one must act for what one believes to be good reasons. One must then also believe (2) that all other rational agents would agree that they are good reasons. So even in the case of instrumental rationality, where one believes a certain action is the reasonable way to satisfy some given interest, one must also believe that all rational agents would agree that it is reasonable, given that interest (which they may or may not share). Now if the rationality of some action must be an object of agreement among all rational agents, it seems (3) impossible for it to depend essentially upon beliefs which some rational agents may have, but others may not. It must instead (4) be ascertainable from a position of completely detached reflection, in which one stands back from all one's present beliefs, except the commitment to reason itself, in order to appraise the merits of the action. Thus, (5) rational action is such that all rational agents will see its rationality as having an unconditional claim on them, binding upon them whatever their other beliefs. (Of course, not all rational agents need therefore have good reason to perform the action, for its rationality, which they must recognize, may consist in its best satisfying some given interest, which they may not share.)

More needs to be said, certainly, about the nature of rationality, if the unconditional claims of rational action are to become more specific and begin to resemble what we ordinarily understand by moral obligations. Here differences emerge among the philosophers sharing this line of argument. Whatever its particular form, however, this argument seems to me unpersuasive. Its failure lies, not just in there remaining, after all, an unbridgeable gap between (5) and what we usually understand as morality, but also in the steps leading to (5) itself.

My objection turns on the fact that rationality is as such an abstract capacity. Its rules are abstract ones, such as that contradictions are to be avoided or (perhaps) that one should pursue what one

believes to be good and avoid what one believes to be bad.¹⁰ Such rules are at best a necessary, not a sufficient means for determining (in conjunction with nonmoral information about the world) the validity of any moral norms.

Perhaps the best general way to prove this point is to observe that rationality is not anything like a Platonic essence, its contours fixed independently of what we might choose them to be. I do not mean that we should think a norm is valid or rational just because we have decided that it is so. That would certainly be wrong. But the rationality of a norm differs from the idea of a norm of rationality. Of the norms of thought and action we hold to be valid it is we who decide which (naturally not all!) will also count as norms of rationality. We should do so, however, with an eye to two things we want from a concept of rationality. First, norms of rationality should be highly formal, indifferent to subject matter. And second, they should be as indisputable as possible, readily acceptable to all no matter what else they may believe; for norms about which there are or can be doubts or disagreement are precisely those which we want to be able to show that it is *rational* to accept or reject. (A notion of rationality is rather pointless if we can say about someone who does not share some norm of ours only that he is not being "rational.") How unlikely must it then be that norms of thought and action selected precisely for their formal, indisputable character should be sufficient (along with nonmoral information about the world) to derive anything so substantial as the universalist morality with which we are familiar! In any case, what can be conclusively shown is how particular attempts at such a derivation fail: either the norms assigned to the idea of rationality do not really suffice, or they do so only because they go beyond the indisputable and are already substantial moral norms in disguise.

It may, for example, be an inherent feature of moral rationality (that is, of whatever may count as rationality in the moral realm) that our moral judgments should be, in Hare's sense, "universalizable": They should not be based on which persons in the given situation we happen to be. But contrary to Hare, such "universalizability" is not by itself, or along with other indisputable formal properties of "moral language" (plus information about people's preferences), able to justify any substantial moral norms.¹¹

10. I add the qualification "perhaps" with regard to the second rule because some philosophers, Thomists, for example, have understood it to imply directly the famous doctrine of double effect. Without thinking that this doctrine must be invalid, I am sure that it is far too controversial to be drawn simply from what may count as the nature of practical rationality.

11. For an illuminating critique of Hare along these lines, see Thomas Nagel, *The Foundations of Impartiality*, in HARE AND CRITICS: ESSAYS ON MORAL THINKING 101-12 (Douglas Seanor & N. Fotion eds., 1988).

Kant's own criterion of universalization presents what in this context must be a contrary defect. This criterion ("Act only according to those maxims which you can at the same time will that they become universal laws.") is more substantial than Hare's, and it can plausibly account for many (if not all) of the duties of ordinary morality. But contrary to Kant, this criterion goes well beyond what can be drawn from practical rationality as such. To see this, note that it involves far more than the requirement to avoid contradictory maxims. It makes the demand that not just under certain conditions (e.g., common moral resolve), but *always* we judge the morality of our maxim of action, not according to what will ensue if we (perhaps alone) act on the maxim, but according to what would ensue if everyone were to act on it. In other words, it forbids us to determine what we ought morally to do by reference to how others are likely to use our actions for their own, perhaps immoral purposes. This sort of outlook (which Weber called an "ethics of conviction"¹²) is, whether correct or not, too controversial to be drawn from the mere notion of practical rationality.

Rationality as such constitutes, then, too slender a basis for justifying the validity of any moral obligation. In saying this, I do not wish to deny that we can justify rationally the validity of certain moral obligations. But we can do so only by relying upon the presumed validity of other moral obligations. Practical reason cannot therefore be the *source* of morality. On the contrary, reason becomes capable of moral argumentation only *within* an already existing morality. Instead of ascending to an absolutely detached point of view, we should acknowledge, what is surely so: that we belong to a moral tradition already in place. When we try to rise above our historical situation, reason loses its substance and becomes mute. Contrary to (2) in the argument above, conduct that is rational for one agent, in a given situation, need not be so for another. Whether it is rational depends generally on what else he happens to believe.

For these reasons I do not believe that the rationalist ethics stemming from the Enlightenment can succeed. Reason cannot take over the function of grounding morality, now that God has been dispensed from the task.

One possible reaction to this result would be to conclude that the legislative conception of morality makes sense only within a certain theological perspective, and that we should therefore look for a new

12. Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, in FROM MAX WEBER: ESSAYS IN SOCIOLOGY 77-128 (H.H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills eds. & trans., 1958).

moral conception in which the notions of law and legislator would not play so central a role.¹³ Following this line of thought, one could easily come to believe that in fact such an ethic has been available for some time. It is the ethics of Aristotle, according to which morality, far from consisting of categorical duties, is part of the self-realization to which all men are drawn by their nature. It is not by accident if today a neo-Aristotelianism in ethics is so widespread, in America as well as in Europe.¹⁴ Its different forms agree upon one essential point: morality must be viewed as an *attractive*, not an *imperative* ideal, as an element of the flourishing life we naturally desire, and not as a set of norms imposed on our self-fulfillment from without. The prevalence of this outlook testifies to the crisis of the legislative conception of morality.

Neo-Aristotelianism appears to me, however, to labor under a profound blindness concerning the modern situation. Since the 16th century, modern thought has been increasingly characterized by the awareness that rational agreement about the nature of the good life is improbable. The more we talk about the meaning of life, the more likely it is that we will disagree. This experience is one of the principal reasons why Aristotelian ethics lost so much of its prestige in the first centuries of the modern era. Aristotle had assumed that the meaning of life, the nature of self-realization, can be the object of rational consensus, and so had sought to explain in these terms the value of the virtues. By contrast, early-modern theories of natural right, beginning with Grotius (the true father of modern ethics), sought to circumscribe an elementary ethics, valid for all, as independent as possible of controversial views of human flourishing. Such a morality was therefore naturally viewed as a set of categorical duties.¹⁵ It is not, as I have observed, the whole of our moral self-understanding, but it has certainly become a central part of it. The legislative view of morality draws directly on one of the distinctive experiences of modernity.

In the end, neo-Aristotelianism founders on the same difficulty as Enlightenment ethics: Man's essence does not provide any firm point,

13. This was already the view of Hume. See DAVID HUME, AN ENQUIRY CONCERNING THE PRINCIPLES OF MORALS 155-66 (The Open Court Pub. Co. 1946). Schopenhauer held the same view. See ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER, DIE BEIDEN GRUNDPROBLEME DER ETHIK 177-84 (1927). See also Larmore, *supra* note 9.

14. See, e.g., ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, AFTER VIRTUE: A STUDY IN MORAL THEORY (1984); ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, THREE RIVAL VERSIONS OF MORAL ENQUIRY: ENCYCLOPAEDIA, GENEALOGY, AND TRADITION 154, 193 (1990); ROBERT SPAEMANN, GLÜCK UND WOHLWOLLEN: VERSUCH ÜBER ETHIK (1989); MICHEL VILLEY, LA FORMATION DE LA PENSÉE JURIDIQUE MODERNE (1975); G.E.M. Anscombe, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, 33 PHIL. 1 (1958).

15. For more details see Larmore, *supra* note 9; Charles Larmore, *Political Liberalism*, 18 POL. THEORY 339, 339-60 (1990).

free of all contingency, on which a universal ethics can be established. It seems then that neither religion nor humanism is able to produce a plausible ethics. This crisis of ethics is not just a secret of the academy. It is part of the public culture. Although the foundations of the sciences are in fact in no more solid a state than those of morality, the sciences have developed internal criteria permitting them not only to increase their technological potential, but also to view the status of their foundations as a purely philosophical problem. For this reason, their cultural prestige has not declined. Morality, by contrast, cannot so easily immunize itself against questions of self-understanding.

III.

The crisis of humanist ethics might suggest that the best solution is a return to the religious perspective. This sort of solution is in fact as old as the awareness of the problem. Recently Daniel Bell has made a powerful plea for just such a return.¹⁶ He has proclaimed that in an age of antinomian hedonism (produced, he believes, by the modern aesthetic) it is becoming more and more urgent to recognize that there must be limits to the cult of self-expression. Bell, however, identifies these limits with the sacred. "Only a God can save us,"¹⁷ Heidegger's famous declaration from the Black Forest, might equally be voiced by Bell on the east coast of America.

There are two objections to this nostalgia for the sacred. The first is that in his recourse to God, Bell has oddly neglected the possibility of simply *moral* limits to what he regards as contemporary sybaritism. The second is that the idea of a return to a religious ethic is short-sighted. Bell does not ask why such an ethic was abandoned in the first place. If the secularization of morality had been an illegitimate coup d'etat, or if it had originally been just a promising alternative to a religious ethic that seemed in difficulty, there would be good reasons to consider returning to the point of departure. But if secularization has instead been the inner logic of Judeo-Christian monotheism, a return must be pointless. It would lead in the end only to where we are already. I believe we must instead make do with the conditions of modernity, neither hankering after lost certainties, nor rushing into the unknown of "post-modernism." I also

16. DANIEL BELL, *The Return of the Sacred? The Argument on the Future of Religion*, in *THE WINDING PASSAGE* 324-54 (1980).

17. *Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten*, *DER SPIEGEL*, May 31, 1976, at 193 (interview of Heidegger).

believe we have the means to overcome this crisis.

The solution I propose has two parts. The first amounts to an observation about the nature of humanism. In criticizing Enlightenment ethics, I referred to a failure of humanism. But the term "humanism" can have two different meanings. It can mean that moral convictions must be based upon practical reason as such or (or less plausibly, upon natural sentiment), upon a rationality that raises us above our traditions so that we can determine the validity of our convictions. This is the meaning of the term considered so far. But it can also mean that we regard our moral convictions as belonging to one or several traditions of moral thought and practice, which are historically contingent (that is, not necessary given the nature of practical rationality) and which we can elaborate and even change in part, but never completely leave behind, on pain of losing our moral bearings. In this case, the authority of morality would be indeed a human matter, arising from this world, not from God. There would be no return to a religious perspective. But just as importantly, it would not be supposed that man possesses an essence, unsullied by contingency, and sufficient to ground a morality. Man would be seen as a *Mangelwesen*, whose intellectual and affective attributes are always historically conditioned, whose reason can be exercised only within a given body of existing belief.

To the question of the legislative source of moral duties, this version of humanism could reply that it is not reason as such, either as the capacity to construct them or as the ability to recognize their authority. The source is our *form of life*, in so far as it embodies this universal morality of categorical duties. This form of life is authoritative for our conduct if, however historically contingent it may be, it has made us what we are, we identify with it and reason within its terms about what we ought to do.

To grasp the nature of this form of humanism, we need to distinguish two ideas that are usually combined in the concept of a universal morality: (1) the idea that there is a set of (categorical) duties which obligate each person with regard to all other persons as such; and (2) the idea that this system of duties is such that each person, simply in so far as he or she is a rational being, has sufficient reason to accept them as his or her duties. Failure to distinguish these two ideas has been an important factor in why ethical rationalism has seemed so appealing, and also in why antirationalists (e.g., Bernard Williams) have been inclined to dismiss the idea of a categorical morality as a "peculiar institution."¹⁸ The more plausible version of humanism I wish to identify consists precisely in rejecting the idea of

18. See BERNARD WILLIAMS, *ETHICS AND THE LIMITS OF PHILOSOPHY* 174-82

universal justifiability (2) while keeping that of a *universalist content* (1). There seems no reason why we cannot affirm a set of duties binding on all, without supposing they must be justifiable to all (though one of these duties may well be that we should do our best to justify to others the duties to which we hold them subject).

To do this, we must reject the familiar principle that a person can be said to have a moral obligation only if his present beliefs are such that he could be rationally convinced of its validity. This principle, however, is far from evident, and often is but a corollary of the view that practical reason is the source of morality. The applicability and acceptability of moral demands must indeed be connected, but not necessarily in this way. More plausible, for example, would be the view that a moral obligation can exist only if the person subject to it could be brought around to accept it, either by rational argument or by some (morally permissible) form of training or socialization. The legislative source of universal morality, so understood, will consist then in our form of life, the moral traditions that in addition to rationality as such, foster and sustain it. (No doubt, around its edges there exist disagreements about its content and implications; but there is also a broad consensus about its core duties, which range from promise-keeping to respect for bodily integrity.) This historical-sociological understanding of universal morality was introduced by Hegel, in the theory of modern *Sittlichkeit* he opposed to Kant's ethics, and later taken up by Durkheim, who made it one of the founding ideas of modern sociology.¹⁹

To avoid misunderstanding, I should emphasize, however, that in affirming the indispensable role of moral traditions I am not falling back on the "holism" or "communitarianism" espoused by a long line of antiliberal thinkers since the French Revolution. There is no question of proclaiming the fusion of society around a single substantial conception of the ultimate meaning of life. An unforsakable insight of political liberalism is that on the meaning of life reasonable people tend naturally not to agree, but to differ and disagree. Thus

(1985); and my criticisms in LARMORE, *supra* note 5, at 87; Charles Larmore, *Les limites de la réflexion en éthique*, in 1 L'ÂGE DE LA SCIENCE LECTURES PHILOSOPHIQUES: ÉTHIQUE ET PHILOSOPHIE POLITIQUE 199 (Francias Réconati, ed., 1988) (reviewing BERNARD WILLIAMS, *ETHICS AND THE LIMITS OF PHILOSOPHY* (1985)).

19. See ÉMILE DURKHEIM, *DE LA DIVISION DU TRAVAIL SOCIAL* 177-209, 267-90, 391-406 (Presses universitaires de France 2d ed. 1967) (1893) (English translation: *THE DIVISION OF LABOR IN SOCIETY* (George Simpson trans. 1933)); ÉMILE DURKHEIM, *L'ÉDUCATION MORALE* 1-12 (Presses universitaires de France 1963) (1925); TALCOTT PARSONS, *THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIETIES* 182-214 (Jackson Toby ed., 1977).

arises the liberal effort to focus on a universal morality, necessarily minimal, that can be shared as broadly as possible despite these disagreements.²⁰ Sadly, a number of thinkers who have seen the connection between moral rationality and tradition have thought this an indictment of liberalism, forgetting that the liberal project has itself become a central part of our form of life. It is of this universal morality that my idea of moral tradition is meant to provide a satisfactory account. What recommends this account is the second part of the solution I am proposing, an epistemology that moves beyond the usual dichotomy between reason and historical contingency. It shows why, despite appearances, this account of the authority of a categorical morality is not inadequate, why it is not a sort of ethnocentric relativism.

IV.

I have already observed that it is quite possible to justify the validity of certain moral obligations, if instead of ascending to an absolutely detached point of view, we rely upon the presumed validity of other moral obligations. The epistemology I shall present is one that makes this contextual form of justification appear no longer deficient, but normal. It also has a general applicability, as suitable for the sciences as for ethics. In essence, it builds on some ideas of American pragmatism. But since in recent years the term "pragmatism" has been appropriated (by Richard Rorty) for ends which are not mine, I shall not make much of this historical connection.

The epistemology turns on a rather obvious fact as well as on two cognitive norms that are as important as they have been neglected. The *fact* is that we are always in possession of a great many beliefs. To this fact are added the following *principles*: (1) We need a good reason to open our mind just as we need one to make up our mind. More precisely, just as to adopt a belief we do not yet hold we must have positive, specific reasons to believe it is true, so to put in doubt a belief we already hold we must have good reasons to believe it is doubtful, that is, that it may be false. (Doubting a proposition means, of course, believing neither it nor its opposite, but suspending judgment.) (2) To justify a proposition is not simply to give some true premises from which the proposition follows, but instead to give reasons that dispel a doubt to the effect that the proposition may be false. The first principle rests on a demand for symmetry in the conditions under which we may rightly come or cease to believe. The second assumes that justification is a problem-solving activity, and in

20. Actually, only that part of such a universal morality which can be legitimately enforced belongs to the normative principles of political liberalism. For details see Larmore, *supra* note 9.

particular one geared to the twin problems of acquiring truths and avoiding falsehood. Together these two principles have the important consequence that we need to justify a belief we already have only if we have first found reasons to believe it is doubtful.

It is this consequence that brings out the novelty of the two norms. It is usually assumed that reason requires that each of our beliefs be justified. (Often the assumption takes the form of the requirement that beliefs serving to justify other beliefs must themselves be justified.) This assumption has become so routine and unthinking, that its original motives have come to be forgotten. Such a requirement has arisen, in fact, not so much from reason as from the metaphysical aspiration to view the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, an aspiration animating most of Enlightenment thought as well. The demand that each of our beliefs be justified is the demand that we undo the weight of historical circumstance and rethink our commitments on the basis of reason alone. This conception of when belief must be justified grows out of a very different purpose than the view that justification is a response to doubt (or at least this is so, as long as the world of becoming is not taken to be the world of illusion). The decisive question is thus whether we want epistemology to be a guide to eternity or a code for problem-solving. If we give up that metaphysical aspiration, and take as our rule that we must have positive reasons for thinking some belief of ours may be false if we are to put the belief in doubt and so demand its justification, the idea that our beliefs must be justified will fall away. The mere fact that we already have a belief, and that we have it because of our historical context, is not a good reason to think it may be false and so not a good reason to demand that it be justified. Moreover, if we indeed find positive reasons for putting a belief of ours in doubt, we must continue to rely on our other existing beliefs, not only to find a solution to this doubt, but also, even before that, to discover the positive reasons that give rise to our doubt. There is in this view, therefore, no opposition between historical rootedness and rationality.

Clearly this epistemology needs more elaboration. I want here to make only one further remark about it, to ward off misunderstanding. The conception of justification at issue is obviously not what is called "*foundationalist*." But neither is it "*coherentist*," as this common alternative is usually conceived.²¹ Both these views of justification share the assumption that all our beliefs are to be justified. They

21. A good example of the common use of this dichotomy is the excellent book by JONATHAN DANCY, *AN INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY EPISTEMOLOGY* (1985). See

differ only in whether this is to be in terms of their relation to some foundational set of beliefs, or in terms of the "coherence" relations among our beliefs. Just this shared assumption is what I believe must be rejected. The *contextualist* view of justification I am proposing might best be described as claiming, not that our *beliefs*, but that *changes in our beliefs* are the proper object of justification. In deciding whether to adopt a new belief, for example, we are to ask, not whether the set of our existing beliefs plus the new one is justified by its coherence, but whether the new belief is justified by what we already believe. (Note that the coherentist must be in some difficulty about the status of his criteria of coherence, since they surely figure among his existing beliefs. Are they supposed to be at once part of what is justified and what serves to justify?)

Now the implication of this contextualist view is that our existing moral convictions do not as such call for justification. If we already believe in a set of universalist duties, they are authoritative for our conduct. Where we find reason to change some of these convictions or to elaborate them further, it will be on the basis of others of these convictions (along with non-moral information) that remain fixed. And if we ask for the source of these moral laws, it will be the form of life that sustains them. Here is the conception of morality we were seeking, in which reason and historical contingency no longer stand opposed.

It would be a mistake to object that I am begging the question about the authority of this universal morality. I am not arguing that its authority is justified because we have an allegiance to this morality. I am urging, instead, that if we have this allegiance, the question of justification does not arise. It does not do so, until we come upon a good reason to doubt whether such a morality is correct. And here I should note that according to this epistemology a good reason for doubting an existing belief is not the mere fact that someone else (in this case, a Nietzschean, for example) may have reasons to reject it. A good reason for us to doubt, and so to raise the question of justification, must be one that is good by our own lights, for it must be supported by our other beliefs. (Of course, even if we have no reason to ask whether we are justified in holding some moral belief, we may still be obliged, as I indicated before, to do our best to justify it to others who do not share it.) Once we see that the universal morality we recognize can be detached from Enlightenment rationalism, have we any reason to doubt its validity?

(Though convinced of the correctness of this moral epistemology, I

also DAVID O. BRINK, MORAL REALISM AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF ETHICS 101, 123 (1989). The contextualist view of justification I propose is in many ways akin to what Rawls has called the method of "reflective equilibrium," though many discussions of this method do not distinguish clearly between contextualism and coherentism.

want to admit to a nagging worry: Even if the metaphysical aspiration to eternity is to have no role in a proper epistemology, could it still have been a necessary element in the historical formation of those universalist moral traditions which are ours today? Could one have gotten to where we are now, only if one had not reasoned as I am urging we now should do, only if instead one had imagined this morality was the voice of Reason itself? An affirmative answer would not refute the epistemological principles I have defended, nor discredit our inherited moral beliefs. But it would make one wonder whether being reasonable must always be the most important thing in the world.)

This epistemology does not resolve all problems of justification in the domain of morality. Many vital questions will remain as difficult as before. Much depends on the nature of the moral traditions we can still affirm, after several centuries of legitimate criticism, but also of reckless attack. But if we can still recognize in our form of life a commitment to a universal ethic of categorical duties, we may consider this form of life as the source of authority for these moral convictions. By reasoning *within* this form of life, we are not doing less than reason demands. In reality, no doubt, a great deal of moral argument already proceeds along these lines. What needs to be changed is our self-understanding. In this way we can avoid the chief failure of Enlightenment ethics, yet continue to affirm the moral outlook of modernity. We can rely upon a conception of reason that is equal to our unprecedented intellectual situation — a situation that is beyond religion and Enlightenment.

