

A SHORT INTELLECTUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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I

Many children are natural metaphysicians. At an early age (six? seven?) they wonder about such things as the antinomies of space and time, what the soul is, the adequacy of causal proofs of God's existence. Then teachers, and other demands of the quotidian, drive the wonder from their minds.

More of the wonder survives in some of us than in others. I went to Yale University intending to concentrate on English literature. I had studied some philosophy at secondary school (an English teacher had set us Berkeley's *Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*), which I took to. But in my first term at university I had an introductory course in philosophy, and that settled it. I wanted to be a philosopher.

In so far as an adult interest in philosophy comes from childhood wonder, its source is pure and admirable. But, as I am here attempting intellectual autobiography, I should say that I doubt that we ever fully understand why these major turns in our lives happen. They are never as simple as they seem. Freudian theory has greatly overestimated nurture and underestimated nature. Still, when it comes to intellectual biography, Freud has much to contribute, if only we can disinter shards of the relevant past. When an adult decides to commit his or her life to philosophy, there are more, and less pure and admirable, forces at work than childhood wonder. How else can we explain the tiresome aggression and partisanship and feeble concern for truth that is so common among philosophers?

When I was an undergraduate at Yale (1951 to 1955), philosophy was taught by isms: Platonism, Aristotelianism, Scholasticism, Rationalism, Empiricism, Idealism, Logical Positivism, and so on. And the faculty was constructed of representatives of as many of these isms as the university

could support. The ones that I had most to do with were Robert Brumbaugh, representing Plato and Aristotle, Brand Blanshard, representing late nineteenth and early twentieth century British Idealism, and Paul Weiss, representing Whiteheadian metaphysics. I just missed Carl Hempel, the representative of logical positivism, who left for Princeton before I became senior enough to take any of his courses.

In the liberal American way, we students were allowed to put together any combination of subjects we wanted, with only the slightest compulsion. As I recall, we had first to do only a survey course in the history of philosophy.

Isms are no way to teach philosophy, even with the stable of highly distinguished representatives available then at Yale. Nor is the variant, learning the history of philosophy. Learning isms is too passive; it is intellectual tourism. So is learning the history of the subject; one comes away with history but not the subject. I personally put together a thoroughly foolish, indigestible menu of courses.

I learned philosophy only when I went to Oxford as a graduate student in 1955. The Oxford method is, from the start, to ask the student to answer an important philosophical question: an undergraduate might start with, What is pleasure, and is everything that makes a life good one form or other of pleasure?; or, perhaps, Is the pronoun "I" in "I think therefore I am" intelligible if one assumes that there are no material things? And students are fed no textbook pabulum. They are given much the sort of reading list of original texts and current journal articles that one's tutor would give to a colleague wanting to catch up on the topic—a shorter list, no doubt, but otherwise the same. And week after one has one's arguments criticized. One best learns philosophy by doing it. And one best learns it, not by designing one's own syllabus, but by following one designed by someone who knows the subject already. Oxford students had less of this freedom than Americans did. Faculties were willing to say, in effect, "We're masters and you are apprentices; we think that studying our subject requires at least such-and-such". Of course, students have different interests and skills, so they must have some freedom too. It is a matter of getting the balance right. The Americanization of Britain, however, has by now upset the fruitful balance I found when I arrived.

As a graduate student I scorned ethics. I thought that it was a soft and peripheral part of philosophy best left to soft and peripheral philosophers. Despite its foolishness, this view is still widespread among (at least anglo-phone) philosophers. My interests, I then thought, were at the very heart of the subject: philosophy of language and theories of meaning and truth. When I arrived in Oxford, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* had recently been published, and most philosophers were still coming to terms with it. My initial view was that the author of the *Investigations*, and even

more so his followers, were altogether too hard on the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and that more of Wittgenstein's earlier ambitions to a systematic philosophy ought to be retained. So when it came to choosing a subject for my doctoral thesis, I decided to expound and thereby, I hoped, to some extent to vindicate the *Tractatus*.

To start with, Gilbert Ryle was my supervisor. He had an older and by then fast disappearing conception of the role of supervisor. On his conception, graduate work was a marvellous grant of free time in which to read, talk, reflect, and write. A supervisor merely gave a word of advice or encouragement now and then, because a graduate student did not need to be taught. But *I* certainly needed to be taught, and fortunately there were tutors who came to my rescue. I was tutored in my first year by a constellation of stars –David Pears, Gwil Owen, and Iris Murdoch (who shortly after resigned her job to write novels full-time). And when I got into my thesis, I was supervised by Brian McGuinness. They, especially Pears and McGuinness, taught me philosophy.

I did not, for an instant, resent Ryle's hands-off style. With Ryle, it was enough –more than enough- to have privileged access. He did not speak a lot, but when he did he was listened to. He disliked pretentiousness, especially the form involved in expressing loftily and obscurely what can be put simply and clearly. His remarks were often deflationary, but not cruel. The first time I met Ryle after he became my supervisor he asked me where I had been an undergraduate. When I told him, he said, "Where they have the zoo-theory of teaching philosophy- one of each species". In those early days a graduate student chum of mine had a paper accepted for *Mind*, a fact he was apprised of by a postcard from Ryle, the editor, which went in its entirety: "Taking your paper. Have removed all italics. No need to shout". And at one of the first student philosophy societies I attended G.R.G. Mure, the last of the twentieth century British idealist at Oxford, read a paper attacking Ryle's *Concept of Mind*, and Ryle was in the audience. At one point in the discussion, Mure said to Ryle, "You go wrong, Gilbert, at the very start, in your assumptions; tell us your assumptions". To which Ryle replied, "I think assumptions are like halitosis; your best friends won't tell you, but your enemies might". One took away from a Ryle quip more to ponder than one does from most journal articles.

My doctoral thesis turned into my first book, *Wittgenstein's Logical Atomism*. By the time I had finished it, I had seen many more of the strengths of *Philosophical Investigations* than I had a first, and more of the weaknesses of the *Tractatus*. I had also got my fill of textual exegesis and vowed never to do it again.

II

As soon as my first book was published, I began slowly, over several years, to get interested in ethics. This is clearly one of those changes of mind—in this case amounting almost to a conversion—that is terribly hard to understand fully. There is a partial, though superficial, explanation. In writing about Wittgenstein, I got interested in F.P. Ramsey's work on decision theory. This led me to utility theory, and then to utilitarianism.

At that time (and well before and after) most British and American philosophers regarded utilitarianism as a lost cause: it cannot account for the demands of justice, and many things that make human life good fall outside the bounds of utility. These objections, I thought, relied upon a staggeringly crude copy-book account of utilitarianism, which even its best-known critics exploited. I never thought utilitarianism was entirely correct, but I did think that it could be vastly more subtle and various and satisfactory than the copy-book account made it out to be. It could account for very many, if not quite all, of the demands of justice. And there were ways of developing the notion of "utility" that gave us an attractive account of what makes a human life good, and the account could be used in a maximizing criterion of moral right and wrong.

I wanted to explore this line of thought, and the exploration led to my book *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance*. I preferred talking about "well-being", rather than "utility" or "happiness", because what matters to us, so far as consequences for human lives are concerned, in both prudential and moral contexts, is not the presence of a state of mind but something broader—how well a human life goes, the quality or flowereshing of the life. The term "well-being" also has the merit of inviting the question, What is it for a life to go well? Recall Aristotle: "Well, so far as the name goes there is pretty general agreement. "It is *eudaimonia*", say both ordinary and cultured people; and they identify *eudaimonia* with living well or doing well. But when it comes to saying in what *eudaimonia* consists, opinions differ, and the account given by the generality of mankind is not at all like that of the wise"¹. Once we can say in what "well-being" consists, the questions of its measurement and moral importance look very different from the copy-book picture.

I thought that once ones starts thinking about well-being, one finds oneself forced down a certain path. "Well-being" is not just desirable consciousness; there are features of a good life that cannot be fitted under that heading. Once that is accepted, one might then say that well-being is, more generally, the satisfaction of a person's desires. But a person's actual desires, even the most central ones, can be satisfied and the person

1 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095 a 17-22, transl., by J. A. K. Thomson, Harmondsworth. Penguin Books, 1976.

be no better off. So we might then say that well-being is the satisfaction of rational, or informed, desires. But then one faces the question of how high the standard for "rational" or "informed" must be. A common answer nowadays- one in keeping with the naturalism running through David Hume, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill- is that a desire is "rational" or "informed" if it is one that a person will have when making no errors of fact or logic. But this standard is still not high enough. A person may have desires free of both factual and logical errors the satisfaction of which brings no increase in well-being. The standard does not become high enough until it represents the conditions for correctness in judgement of what makes a life better; the relevant desires are ones formed in correct appreciation of the nature of their objects. But this means that the notion of "desire" falls away as unimportant. There just are certain things that make a life -any characteristic human life- better. So the standard, when stringent enough, becomes more objective than subjective. It turns out that ideas such as "well-being", "utility", even "happiness", when they are used broadly enough to cover all that makes a human life good, do not themselves mark substantive values; rather, they become the formal idea of that which is prudentially valuable. And the illuminating answer to the question, What makes a life go well?, is a list of the various good-making features of life, which cannot themselves be reduced to a single substantive super-value.

In any case, so I argued in *Well-Being*². And though I do not now agree with everything in that book, I still think that this is the best account of well-being, and that it transforms our understanding of its measurement and moral importance. My discussion of its moral importance, though, is the most difficult and (understandably) the least satisfactory part of that book.

III

I still held on to the view that maximization of well-being is the appropriate criterion of moral right and wrong in many, though not all, situations. But I soon began to doubt even this qualified commitment to maximization. I seemed to me appropriate in fewer cases than I had thought. And in the cases in which is not appropriate we need a new way of conducting our moral thought.

My growing doubts about maximization, which I shall come to in a moment, are obvious ones, and it is astounding to me that they did not worry me earlier or worry more people. I had never myself, in any difficult cases, carried a utility calculation far enough to show what to do in a particular situation or what moral norm to adopt. Nor had anyone else.

2 *Well-Being*, Pt. I.

And though one might postpone the calculations when young in hope of being better at them later, there eventually comes a time when one knows that one will get no better. So one has finally to confront the thought: it is now or never, and can I do it now? And why haven't others ever done it? And why have the most ambitious, exhaustive cost-benefit analyses, performed by whole establishments of economists, seemed so jejune in theory and flawed in execution (especially when loss of life and damage to the environment are at stake)?

Can I do the necessary calculations now? The calculations do not have to be precise; rough ones will often do. So will probable ones, if the probabilities are high enough; if they were very low – say, a stab in the dark – one would be unwilling to rest one's action (and one's own and other people's fate) on them. And just how daunting the calculation is turns on what is to be maximized. To my mind, the most plausible form of utilitarianism is a highly indirect one. And the question that then becomes crucial to ethics is, What set of rules and dispositions would, if they largely determined the behaviour of a good majority of the population, produce most utility over society at large and in the long run? "Largely determined": well, no doubt the more demanding the norms the more the lapses, and the more complicated they are the less their implications will be understood. "A good majority": well, no doubt the size of the majority that adopts the norms will vary as the subtlety and demandingness of the norms themselves vary. So all these trade-offs must also enter the calculation, along with the grand-scale spatial ("society at large") and temporal ("the long run") dimensions. Which set would produce most utility? We should take seriously the thought that we do not know, and never will, at least to a degree of probability on which we should be willing to act. I now suspect that there are several major feasibility constraints on criteria of moral right and wrong: for example, motivation constraints (there is a limit to what we can do) and knowledge constraints (there is only so much we can understand).

What seems to me clear, and is agreed on nearly all sides, is that some utility calculations can be done to a high enough degree of probability, while some cannot. For example, I think that the key question arising from the most plausible form of (indirect) utilitarianism cannot be answered with the necessary probability. What is crucial is how many, or how central, the unavoidable failures in calculation are. If many or central, then utilitarianism itself, with its ambitions to high system, is in doubt.

One of the aims of my next book, *Value Judgement*, was to throw doubt on highly systematic forms of ethics – not just on utilitarianism (and, for the same reasons, consequentialism) but also on Kantian ethics, the sort of deontology advocated by W. D. Ross, and virtue ethics (if not Aristotle's, then the systematic forms one finds nowadays).

There is a feature of moral philosophy in the modern period that is little noticed and of great consequence. In the course of the seventeenth century the paradigm of rationality for philosophers largely shifted from mathematics to natural science. A parade of moral philosophers came on the scene aspiring to be the Newton of ethics. They harboured no doubts about the appropriateness of their new model.

On the title page of his *Treatise* Hume announced that his book is “an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects”³. What philosophers should now provide, he said, is a science of human nature, the “only solid foundation” for which “must be laid on experience and observation”⁴. He saw this empirical science of the mental world as analogous to what Bacon and Newton had done for the material world. “For to me it seems evident, that the essence of the mind being equally unknown to us with that of external bodies, it must be equally impossible to form any notion of its powers and qualities otherwise than from careful and exact experiments, and the observation of those particular effects, which result from its different circumstances and situations”⁵. Hume’s contemporary, Adam Smith, saw the “theory” referred to in the title of his book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in the same light. He aimed at giving an empirical account of the operation of our feelings, sentiments, and decision – in short, at providing a moral mechanics. In this he followed what he called the “Newtonian method”, which should be adopted by all authors of “didactical” discourse: namely, establishing a systematic science by starting with “certain principles, known or proved, in the beginning, from whence we account for the several phenomena, connecting all together by the same chain”. This method, he says, “is undoubtedly the most philosophical, and in every science whether of morals or natural philosophy etc. It is vastly more ingenious and for that reason more engaging than the other (i.e. the Aristotelian method).”⁶

Kant, of course, did not see his aim in quite these terms. Philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries valued Newton’s work for two features in particular: its empiricism (observation and experiment) and its comprehensive system (subsumption of everything in the chosen domain under a small set of principles). Hume and Smith valued him for both features, Kant for the latter alone. Our actions are moral, Kant concluded, only if autonomous, and autonomous only if outside the causal network⁷.

3 David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, L. A. Selby-Bigge (ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888.

4 *Op. cit.*, Intro., p. xx. Hume says much the same in sect. 1 of the *Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*.

5 *Op. cit.*, Intro., p. xxi.

6 Adam Smith, *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. IV, J. C. Bryce (ed), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983, pp. 145-6; but see also p. 204.

7 In *The Social Contract* Rousseau had written; “To be governed by appetite alone is slavery, while obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself is freedom”.

Kant prized Rousseau for this key insight into the importance of self-legislation and, for it, regarded him as the Newton of the moral realm⁸. But it was Kant who developed Rousseau's insight into a truly comprehensive system of that realm. As Newton had found a small number of principles behind the welter of our observations of the movements of material bodies, so Kant had found a single principle, The Categorical Imperative, behind our apparently varied moral beliefs. Kant had a stronger claim than Rousseau to be the Newton of ethics⁹.

Bentham was both empiricist and systematizer. As he says in the famous declamation at the start of *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*... On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne... a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while"¹⁰. John Stuart Mill, too, thought that our method in ethics must be "inductive", that is, based solely on "observation and experience", a method he puts on display in his own "proof" of the principle of utility. His proof is meant to be based on empirical generalizations alone: versions of psychological hedonism and psychological egoism, and the empirical evidence of what is actually desired most sympathetically understood as desired when in a certain epistemic state), from which one can derive what is desirable, and the like. What they prove, Mill thought (though even few utilitarians follow him in this), is the principle of utility, which then brings system to the whole of ethics¹¹.

With rare exceptions, moral philosophers today are still Newtonians. One sign of this is their thinking of our ethical beliefs, when organized by philosophy, as a "theory", which can be justified, as natural sciences can be, by being brought into coherence, or, as John Rawls puts it, into "wide reflective equilibrium"¹². I was never persuaded by Rawls' view of justification in ethics. It is not that it is wrong, but that it says far too little.

It is not enough to cite "coherence"; we have to know just how demanding "coherence" has to be. Obviously it must demand more than consistency. In the case of the natural sciences, for example, it requires finding place for beliefs that have some reliability independent of coherence; that

8 Quoted by H. S. Reiss, *Kant: Political Writings*, 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 4.

9 On Kant's comprehensive ethical system and Newton's and Rousseau's influence on it, see H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative*, London: Hutchinson, 1965, p. 162; Immanuel Kant, *Opus Postumum*, Eckart Förster (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 237; Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 52 ff.

10 Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, various editions, ch. I sect. 1.

11 John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, various editions, ch. 4.

12 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972, pp. 20-2, 46-53.

is, it requires modifying a pure coherence theory into a hybrid foundationalist-coherentist theory. It demands, further, that the beliefs form a system in a strong enough sense of “system” that credibility will transfer along the links between the beliefs; some of the credibility of certain of the beliefs must transfer to closely related beliefs. Now, natural sciences exhibit these kinds of connections. They aim to describe a nature that we suppose to be strongly unified by a network of casual connections; with that kind of system one will get the necessary credibility transfers. But is ethics “systematic” in anything like this sense? It seems not. When we philosophers talk of “system” in ethics, we sometimes mean only that ethical beliefs can be organized into a structure –of, say, subordination (as in utilitarianism secondary principles are subordinate to the principle of utility) or of equipollence (as in Ross’ deontology the seven *prima facie* duties are same-level principles). At other times, and perhaps most commonly, we mean merely that our ethical beliefs are related in such a way that general principles throw light on particular cases, and *vice versa*. It is, of course, true that such ethical beliefs can be mutually illuminating. Utilitarians rightly think that the principle of utility casts light on many particular cases. Kantians rightly think that the principle of respect for persons does too. And so on. Indeed, the relation of mutual illumination occurs much too readily to show much about justification. Any half-way plausible normative ethics will exhibit it. But the two relata involved are too close for much in the way of credibility transfers to flow along these short lines. Ethics, I believe, lacks system in the strong sense that a natural science has¹³.

An even better sign that we still aim at being Newtons is the kinds of normative ethics we aim at establishing. Not only do we expect them to be highly systematic, but we also do not doubt for a minute that they are possible. We assume that whatever a systematic ethics needs can be supplied. For example, if utilitarianism requires fantastic feats of calculation, then we can do them. The non-sequitur here is blatant. What if we cannot? What if there are serious constraints on the content of morality, arising from, say, both the limits of motivation and the limits of knowledge? *Ought* implies *can*. So perhaps it is not the case that we ought¹⁴.

I came in time to think that it distorts normative ethics to try to make it Newtonian. Instead, we should start working out a normative ethic that is not overly ambitious, that does not expect people to be what they cannot be.

We have to work out an ethic that is not consequentialist nor Kantian nor Rossian nor any of the contemporary forms of virtue ethics. At the very

13 I argue this in *Value Judgement*, ch.I.

14 I argue this in *Value Judgement*, ch.VI.

end of *Value Judgement* I started the job of saying what that might be, but only started it¹⁵. I gave a rough, incomplete sketch of an ethic that accommodates the limits of motivation of the sort of person we should want there to be, and the limits of knowledge of human beings as they are, and the demands of life in a stable, tolerably successful society. I was criticized for not saying more, fairly criticized because more is needed, but unfairly because the job is not easy and I had said what I could. In any case, part of my point was precisely that there is no simple, brief account of the nature of ethics of the sort that a highly systematic ethics can readily supply.

I have never been as anti-theory as a few of our contemporaries have been. There are legitimate pressures on us to produce as much theory as we can – for instance, in order to resolve conflict between moral norms. I doubt, though, that the theory can be as overarching as Kant, Mill, and other Newtons of ethics assume. In any case, we should not assume; assumptions are like halitosis.

IV

Where should I go now? I know that my disenchantment with Newtonian ethics stops well short of refutation. One has to play one's hunches. Newtonian ethics are unrealistically ambitious. The most promising kind of normative ethics would take a longer, cooler look at what human beings are like, especially at what they are not like and can never be. It would pay more attention to what is needed for society to be successful and stable. It would consider what constraints these facts might impose on the content of morality. It would pay more attention than they usually get to moral conflicts and how, when possible, they can be resolved. For example, it would not merely announce, as Ross does, that, to resolve conflict, one should estimate the relative "stringency" of the conflicting norms; this merely posits a new scale of moral weight, different from the scale of individual goods, without demonstrating whether or how it works. (And the answer to how it works cannot be "practical rationality"; in this context "practical rationality" is not an answer, but a magic wand.) And it would be alert to the possibility of incommensurable norms. Philosophers have paid some attention to the incommensurability of *values*, but they have often been concerned with values only in a narrow sense – the elements of a good individual life. But the more likely and more worrying incommensurabilities are between moral norms each with its firm but different backing without any obvious super-backing common to them all.

Then we should have to describe the ethic that emerges from these considerations. I have already admitted that I find its description difficult. It

¹⁵ *Value Judgement*, chs. VII and VIII.

may also be too complex for us to expect to be able to give anything approaching a full description. It is that description that I want to turn to next.

Meanwhile, I am writing a book about human rights. It is not a detour; one cannot arrive at an adequate account of human rights without travelling across the steep terrain of normative ethics generally.

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