

# Who Are We?

## Moral Universalism and Economic Triage

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In what sort of situation might someone ask the question "who are we?" It seems most appropriate in the mouth of someone trying to shape her audience into a more coherent community. It is the sort of rhetorical question a party leader might ask at a party rally. In such situations, it means something like "what unifying ideal can we find to make us less like a mob and more like an army, less like people thrown together by accident and more like people who have united to accomplish a task?"

"Who are we?" is quite different from the traditional philosophical question "what are we?". The latter is synonymous with Kant's question, "What is Man?" Both mean something like "how does the human species differ from the rest of the animal kingdom?" or "among the differences between us and the other animals, which ones matter most?" This "what?" question is scientific or metaphysical.

By contrast, the "who?" question is political. It is asked by people who want to separate off the human beings who are better suited to some particular purpose than other human beings, and to gather the former into a self-conscious moral community: that is, a community united by reciprocal trust, and by willingness to come to fellow-members' assistance when they need it. Answers to the "who?" question are attempts to forge, or reforge, a moral identity.

Traditional moral universalism blends an answer to the scientific or metaphysical "what?" question with an answer to the political "who?" question. Universalism presupposes that the discovery of traits shared by all human beings suffices to show why, and perhaps how, all human beings should organize themselves into a cosmopolis. It proposes a scientific or metaphysical foundation for

global politics. Following the model of religious claims that human beings are made in the image of God, philosophical universalism claims that the presence of common traits testifies to a common purpose. It says that the form of the ideal human community can be determined by reference to a universal human nature.

The idea of human nature has, in recent Western philosophy, come to seem obsolete. Ever since Darwin, philosophers have become increasingly suspicious of the very idea of naturalness. Western philosophy has been trying to adapt itself to Darwin's claim that what we call biological species are the haphazard productions of chance – a claim which erases the Greek distinction between natural and artificial kinds. For if the paradigm cases of natural kinds – biological species – are accidental results of accidental encounters between mutated genes and environmental niches, then the very idea of naturalness begins to seem artificial. Darwin makes it hard to continue the practice, common to the Greeks and to the Enlightenment, of using the term "natural" as a term of praise.

When the idea of naturalness goes, so does the Greek picture of inquiry as substituting reality for appearance, the way things are in their own intrinsic nature for the various ways human beings find it useful to describe them. The beginnings of the attempt to abandon the reality-appearance distinction are found in Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* and William James' *Pragmatism*. Both books argue that the idea of truth as correspondence to reality only makes sense if reality has an intrinsic nature, and that it is unclear how we could ever tell whether or not a given descriptive vocabulary "corresponds" to such a nature.

The idea that some such vocabularies are somehow closer to the intrinsic nature of reality than others makes sense to religious believers. For those who believe that a certain religion enshrines the Word, and thus the Will, of the Creator and Lord of the Universe, not only does the question "In what language does the universe demand to be described?" make sense, but the answer is already evident. For secularists, however, the only way to make sense of the idea that the universe demands description in a certain vocabulary is to turn to science. Enlightenment secularism suggested that the vocabulary of the natural sciences is nature's

own – the divisions made by this vocabulary are the joints at which nature demands to be cut.

James and Nietzsche viewed this sort of scientism as an unfortunate persistence of religious ways of thinking. They urged that the vocabulary of physics is simply one useful vocabulary among others – useful for technological purposes but useless for any others. Both thought that the Enlightenment's attempt to put science in the place of theology was a mistake, as was the initial assumption that the universe somehow *demand*s a certain description. Both saw the choice among descriptions as a choice among human purposes, not a choice between human purposes and those of something non-human. Their Darwinian view of the human situation persuaded them that descriptions were tools, not attempts to correspond to the nature of reality. Different purposes demand different tools.

Adopting this view means replacing the choice between theological, scientific and metaphysical descriptions of the world with a choice between human purposes. But the choice of what purposes to have is almost always, in practice, a choice among groups of people rather than a choice among abstract formulae. A choice of purposes to which to devote one's life is typically a choice between actual or possible human communities: between the sort of people who have one over-riding purpose and the sort of people who have another. So, on the pragmatist view common to both Nietzsche and James, metaphysical questions are concealed political questions, questions about the group or groups with which one hopes to affiliate oneself, or which one hopes to create.

For example, to adopt a physicalistic metaphysics is to opt for a human community devoted to mastering nature for the sake of what Bacon called "the improvement of man's estate." To reject that metaphysics, either in the terms in which religious fundamentalists would reject, or in those in which Gandhi or Heidegger would reject it, is to presuppose an alternative answer to the question "who are we?" Such a rejection is part of an attempt to create a different sort of human community, organized around a different goal.

To sum up what I have been saying so far: I read Nietzsche and James as saying that the question "who are we?" should replace "what are we?" as the primordial question of philosophy. For it is

the one to which we shall always return – the one which has always already been answered when we answer other questions. Every account of what human beings are is, for pragmatists like Nietzsche and James, a disguised proposal for shaping a new human community. The question “who are we?” replaces the Greek question “What is Being?” and also Kant’s questions “What can I know?” and “What is Man?” It replaces all these with a new form of Kant’s question “What may I hope?”

In this new form Kant’s question becomes “What may *we* hope?” For it is no longer, as it was for Kant, a question about the immortality of the individual soul, but about the future of the species. The question “who are we?” is future oriented in a way in which the question “what are we?” is not. The “what?” question enshrines the pre-Darwinian notion of a human essence, which has its place in a Platonic heaven of other essences. The “who?” question sets aside the notion of essence, of intrinsic reality, and thus, as I have already said, of the distinction between reality and appearance. It thereby stops asking a timeless question, and asks a question about future time. But this question about the future is not a request for a prediction, but rather for a project. To ask who we are becomes a way of asking what future we should try, cooperatively, to build.

Nietzsche and James agree on the primordially of this question, but disagree about the answer. The two have different projects in mind: Nietzsche’s is an aristocratic project and James’ democratic. Nietzsche’s “we” consists of a happy few, Zarathustra’s chosen companions. James’ “we” are the inhabitants of a global cooperative commonwealth. James took for granted the universalistic assumption, common to Christianity and the Enlightenment, that our moral community should be identical with our biological species – defined not in any essentialistic way, but simply as consisting of any organism with which any of us can interbreed. This amounts to the project of distributing the planet’s resources in such a way that no human child lacks the opportunities for individual development, the life-chances, available to any other human child.

Nietzsche, obviously, did not take this assumption, or this project, for granted. Were he to reappear among us, Nietzsche would

presumably say that this project is even more absurd than it was a century before. For now, even if it were desirable, it is obviously unfeasible. In 1900, when there were only one and a half billion people in the world, and there were still forests on land and fish in the sea, such an egalitarian project might have made some sense. But in 2010 we shall have seven billion people, almost no forest, and barely any fish. So, one can imagine Nietzsche saying, even if democratic egalitarianism had been a good idea in 1900, nobody can put it forward as a practical proposal now. Doing so is either hypocritical or self-deceptive.

Nietzsche's point can be restated and enlarged as follows: the part of the world which fostered Christianity and the Enlightenment was exceptionally lucky. The assumption that our moral community should be identical with our biological species, could only have occurred to people who were lucky enough to have more material goods than they really needed. It is not an idea which could have occurred to those who had to struggle to survive. Moral universalism is an invention of the rich.

The rich parts of the world, the ones which have already realized some of the dreams of the Enlightenment, are also the places where technology took off. Technology began making Europe rich even before the Enlightenment began making it democratic. Only people who were already exceptionally rich, and therefore exceptionally secure, could have taken the idea of democracy, much less of global democracy, seriously. Moral idealism goes along with economic success. The latter is obviously not a sufficient condition for the former, but I think we should concede to Nietzsche that it is a necessary one.

I think that we also have to concede to Nietzsche that no foreseeable application of technology could make every human family rich enough to give their children anything remotely like the chances that a family in the lucky parts of the world now takes for granted for theirs. Nobody has written a scenario which ends with every child born in Peru, Angola and Bangladesh going to school, rather than working, until the age of eighteen, and then, if talented, proceeding to a university for training which will enable it to realize its fullest potentialities. Nobody has even written a scenario showing how a family in these countries would acquire a

reason to practice birth control, instead of trying to propagate as many sources of income as possible.

Furthermore, nobody has written a scenario which shows how the people in the lucky industrialized democracies might redistribute their wealth in ways which create bright prospects for the children of the undeveloped countries without destroying the prospects of their own children and of their own societies. The institutions of the rich democracies are now so intertwined with advanced methods of transportation and communication, and more generally with expensive technology, that it is hardly possible to imagine their survival if the rich countries had to reduce their share of the world's resources to a fraction of what they now consume. Democratic institutions in these countries depend on the existence of things like universal literacy, meritocratic social mobility, bureaucratic rationality, and the existence of many competing sources of information about public affairs. Free universities, a free press, incorruptible judges, and unbribable police officers do not come cheap.

To mention all these missing scenarios is to suggest that the rich parts of the world may be in the position of somebody proposing to share her one loaf of bread with a hundred starving people. Even if she does share, everybody, including herself, will starve anyway. So she may easily be guilty, as my hypothetical Nietzsche suggests, either of self-deception or hypocrisy.

I do not know – perhaps nobody knows – whether the project of constructing a global cooperative commonwealth is as hopeless as I have been suggesting it may be. Technology has surprised us before, and so has the success of moral idealists in bringing about the seemingly impossible. Both might surprise us again. Maybe somebody has written scenarios I have not read. But my present concern is not with predictions, either gloomy or optimistic, but rather with describing the present moral situation of the rich and lucky inhabitants of the world in terms of alternative answers to the question “who are we?”.

One way to get these alternatives in focus is to remark that a traditional expression of moral idealism is for a smaller group of people to identify themselves imaginatively with a larger group. Fifty-one years ago, a set of rich and lucky people imagined them-

selves to be "we, the people of the United Nations". One reason they chose those words was that, a hundred and fifty six years earlier, some equally rich and lucky people had imagined themselves to be "We, the people of the United States".

It has often been suggested that the authors of the Constitution of the United States of America were not entitled to describe themselves as the people of the United States. They were, it is said, only entitled to call themselves something like "We, the representatives of the property-owning white males of the United States". Their black slaves, their white servants, and even their wives and daughters, did not really come into the picture. Similarly, it has often been suggested that when the representatives of governments signed the Charter of the United Nations, the most that they were really entitled to say was something like "We, the representatives of the political classes of our respective countries".

The existence of a moral community which can plausibly and without qualification identify itself as "we, the people of the United States" is still a project rather than an actuality. In a few respects, my country is closer to accomplishing this project now than it has been ever been, thanks to the Civil Rights Revolution of the 1960s and to the continuing pressure exerted by feminists. In most respects, however, it is losing ground. For the gap between rich and poor Americans is widening steadily, and the latter are increasingly bereft of hope for their childrens' future.

A recent article by Richard Posner, the only American jurist who is also a distinguished and widely-known intellectual figure, contains a sentence which underlines this lack of hope. Judge Posner wrote that "The very high crime rate of young black [American] males is an aspect of the pathological situation of the black underclass, but there do not appear to be any remedies for this situation that are at once politically feasible and likely to work.<sup>1</sup> In the context in which Posner writes, "politically feasible" means "compatible with the fact that the American middle class will not let itself be taxed to save the children of the underclass." This unwillingness creates a situation in which those children cannot hope for a decent chance in life. To predict that unwillingness will persist is to say that there will, in the future, no longer be any "we" which unites the political class of the US and those under-

class children in a moral community. Those black children are no longer, if Posner's judgment of political feasibility is right, among "we, the people of the United States", any more than their slave ancestors were when the US Constitution was written.

I hope that Posner is wrong, and that the middle class of my own country will not prove to be as cruel and greedy as he predicts. But I have cited Posner on the United States only to pursue the analogy with the United Nations. I think it is important to ask whether it is any longer possible to use the phrase "We, the people of the United Nations" as the name of a moral community, a community which is identical with the human species. The crucial question here is whether it is merely the cruelty and greed of the rich nations which keeps this community from being formed, or whether the formation of such a community is simply impossible, even given all the good will in the world.

Suppose that it is impossible. That is, suppose that there is no imaginable way to make decent life-chances available to the poorer five billion citizens of the member states of the United Nations while still keeping intact the democratic socio-political institutions cherished by the richer one billion. Suppose that the hope of such availability is doomed to be either hypocritical or self-deceptive. Suppose that we have passed the point of no return in the balance between population and resources, and that it is now *sauve qui peut*. Suppose that the rich and lucky billion come to believe that this is the case – not out of selfishness and greed, but as a result of accurate economic calculation. Then they will begin to treat the poor and unlucky five billion as surplus to their moral requirements, unable to play a part in their moral life. The rich and unlucky people will quickly become unable to think of the poor and unlucky ones as their fellow humans, as part of the same "we".

This may seem overstated. For surely, it might be objected, one can have a sense of identification with people whose suffering one has no way of alleviating. The link between having a sense of community and being able to fulfill obligations to other members of that community – the link between ought and can, between morals and money – is not that tight.

This objection is plausible, but not, I think, convincing. Consider the analogy, suggested by Posner's phrase "pathological sit-



uation", between finding it politically unfeasible to give people hope and finding it medically unfeasible to do. When a hospital is deluged with an impossibly large flood of victims of a catastrophe, the doctors and nurses begin to perform triage: they decide which of the victims are "medically feasible" – which ones are appropriate recipients of the limited medical resources available. When the American underclass is told that it is politically unfeasible to remedy their situation, they are in the same situation as accident victims who are told that it is unfeasible to offer them medical treatment.

In both cases, those who make the decision about feasibility are answering the question "Who are we?" by excluding certain human beings from membership in "We, the ones who can hope to survive." When we realize that it is unfeasible to rescue a person or a group, it is as if they had already gone before us into death. Such people are, as we say, "dead to us". Life, we say, is for the living. For the sake of their own sanity, and for the sake of the less grievously wounded patients who *are* admitted to the hospital, the doctors and nurses must simply blank out on all those moaning victims who are left outside in the street. They must cease to think about them, pretend that they are already dead.

These doctors and nurses illustrate the point that if you cannot render assistance to people in need, your claim that they form part of your moral community is empty. This in turn is an illustration of a more general, philosophical point: that it only makes sense to attribute a belief to someone if such an attribution helps one to predict the person's future actions. Beliefs are, as Bain and Peirce said, habits of action. If no actions can be predicted on the basis of a belief-attribution, then the purported belief turns out to be, at most, the mouthing of a formula, a meaningless incantation.

On this Peircean, pragmatic account of belief, to believe that someone is "one of us", a member of our moral community, is to exhibit readiness to come to their assistance when they are in need. To answer the question "who are we?" in a way that is relevant to moral questions is to pick out whom one is willing to do something to help. Pressing Peirce's point, I would argue that one is answering the question "who are we?" in a useful and informative way only if one thereby generates reliable predictions about

what measures the group identified as "we" will take in specified circumstances.

It follows that it is neither useful or informative to answer this question by reference to a class of people whom one has no idea how to help. Moral identification is empty when it is no longer tied to habits of action. That is why it is either hypocritical or self-deceptive for the doctors to think of those who are left outside the hospital as "us". It is why it is either hypocritical or self-deceptive for those who agree with Posner about the hopelessness of attempting to rescue the black American underclass from its pathological situation to continue to use a phrase like "We, the people of the United States". It would be equally self-deceptive or hypocritical for those who do not believe that the industrialized democracies can bring either hope or human rights to the billions who lack both to use the term "We, the people of the United Nations".

When the founders of the United States and of the United Nations originally used these terms, however, it was neither self-deceptive or hypocritical. For the foundation of each of these institutions was part of a project – a project of forming a moral community out of a mass of people which was not yet such a community. Both were founded not only in a spirit of hope, but in the midst of a plethora of practical proposals – proposals which looked, at the time, as if they might be politically and economically feasible. At the time of the foundation of the United Nations, when the world's population was only half its present size and everybody assumed that the forests and the fish would last forever, many proposals seemed politically feasible that seem so no longer.

Perhaps there are feasible political proposals to be made, even today, which would entitle us to use the phrase "We, the people of the United Nations" in a way which is neither empty nor hypocritical. If I knew what they were, I would offer them. But I do not, and so I am making a merely philosophical point.

I can sum up this point as follows: an answer to the question "who are we?" which is to have any moral significance, has to be one which takes money into account. Marx may have overstated when he identified morality with the interests of an economic class, but he had a point. That point is that a politically feasible project of egalitarian redistribution of wealth, requires there to be

enough money around to insure that, after the redistribution, the rich will still be able to recognize themselves – will still think their lives worth living. The only way in which the rich can think of themselves as part of the same moral community with the poor is by reference to some scenario which gives hope to the children of the poor without depriving their own children of hope.

As I said earlier, I am not trying to make predictions. Nor am I offering recommendations for action. Rather, I have been putting forward a philosophical argument that depends upon three premises. The first is that the primordial philosophical question is not “what are we?” but “who are we?” The second is that “who are we?” means “what community of reciprocal trust do we belong to?” The third is that reciprocal trust depends on feasibility as well as on good will. The conclusion I draw from these premises is that thinking of other people as part of the same “we”, depends not only on willingness to help those people but on belief that one is *able* to help them. In particular, answering the question “who are we?” with “we are members of a moral community which encompasses the human species”, depends on an ability to believe that we can avoid economic triage.

### Notes

1. Richard Posner, “The Most Punitive Nation,” *Times Literary Supplement* (September 1, 1995), p. 3.