

MODERN AUTONOMOUS MORALITY AND THE IDEA OF THE NOBLE

Introduction

I refer to autonomous morality in the title of this article. What I mean by the term is that tradition of moral theorizing that wants to separate off moral values and moral thinking from other forms of thinking, such as thinking about natural objects. Instead moral thinking is to be understood as set in a realm of its own where it operates according to its own internal logic without having a foundation in anything outside itself. In this sense morality is autonomous because it has its own independent sphere. This autonomy is often expressed by reference to the ‘is-ought’ distinction. Morality is the realm of the ‘ought’, not the ‘is’, and this ‘ought’ is *sui generis*. It is not, for instance, like the prudential or hypothetical ‘ought’. The prudential ‘ought’ rests for its force on the facts about the contingent desires and interests people have, and just tells one what one ought to do if one is to satisfy them. The moral ‘ought’ has a force peculiar to itself, and is somehow uncontaminated by calculations of selfish advantage. Unless one recognizes this peculiar ‘categorical’ character of morality, it is said, one has failed to grasp the idea of moral thinking at all.¹ Another way of stating the same idea is to say that morality is nonnaturalist, or that thinking about what one ought to do is different from thinking about how things are or about the true and the false. In this sense moral thinking is said to be volitional rather than cognitive. It is not constituted by knowing certain facts, but rather by the performance of certain acts of will or acts of choice that are spontaneous and not elicited by any prior acts of thought. The existence of morality as an independent sphere is thus understood as arising from the fact that it is constituted

¹ See, for example, Phillips and Mounce, “On Morality’s Having a Point,” in Hudson, *The Is/Ought Question*, p. 233; Hudson, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, pp. 274-75 (though see also pp. 276-81); Paton, *The Moral Law*, p. 22; Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics*, pp.9-12; von Hildebrand *Christian Ethics*, ch. 8. Contrast Crombie, *An Examination of Plato’s Doctrines*, vol. 1, p. 275; Duff, “Desire, Duty and Moral Absolutes,” in *Philosophy* 55 (1980), pp. 223-38;

by independent, spontaneous acts of will. Since both these senses of independence count as senses of autonomy, the autonomous morality of the title of this article must be taken to embrace both.

The claim that morality is autonomous is often looked upon as the guarantee of its peculiar and distinctive character, without which it would get reduced into something quite different. But one may also and equally look upon it as the claim that there is a divorce, a severing, between the realm of knowledge and nature on the one hand and the realm of will and moral values on the other. At least the finest exponent of the autonomy of morality, Kant, looked on it like this, as he made starkly evident in the introduction to his *Third Critique*.

This theme of the autonomy of morality as constituting a divorce or split in human existence is what I want to examine here. Given the influence of the ideas of autonomous morality, and even more so the influence of Kant, in contemporary moral philosophy,² it is a theme that perhaps deserves more attention than it is usually given. If I choose to approach it from the vantage point of history, this is not because I think a philosophical position can be explained or refuted in terms of its origins. Rather I think that in many cases, and especially in this case, the internal logic of a philosophical position can become clearer if seen in its process of growth. The precise bearing and significance of different elements in a united whole, and which they still have in that whole, may be better seen if observed outside it in their beginnings. In this way, when one returns to the whole, one may be able to discern in it what before had escaped one's notice.

My principal object of concern in what follows will be Kant (though I will deal with

Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, essays 11 and 12; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 131.

² See, for example, Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, pp. 34, 219; *Moral Thinking*, pp. 4, 9-11; Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. viii, 256; Scheler, *Formalism*, pp.9-12; von Wright, *Varieties of Goodness*, p.1. Contrast Foot *Virtues and Vices*, pp. 157ff.

several others as well). I regard him not just as the finest but also as the first exponent of the idea of autonomous morality. He is the one who is responsible, if anyone is, for the persistence of that idea in our own day. My remarks will, of course, not be exhaustive, either with respect to history or with respect to the philosophy of Kant. I hope, nevertheless, that they will be pertinent and provocative.

The Realism of Machiavelli

In tracing any historical development one is always faced with the problem of how far back to go. Wherever one stops it will always be possible to continue further, for no historical beginning is absolutely a beginning (except possibly the Big Bang). Obviously one needs to go back as far as is required for one's purpose. My purpose can suitably begin with Machiavelli. I cannot really justify this choice in advance because the justification is precisely the ensuing argument where the importance of Machiavelli for my theme will become clear. I can, nevertheless, appeal to the fact that Machiavelli is widely regarded as initiating something original, as being one of the chief founders of modern forms of thought.³ Since autonomous morality as I have described it is a typically modern doctrine (nothing like it exists in ancient moral thought), it would not be surprising if it has roots in Machiavelli.⁴

There has been much debate about the novelty of Machiavelli.⁵ I will content myself here with noting one particular element of his thinking which is especially relevant for my purposes: his rejection of the ancient idea that there is by nature a supreme or highest good for man which

³ See Berlin, *Against the Current*, essay on "The Originality of Machiavelli"; Procacci, *Machiavelli: Il Principe e Discorsi*, Intro., p. xcii; Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, pp. 180-86.

⁴ The novelty of the modern autonomous 'ought' was argued in Anscombe's famous article of 1958, "Modern Moral Philosophy." The thesis has been more elaborately re-argued by MacIntyre, *After Virtue*. While I agree with some of what these two authors say, I think that the issues were more penetratingly treated by Leo Strauss in his *Natural Right and History*, and also more recently by Paul Rahe in his *Republics Ancient and Modern*, especially bk. 2, ch. 1, sect. 3.

is discoverable by reason and which determines the character and structure of the good life. This idea was, one may say, the substance of ancient moral and political thought. It is precisely what Machiavelli rejects when, in chapter 15 of *The Prince*, he declares his intention to write something “useful” and, separating himself from the “orders” of others, to go to the “effectual truth of the matter,” not the “imagination of it.” Here we find succinctly expressed what has sometimes been called Machiavelli’s ‘realism’, or his refusal to indulge in speculations about, and constructions of, the best regime. Such speculations and constructions were usual in the classical writers. Machiavelli insists instead on speaking about the world of actual realities and to men whose concern is with getting on in that world. The effort, by the imaginative construction of the best regime, to see as far as possible what political order will best realize man’s highest good, and the attempt to live by the virtues of that good, are rejected by Machiavelli as both useless and ruinous.

Machiavelli’s work has a confessedly practical rather than theoretical orientation. He wants to get results, not merely to speculate. But his practical teaching is given a theoretical basis. “Nature,” he writes, “has created men in a way that they can desire everything but cannot obtain everything.”⁶ Again: “human appetites are insatiable, because having from nature obtained the power and wish to desire everything, and from fortune the power to obtain few of them, there results continually an ill content in human minds, and a disgust with the things that are possessed”.⁷ For Machiavelli men’s desires are both insatiable and self-interested. Men’s good is their private good, their personal pleasure and advantage. They are directed by nature only to the objects of their contingent and self-regarding passions, and to all of them equally, not to one more than another. There can be no sense in speaking of a highest among these objects, or

⁵ . For a summary of the varying views see Berlin’s essay on Machiavelli in *Against the Current*.

⁶ *Discourses*, Bk. 1, ch. 37. All translations in this article, whether of Machiavelli or others, are my own.

of one that will complete and satisfy the possessor. Moreover, because these passions are infinite but man's lot is such that they can never be satisfied, the natural human condition is one of misery and frustration. The world is hostile to man and opposed to his natural urges. Machiavelli speaks almost as if nature has been deliberately cruel and vicious. His 'realist' vision is of man as a creature of selfish passions set in a hostile world where he is forever condemned to frustration in greater or lesser degree.

The contrast between this vision of man and the ancient vision could hardly be greater. It is of some importance, therefore, to fix the precise sense and character of the difference. The traditional idea of a supreme end for man may be said to have two aspects to it: (1) it is the fully satisfying object of desire that excludes nothing desirable;⁸ (2) it is an ordered hierarchy responding to the objective hierarchy of human nature. Man is a being made up of parts and these parts are rightly ordered when they are subject to the discipline of reason and promote the life of reason in both practical and theoretical activity. It is not the case that whatever one may subjectively and contingently desire will be satisfied by the supreme good. Some desires may lack the necessary subordination to reason. Attaining the supreme good involves not just the satisfaction of desire, but also the disciplining and control of desire so that it does not exceed the rational measure. A life thus disciplined proves to be the most desirable and fully satisfying way to live. It accords with the objective condition of nature. A life, by contrast, devoted to the pursuit also of disordered desires is most dissatisfying and miserable. It is in conflict with the objective condition of nature. Complete and lasting satisfaction is to be found only in the fulfilling, and not in the thwarting, of nature.⁹

⁷ *Discourses*, Bk. 2, Preface.

⁸ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1211b18; Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, III, prose 2; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, q. 1, a. 5.

⁹ This is clearly the thrust of Plato's thought, as especially in the *Gorgias*, of Aristotle's thought (in both his ethical

The good life is thus the most objectively satisfying life. It is also the most noble or excellent life. The noble is understood as what is highest and most elevated. In the context of human life high and elevated mean the most complete and advanced development of soul. This development of soul, or perfection, is the realizing in oneself of the natural hierarchy of one's being. Hence the good and satisfied life must also, in the ultimate case, be the noble and beautiful life. Such a life is the intention of nature herself; this is what man is naturally directed towards. In becoming good and noble, in achieving virtue and rational self-control, one does not oppose or thwart one's natural inclinations. Rather one follows them.

For Machiavelli the reverse is the case. Man has no natural inclination to virtue or nobility. He is by nature a creature of multitudinous passions ruled by whatever desires he happens to have and moved by nothing but the restless urge to satisfy them. There might still be here an implicit notion of a supreme good in the sense of the complete satisfaction of desire (though this satisfaction remains out of reach). But there is no notion of a supreme good in the sense of an ordered hierarchy. Machiavelli makes no attempt to distinguish among natural and unnatural desires, or to impose, in the name of nature, discipline and restraint on the latter. Instead all desires whatever are regarded as natural. Machiavelli thus retains the idea of complete satisfaction but rejects the idea of order and hierarchy. As a result the idea of complete satisfaction of one's being and one's yearning for it become, instead of something noble and elevating, a curse and a burden. And man's world, instead of being friendly and beneficent, becomes hostile and cruel.¹⁰

writings and the *Politics*), of Cicero's (as in the *De Finibus* and *De Officiis*), of St. Augustine's (as in *De Civitate Dei*), of St. Thomas Aquinas (as in his treatise on happiness, *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, qq. 1-5), and of countless others in the same tradition.

¹⁰ Aristotle was as aware as Machiavelli of the infinite character of the passions in man. But because of his notion of hierarchy he holds, unlike Machiavelli, that reason's imposition of a measure on the passions is both natural and ultimately most satisfying; see, for instance, *Politics*, 1.2.1257b24-8a14, and 1.9.1257b40-1258a18.

Man's desires are the cause both of happiness and misery: of happiness to the extent they are satisfied and of misery to the extent they are not. Complete happiness is impossible. Human life can never be free of misery. One can only strive to get as much happiness as one can and to prevent the frustrations of inevitable misery from driving oneself, and others, into self-destructive acts that will just increase the misery. In Machiavelli's case this takes the form of the devious and unscrupulous techniques of his political science, whereby the artful prince is able to conquer and subdue other men, winning for himself the pleasures of lasting rule and glory while securing for them the conditions for the safe and non-destructive pursuit of happiness. There were, however, other answers, and notably that of Hobbes.

Hobbes presents the Machiavellian picture of man in some ways more effectively than Machiavelli himself. To quote one of his more striking passages:

There is no such *finis ultimus* (utmost aim) nor *summum bonum* (greatest good) as is spoken of in the books of the old moral philosophers. Nor can a man any more live whose desires are at an end than he whose senses and imaginations are at a stand. Felicity is a continual progress of the desire from one object to another, the attaining of the former being still but the way to the later. The cause whereof is that the object of man's desire is not to enjoy once only and for one instant of time, but assure forever the way of his future desire.¹¹

This picture is quite parallel to Machiavelli's. Yet Hobbes has not acquired the same reputation for wickedness and evil arts. The reason is not far to seek. Machiavelli leaves the unredeemed condition of man unredeemed and merely counsels how to exploit it to one's own advantage.

Hobbes endeavors, in an ingenious way, to refound morality on its basis. He does this by finding a substitute for the traditional idea of a supreme end or *summum bonum*; only Hobbes' substitute is rather a necessary condition than a supreme end. In the state of war of everyman against everyman that results from everyone's trying to secure against others the way of his future desire, no one can be certain of getting any satisfaction at all, let alone of assuring satisfactions for the future. The one absolutely indispensable thing for everyone is to replace this state of war with a state of peace. Peace is the universal and necessary condition for the attainment of any satisfaction whatever, and hence for the attainment and safe enjoyment of anything that the individual can call good. Whatever, therefore, is necessary for peace is necessary for any sort of desirable and satisfied life. Hobbes constructs a set of rules or "natural laws," whose sole purpose is to secure peace. They are, as he calls them, "convenient articles of peace."¹² They are also at the same time the normative rules of Hobbes' moral theory. That is why I call this universal condition of peace a substitute for the ancient vision of a supreme end. As the ancients understood the moral by reference to the highest good of human perfection, so Hobbes understands the moral by reference to the necessary condition of peace.¹³

Hobbes' theory is ingenious. But the morality that results has a certain feature that deserves particular notice. It creates a twofold split or divorce. First of all there is a divorce that it creates between the moral life and the satisfied life. Morality consists in the rules of peace. These rules require one to give up, for the sake of satisfying some of one's passions, the pursuit and satisfaction of all of them. To try to satisfy all is to achieve nothing but the war of everyman against everyman, which is the surest way to thwart all one's passions. One has a choice between satisfying some passions or none. One cannot satisfy them all.

¹¹ *Leviathan*, ch. 11. I have changed spelling and punctuation to bring them into line with current conventions.

¹² *Leviathan*, ch. 13.

Just as there is this divorce between the moral life and the fully satisfied life, so there is a divorce between the moral life and the natural life. By nature man pursues the satisfaction of all passions whatever without distinction. Morality is a check, a restraint, on nature, to hold it back-- in short to frustrate it. Even if the frustration is partial and is justified in the name of satisfaction, it is still frustration and a frustration that one cannot entirely avoid. Hobbes implicitly admits this. However, he left it to a modern Hobbesian, G.J. Warnock, to point out that such a morality, since it involves the frustration, not the fulfillment, of nature, involves also the likelihood of causing continuous psychological damage and a general psychic malaise.¹⁴

This divorce in human life between the requirements of morality and those of satisfaction and nature was uncovered by Hobbes in his elaboration of one of the strands of Machiavellian 'realism.' In their elaboration of another strand of it Bacon and Descartes uncovered a further divorce. Along with Machiavelli's picture of man as a collection of unordered passions went also a picture of knowledge as a technique of mastery for personal advantage. To control the insatiable beast that is man one needs skill and force. Machiavelli prided himself on his knowledge, on his understanding of the passions of men (including his own), and also on his understanding of how to control them.¹⁵ The Machiavellian prince is a man who knows how to manipulate men, and to exploit their passions to his own advantage. He is a man endowed with a superior technique. The man of knowledge in this sense is a man who knows how to conquer human nature and human affairs. Knowledge is power and for the conquest of what is known.

Machiavelli confined his knowledge to control of man. Bacon, who picked up Machiavelli's idea of knowledge as conquest, thought it could and should be applied to the conquest of nonhuman things as well. It seemed to Bacon, who at least for this life accepted

¹³ *Leviathan*, ch. 15, *ad finem*.

¹⁴ *The Object of Morality*, pp. 161-62; see also J.L. Mackie, *Inventing Right and Wrong*, pp. 107-19.

Machiavelli's picture of man,¹⁶ that even if one could not secure entire satisfaction, one could achieve a lot more of it than Machiavelli thought. One could overcome the hostility of external nature by the conquest of technological science, and so exploit nonhuman things for human advantage and satisfaction. Bacon implicitly accused Machiavelli of being one-sided, of not seeing the advantage of having knowledge in both areas, and of thus failing to see that one could control man, not just by the direct use of force and trickery, but also by the invention of "new arts, endowments, and commodities towards man's life."¹⁷ Baconian science was another answer, besides that of Hobbesian morality, to the Machiavellian problem of how to deal with man's insatiable passions. What Machiavelli thought to secure by ruthless politics, Bacon hoped to secure by technological science. His vision of the *New Atlantis* is an imaginary representation of just that hope.

Bacon's new method of science, which was invented for this technological purpose¹⁸ (a purpose which still today predominately animates the pursuit of science), has the same consequence for human knowing as Hobbes' new morality had for human acting. It creates a split or divorce of man from nature. Previous or traditional science had, according to Bacon, failed to find the proper method. It had set too much store by the "immediate and natural perceptions of the senses," and had tried to use these to get to the realities of things. This is a hopeless procedure. The senses are too gross to judge nature directly. They can only judge it by means of artificial aids, that is, they can report the truth about experiments but it is the experiments that must report the truth about nature. Bacon's science is a mechanical and materialist science. The world is just bodies and efficient causes, operating without reference to

¹⁵ See the dedicatory epistles of *The Prince* and *Discourses*.

¹⁶ *Advancement*, in *Works*, vol. III, pp. 301-302, 419ff.; *Great Instauration*, Preface, in *Works*, vol. I, pp. 125-33.

¹⁷ *Advancement*, in *Works*, vol. III, pp. 244-45, 301-302.

¹⁸ *Advancement*, in *Works*, vol. III, pp. 294-95; *Great Instauration*, Preface and Distribution of the Work, in *Works*,

ends or without any inherent teleology. The world is a collection of goalless facts.¹⁹ Only on the basis of such a vision of things, indeed, does a technological science seem able to operate. Such a science requires that nature be reduced to calculable rules, so that artificial devices can be built with the necessary mathematical and mechanical precision to embody and exploit these rules. It also requires that things be understood as no more directed to one thing than another, so that man is free to use them as he wills.

Bacon took this picture of nature postulated by science as objectively real. He thought that only through the knowledge revealed by artificial experiments, and not through the knowledge of the unaided senses, could a legitimate familiarity be restored between the mind and things.²⁰ But it is at once evident that this restoration by means of an artificial method is only required because by nature the mind and things are divorced. Man has, as such, no direct access to the nature of things. Although mechanical aids enable him in part to overcome this, he only ever gets indirect access. The original divorce is never abolished.

This divorce is more evident in the case of Descartes, who also, like Bacon, saw in science a means for the conquest of nature for human advantage.²¹ His famous ‘doubt,’ his use of skepticism to reject the natural and ordinary perceptions of the mind and the senses, has, as its result, and intended result, the setting of the world of things beyond human access behind a screen of ‘ideas.’ It is these inner mental entities that are the direct and proper object of knowledge. One’s knowledge of external things is always indirect and is derived from attributing to things, as their real properties, only those aspects of one’s direct awareness that are “clear and distinct.” The real world, as so constructed by Descartes, is one of pure mathematical extensions,

vol. I, pp. 125-45.

¹⁹ *Novum Organum*, II, sect. 2; *Advancement*, in *Works*, vol. III, pp. 357-59; *Great Instauration*, Preface and Distribution of the Work, in *Works*, vol. I, pp. 121, 138.

²⁰ *Great Instauration*, in *Works*, vol. I, pp. 121, 138; *Novum Organum*, Preface and I sect. 50.

devoid of all sensible properties. It is a world both typically scientific and wholly foreign to what we are familiar with through the unaided senses.²²

This new vision of science and of the world and of man's place in it is marked already in Bacon and Descartes by two opposing characteristics: confidence and despair. The confidence is more noticeable. It is what they both stress, namely their belief in the almost unlimited power of man to conquer nature for his own advantage, that is, for the increasing satisfaction of his passions. The despair goes hand in hand with this. It is the divorce between mind and things on which the new method of science was founded. Man may be able to conquer the world for his own use, but the real nature or essence of that world is forever cut off from the direct grasp of the human mind behind a screen of more or less delusive sensible images.

We have long grown accustomed to call this despair by another name, the name of epistemology. The epistemological task, as this exists in its typically modern form, has been from the outset a denying to the mind of any claim to be able to know external things directly in themselves and a confining of it instead to its own conscious elements. It seemed very clear at the time, indeed, that if this was not done the mind would be carried off by its own unrestrained self-confidence into dogmatic pronouncements and endless disputing. Let thought begin rather with a chastened scepticism, at least about external things. Then let it proceed, accepting only what it could be sure of within itself, to other things that it could be sure of because it proceeded at no point beyond what it first found securely within itself. The first task of any philosophy that pretended to systematic rigor was to determine the scope and competence of the human mind and its contents, and to impose on it the necessary ascetic discipline and restraint that the previous

²¹ *Discourse on Method*, Part VI.

²² This divorce between things as they are and our own consciousness or awareness is absolutely standard for what we nowadays call philosophy of mind. See Colin McGinn, *The Subjective View* and *The Problem of Consciousness*, and David Rosenthal ed., *The Nature of Mind*.

and scholastic tradition of philosophy had signally ignored.²³ These ideas, already present in Descartes, become especially explicit in Locke.²⁴ From Locke they pass over into Hume and Kant, and thence into the whole of modern philosophy, Continental and Analytic, where individual consciousness has been relativized to historical and group consciousness, whether of nation, language, race, gender, or what one will.

Taking this divorce from nature in the sphere of knowledge together with the divorce from nature in the sphere of morals traced earlier, one has in the tradition of ‘realism’ descended from Machiavelli what may be called the philosophy of divorce. Such a title, indeed, is exactly applicable to the Kantian critique. For it is, as was suggested at the beginning of this article and as I shall now try to show more at length, in Kant’s critical philosophy that one gets the most ingenious and systematic elaboration of this theme.

Kantian Autonomous Morality

Knowledge is for Kant, as for everyone in the tradition of epistemological despair descended from Descartes and Bacon, not of external things but of our own consciousness. This knowledge turns out, in Kant’s case, to be composed of two distinguishable elements: the sensuous data or appearances provided by sense-awareness on the one hand, and the patterns of unity that give meaning and coherence to these appearances provided by the mind on the other. Both elements exist only in and for consciousness. External realities, or thing in themselves, are forever hidden from us behind the screen of our inner appearances. It is only these appearances, and the patterns of unity our mind imposes on them, that we can be said to know. This leads Kant to make his

²³ One may suggest, in the light of this and of what was said earlier about the passions, that whereas the ancient tradition was severe as regards the passions but indulgent as regards thought, the modern Machiavellian tradition is the reverse--severe as regards thought and indulgent as regards the passions.

²⁴ *Essay on Human Understanding*, bk. 1, ch. 1, sect. 7.

famous division of the two worlds: the phenomenal world or the world of appearances that we know, and the noumenal world or the world of supposed things in themselves that we do not know but that we posit as the hidden source or ground of appearances.

The phenomenal world is the natural world as described by contemporary science. It has the features attributed to it by Bacon: it is materialist, governed by mechanical necessity, and lacks any objective teleology. More importantly the description Kant gives of man insofar as he too is part of the natural or phenomenal world is no other than the description given previously by Machiavelli and Hobbes. Man is a creature of passions, and these passions are purely selfish and lack any natural ordering among themselves.²⁵ Kant was, however, convinced that morality, as it manifests itself to us in our practical thinking, our thinking about what we ought to do, could not be accounted for within the phenomenal world as thus described. There were three features in particular that seem to have stood out for him in this regard.

First, moral judgments have a special claim or authority that applies independently of one's actual and contingent wants (the only wants that, following Machiavelli and Hobbes, Kant felt one had as something natural). To make morality depend on such wants is to say that one ought only to behave as the moral judgment requires if one will satisfy some want in the process. If one has no such wants, or one's wants change, then one no longer ought to behave in that way. But the sense of 'ought' used in morality is not hypothetical like this. It does not vary with the state of one's inclinations. It stands independently of them, even in opposition to them. It is, as Kant says, in some sense 'categorical.' Second, morality is something elevated and sublime. But if one subordinates it to particular inclinations, which are all selfish, one will make of it something low and base, and destroy all its peculiar worth. Third, morality is bound up with

²⁵ *Second Critique*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* (hereafter referred to as GS), vol. V, pp. 21-25, 35; also in Abbott, *Kant's Theory of Ethics*, pp. 107-12, 125.

freedom. Men, in judging and acting morally, do so without external constraint or compulsion from natural causes. They are exercising free choice or their rational will.²⁶

All three of these elements were lacking in the morality devised by Hobbes on the basis of Machiavelli's view of man. Kant could not, therefore, accept the correctness of that account. In doing this, Kant was, in effect, reverting to an older and pre-Machiavellian vision of morality. He was reverting to a vision that did see moral goodness as something fine and splendid, as something objectively valid for all men independently of their particular passions, and as involving the free assent of human choice. These were present in the ancient and medieval vision of the supreme good and the noble, or the natural perfection of soul. Kant was sympathetic to the claim that the truly good life must be something noble. He was not sympathetic to the ancient and medieval understanding of what the noble was. He rejected the claim that the noble was part of nature and an object of human knowledge.

The reason for this is not difficult to grasp. It lies in his theory of knowledge, or his acceptance of the tradition of epistemological despair that was just another element of the realism of Machiavelli. Kant firmly believed that in the world of knowledge, the phenomenal world, none of the aspects of morality he had noted could be found. The phenomenal world is the world of Machiavellian selfishness and Baconian science, of man as a beast of insatiable passions and of nature as a collection of valueless facts. Kant was accordingly forced to look for the origin of what was properly moral in the noumenal world. This had some important and striking results.

The moral good can now no longer be regarded as an object of knowledge as it had been by the ancients and medievals. For the only knowable goods are the object of particular selfish desires. Consequently, when one wills and acts in a moral way, it ceases to be the case that one is

²⁶ *Groundwork*, GS, vol. IV, pp. 428, 442-44.

determined or moved to do so by some prior cognitive recognition of good. On the contrary nothing knowable can determine the will to moral choice. If the will is determined it cannot be by anything accessible to understanding. It can only be determined directly by itself. The will, says Kant, has its own spontaneity, its own free causality, quite distinct from the determinist causality of scientific nature. This causality or self-determination with which the will is endowed belongs to the noumenal and hence unknowable sphere. Kant only secures the nobility and freedom associated with morality at the cost of shifting both into a sphere that lies completely beyond human grasp. The free acts of the will that constitute moral goodness and moral choice are beyond human explanation and comprehension.²⁷

This does not mean that one cannot say anything about the form these choices take. On the contrary one can say quite specifically that they take the form of categorical imperatives or categorical ‘oughts.’ Morality is about action, or about how to behave. Judgments about how to behave are typically expressed in terms of ‘should’ or ‘ought.’ In the ancient and medieval scheme of things these ‘oughts’ are relative to the good of perfection or of the supreme end of human action. One ought to do so and so because it is part of, or leads to, the good. Kant has ruled out this way of understanding ‘ought’ by denying that any good accessible to knowledge is other than contingent, low, and selfish. Consequently in the case of moral judgments about how to behave he is left with an ‘ought’ that is not relative to any good, or that is, in his own words, ‘categorical.’ This categorical ‘ought’ is just the pure idea of prescription or command. Kant’s morality is a matter of such categorical ‘oughts,’ and the will’s free determination is a matter of its imposing these ‘oughts’ on itself. Freedom is self-legislation, that is, autonomy or the commanding of an ‘ought’ that has no ground or source other than one’s own mysterious will. It certainly has nothing to do with nature or anything that can be known. It is essentially volitional,

²⁷ *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, ch. 3.

not cognitive. In Kantian categorical morality the ‘is-ought’ distinction receives its first and certainly its classic expression.²⁸

The categorical ‘ought,’ because it is purely formal, is also purely general. It does not command any particular thing (there is, after all, no knowable good worthy enough to be the object or content of its command). What it commands is the general form by which all practical judgments must be measured if they are to count as morally right. The categorical ‘ought’ in which the will expresses itself requires that any proposed course of action be examined to see if it can be made universal, that is, to see if it can be made a law valid for everyone and still stand. Only if it can is it compatible with right and duty. This neatly separates the action from dependence on subjective and selfish interests that are private and contingent to each individual, and so gives the action the categorical character it needs in order to count as moral. This also enables Kant, at the same time, to give a moral dignity to the purely selfish character of man’s desires as these were pictured in Machiavellian realism. While it remains true that the only desires or interests that one can know to exist in men are their particular felt and self-interested preferences, it is nevertheless possible to put these desires on a higher moral plane provided they can be subsumed under the categorical imperative, the principle of morality, and be made into universalized prescriptions or laws. Morality becomes a kind of universalizing of self-interest.²⁹

Such is the theory stated in general terms. Such also is how Kant sought to restore to morality the three elements of nobility, of freedom, and of objective validity or independence from individual and contingent passions. Since the device of universalizing embodies, as it were, the whole practical force of Kant’s moral system, there is special need to understand more

²⁸ Some scholars, notably Anscombe in her article ‘Modern Moral Philosophy,’ have argued that the ‘ought’ of the ‘is-ought’ distinction begins with Hume. But Hume has no sense of disinterested duty, or unfounded autonomous ‘oughts.’ He makes it plain that duty or obligation is tied to, and follows, some interest we have and cannot be wished or arise on its own. *Treatise*, ed. Selby Bigge, pp. 484, 498, 517-19, 523.

precisely what it amounts to. If one looks at how Kant expressly regards it in his ethical writings (and not just in *The Groundwork*), one will find that it is little more than an elaboration of Hobbesian peace. The formal principle of universalizing establishes right, and right is that one should refrain from pursuing those of one's self-interested desires which are incompatible with others' pursuing their self-interested desires, or which bring one into conflict with others. To put it differently, one is free, and has a right, to pursue happiness, or one's self-interested desires, in whatever way one wishes, so long as in doing so one does not infringe upon the right and freedom of another to pursue his happiness, or self-interested desires, in whatever way he wishes.³⁰ Right is the restraining and checking of one's desires sufficiently to avoid conflict. The way to ensure this is the device of universalizing one's desire. One asks what would be the result if everyone were to do the same. If the result would be conflict or something like the war of all with all, then it is not right.

Note that the conflict which shows that a given maxim or courses of action cannot be universalized is rather one of will than of thought.³¹ The contradiction that, according to Kant, rules out certain courses of action is just conflict with desire. That is why he is prepared to appeal, like utilitarians, to the undesirability of consequences. The repugnance to one's desire of the consequences of an action when this action is universalized, or conceived as done by everyone, is what shows that one cannot desire it *qua* universalized, even though one could desire it when conceived as done only by oneself. This does not mean, contra Mill, that utilitarianism lies at the bottom of Kant's principle of universalizing.³² An action done by many,

²⁹ Cf. Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, pp. 104-105.

³⁰ . *Theory and Practice*, GS, vol. VIII, pp. 290-91 (also in Riess, *Kant's Political Writings*, pp. 74ff.); compare *Metaphysic of Morals*, GS, vol. VI, pp. 380-81, 396 (Abbott, pp. 291, 307); also GS, vol. VI, pp. 230-33 (Riess, pp. 133-35).

³¹ E.g. *Groundwork*, GS, vol. IV, p. 423.

³² *Utilitarianism*, ch. 1, pp. 3-4. At least this is not true of utilitarianism in Mill's sense, though it may be true of utilitarianism in Hare's, especially when one considers Hare's remarks on 'fanaticism' in *Freedom and Reason*, ch.

for instance, that increased the happiness of the many at the expense of happiness for a few could be a case of utilitarianism but it could not be a case of universalizing. The overall happiness, which is what utilitarianism aims at, might well be greater if a few suffer and many are extremely happy than if all are just averagely happy. But universalizing only works, according to Kant, if one can desire the results of universalizing, which one cannot do in this case. For while one could, to be sure, desire to be one of the happy many, one could not desire to be one of the unhappy few. The appeal to the consequences of a given maxim or course of action is necessary in Kant's system, not to see where the balance of overall happiness lies as in the case of Mill, but to see whether these consequences are repugnant to desire or not. Only if they are not thus repugnant is the maxim universalizable in the relevant sense. Kantian universalizing has the same structure as Hobbes' argument against war and in favor of peace. Everyone finds he has to desire peace because what he instinctively and ordinarily desires (the unfettered pursuit of private pleasure) leads to consequences he cannot desire (the misery of war) if everyone does the same.

Kant's moral principle, which establishes the idea of right, is no other than Hobbes' idea of peace. It is its logical as well as historical heir. In this sense Kant never gets beyond Hobbesian morality. He does manage to bestow on this morality something of that ancient and medieval sense of the noble that Hobbes (along with Machiavelli) had lost. But he does not do this by changing the formal character of Hobbesian morality. Rather he changes its motivation and justification. He makes his expression of this formal character, that is the principle of universalizing, into the categorical imperative (in which is contained the pure idea of oughtness or command that the will imposes on itself without reference to good and desire). Thereby he makes this principle into an object of respect and awe in and of itself, quite regardless of the

9. But then Hare consciously constructed his utilitarianism on the basis of Kantian universalizing.

selfish interests it serves and for the sake of which men would more or less necessarily be moved towards it in Hobbes' system. The principle is separated from selfish and contingent motives (which it never was for Hobbes). It has been endowed with those three qualities which Kant, with his sense of the noble, felt it lacked. It is now categorical, that is, independent of actual and contingent desires; sublime, that is, independent of what is low and selfish; and free, that is, imposed on the will spontaneously by itself and not by the more or less mechanical workings of the passions.

It is in the idea of autonomy, of categorical 'oughts', and respect for universalizing as such, all divorced from anything natural and knowable, that the sense of the noble comes to rest in Kant's thought. As one can see from the movement of that thought traced above, this happens because the sense of the noble has had to be forced into a Machiavellian context of selfish inclinations and epistemological despair. The truth of this conclusion is no better illustrated than by Kant himself:

Duty! thou sublime, mighty name...what is your origin, and where is found the root of your noble descent, which proudly strikes out all kinship with inclinations?...It can be nothing less than what exalts man (as part of the sensible world) above himself...It can be nothing other than personality, that is, freedom and independence of the mechanism of the whole of nature, yet viewed at the same time as a power of a being which is subject to special laws, pure practical laws given by its own reason.³³

Kant may have succeeded in restoring something of the noble to morality from within a Machiavellian context (which Hobbes failed to do). But because of the way that context forces

him to alter that idea into the idea of categorical ‘oughts’, the noble is reduced to a sort of universalizing that differs from Hobbesian peace only because it is conceived as an unfounded and awesome command. Kant’s noble has an altogether peculiar character. By Kant’s own admission Hobbesian self-interest is too low for morality, yet his own ‘higher’ morality appears to be no more than Hobbes backed up by the unfounded ‘ought’ of noumenal, that is to say, incomprehensible freedom. Since all that can be noble here is the sheer unfounded and incomprehensible ‘oughtness’ and nothing else, it would seem that Kant’s noble is just Hobbes’ ignoble made mysteriously imperious.

One might be inclined to object that this is too extreme. What Kant regards as ignoble about Hobbes is not the peace he commends but the grounds on which he commends it, namely selfish interest. In removing this but keeping the idea of peace, Kant is not so much making Hobbes’ ignoble imperious as removing something noble from an ignoble context. But this is to forget the logical origin of the idea of peace. This idea is only devised in the first place on the basis of a Machiavellian view of the natural man. It is because men are conceived as creatures whose desires are particular passions without any intrinsic ordering that the problem becomes one of managing or manipulating these passions. The Hobbesian way of making this problem a moral one is to ask how the satisfying of passion by one can be harmonized with the satisfying of passion by all. The answer is, in the end, to universalize. All that Kant adds is to say that man has a mysterious capacity to respect this universalizing as such and not just in view of what he gets out of it.

By contrast, the ancient and medieval vision of the noble is tied to a view of the natural man which denies any independent validity to particular passions, and so *a fortiori* denies any right to the pursuit of them, whether universalized or not. What needs to be discerned is how to

³³ *Second Critique*, GS, vol. V, pp. 86-87; Abbott, p. 180.

subordinate the passions so as to make them accord with and promote the natural perfection and elevation of soul (which means, in the end, a certain perfection of reason in thought and action). Kant is bitterly opposed to this tradition of moral thought. When he speaks of their vision of the perfection of man, he calls it “fanaticism.” By this he means “the delusion of seeing beyond the boundaries of sensibility (sense perception),” or in the case of “moral fanaticism,” the attempt to base morality on something other than the stern categorical ‘ought’ of duty, and in particular the attempt to base it on some presumed knowledge and love of the noble.³⁴

This opposition to the idea that the noble is perfection of soul and the consequent replacement of it by the pure ‘ought’ of duty means that in Kant’s thought one finds a further separation or divorce. Besides the separations already mentioned of the moral from the natural and of the real from the knowable, one has also the separation (deriving from Hobbes) of the moral from the beneficial and expedient or from the idea of the most desirable and fully satisfying life. According to Kant, to speak of how something benefits one or makes one better off or fully satisfied is, if it is to have any graspable content and not be merely empty ideas, to speak of something empirical and selfishly pleasant. Hence Kant associates the beneficial and satisfying with the low and selfish and dissociates them from duty and the moral.³⁵ It has now become fairly standard to repeat the same separation and to equate the selfish with the prudent and to deny any essential connection between the moral and what benefits the individual.³⁶ This separation is sometimes put in terms of the distinction between what it is to be a good x and what

³⁴ *Third Critique*, sect. 29, GS, vol. V, p. 275; *Second Critique*, GS, vol. V, pp. 84-86, Abbott, pp. 178-79. Kant was aware that the older vision of perfection presupposed a capacity of the mind to penetrate beyond sensible properties to the intelligible being of things. That is the main reason he rejected it.

³⁵ It is worth noting that Kant asserts as much as, if not more than, Machiavelli and Hobbes that the natural condition of man is wretched and miserable. He goes further, however, in actually praising nature for being cruel and vicious. It is misery that is nature’s engine, as it were, to compel man to develop towards morality by forcing them to universalize their particular passions. *Third Critique*, sect. 83, GS, vol. V, pp. 429-34; *Universal History*, 4th proposition, GS, vol. VIII, p. 21.

³⁶ See the references in note 1 above, and also T. Saunders in his revision of Sinclair’s translation of Aristotle’s

it is to be good for x. Such a distinction would not, for instance, have been tolerated by Plato's Socrates. Socrates thought it absurd to suppose that what makes something good might not also be good or beneficial for it, and went so far as to curse the man who first separated the useful and the just. There are others who have made the same protest since.³⁷

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to show how the idea of autonomous morality as developed by Kant has its roots in the morality of Hobbes, the science of conquest of Bacon and Descartes, and the realism of Machiavelli. Having inherited and made his own a bestial, selfish view of natural human inclinations, despair of the human capacity to grasp the real being of things, and a mechanistic, nonteleological science of nature, Kant devises an autonomous morality of self-willed categorical 'oughts' to cope with the sense of the noble. This has the consequence of reaffirming and making more absolute fundamental splits in human existence. The moral is divorced from the natural and knowable and also from the prudential and fully satisfying, and mind is divorced from the real. One cannot say that these splits have been overcome or the root causes abandoned in the course of the historical development of autonomous morality since Kant, for they have not. The cardinal thesis of autonomous morality, the 'is-ought' distinction, remains today as much dependent on empiricist notions of the 'is', or of 'facts', and on a selfish

Politics (Penguin, 1981), p. 390.

³⁷ Plato, *Gorgias*, 474c-479e, *Republic*, 443c-445b (justice is a kind of health of soul and a benefit to the just man precisely as such without addition), Cicero, *De Officiis*, bk. 3, sect. 34. Foot and Warnock and others also wish to reunite the prudential and the moral by relating the moral to human benefit and harm. They do this, or were inclined to do this, by giving up the idea of the noble and returning to the self-interest of Hobbes. For a more Socratic position one may compare Bishop Whately: "If anyone really holds that it can ever be expedient to violate the injunctions of duty--that he who does so is not sacrificing a greater good to a less (which all would admit to be inexpedient),--that it can be really advantageous to do what is morally wrong, and will come forward and acknowledge that to be his belief, I have only to protest, for my own part, with the deepest abhorrence, against what I conceive to be so profligate a principle." *Rhetoric*, p. 316. See also H. Veatch, 'Telos and Teleology in Aristotelian Ethics,' in D.J. O'Meara ed., *Studies in Aristotle*. One should also not forget Nietzsche. Like the ancient and

understanding of human desires as it was for Kant. There is still the same insistence that the moral has not been properly understood if it is equated with the prudential or satisfying.

These suggestions about the structure of autonomous morality, as derived from an examination of historical origins, do not in themselves amount to a refutation, either of the origins or of what rests on them. For one thing, there is a lot of very good evidence to back up the Machiavellian account of the natural man (the appeal to history is one of the strong points of Machiavelli's work). Yet one must not forget that there are other ways of coping with this evidence without going the way of Machiavelli, and so without going the way of Kant either.³⁸ I have, in fact, throughout this article contrasted the Kantian account of how things are with the older one. Still, I have not been concerned in this article, at least not directly, to settle the issue between the older and more modern vision of things. It has been sufficient for my purpose to make clear just what the issue is.

medieval authors, he wanted to see nobility in terms of perfection and elevation of soul, and so in terms of what enhances and benefits the noble individual, *Beyond Good and Evil*, part 9.

³⁸ See in particular Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.2.1253a29-39, but also St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, passim.