

Moral Absolutes

William Charlton

'Law' says Plato in his dialogue *The Statesman*, 'can never embrace in one prescription what is best and most right for everyone. The dissimilarities between men and between their actions and the fact that human affairs are pretty well always changing make it impossible for any skill whatever to lay down anything simple in connection with anything that will hold for all cases and at all times.' Aristotle agrees. 'It is the mark of an educated mind to aim at just so much precision of detail as the nature of the subject matter admits.' In mathematics we expect exactitude; but in matters of conduct and what is advantageous, 'nothing is fixed any more than in medicine', and 'the agents themselves must decide each case as it comes, just as must doctors and steersmen.' The best thinkers of ancient Greece thought it obvious that we cannot achieve what is best for ourselves, cannot achieve the good for human beings, by following general rules.

Today it is sometimes said that there are certain general moral rules that bind without exception, rules that it is always wrong to break, whatever the circumstances. Is there a conflict between this and the ancient view?

The modern view applies primarily to rules forbidding certain acts. If a rule tells us to do something positive, it does not tell us to do it all day long, and no one supposes that there is any definite act it is always best to do regardless of the circumstances. Conversely the ancients allowed that there can be exceptionless rules enjoining or forbidding behaviour that is already described in moral terms. Nobody disputes such rules as 'Always do what is right' 'Wrongful killing is wrong' or 'We ought not to deceive those who have a right to the truth from us'. If an act is described as wrong or evil, a rule forbidding it is tautologous.

But there are other ways of describing acts. We can describe a change in purely physical terms, 'Water rising in temperature by 20°F', 'A cube's rotating through 20°', 'An object's moving 20 cm'; and we can describe an act simply as the causing or preventing of such a change. Those who take the modern view will agree that acts which satisfy descriptions like these will be right in some circumstances and wrong in others; and so will acts described in such terms as 'Causing £1,000 to enter a bank account', 'Preventing the ownership of 1000

acres from being transferred.'

The ancient and modern views come into disagreement when acts are described in two further ways. We have phrases like 'causing pain', 'giving pleasure', 'curing', 'frustrating a desire', 'sheltering', 'damaging', 'repairing'. These expressions apply to acts only insofar as they affect living organisms with needs and sentience, and affect them for better or worse. Health, pleasure and knowledge are conceived as good things that are desired, sickness, pain and ignorance as bad things that are objects of aversion. It is consistent with the ancient view that the fact that an act will cause some good to a living thing or prevent some harm is always a point in its favour, and the fact that it will prevent a good or cause an evil is always a point against it. But if Plato and Aristotle are right, these considerations alone cannot settle whether it is best in the circumstances to do the act. It can never be right to do something *because* it causes harm or prevents good or is against someone's will; but it can be right to do it *although* it is bad in one of these ways.

An act may also be described as affecting someone who stands to the agent in a certain relationship or who holds a certain role. It can be described as 'sleeping with a sister', 'attending to a patient', 'saluting an officer', 'striking a priest'. In every society certain duties are attached to certain relationships and roles. An agent is thought to owe it to a parent or a child to do certain things and refrain from doing others (what these are, of course, varies from society to society), and similarly to an employer or employee, to a teacher or pupil, to males or females, to the old or the young, and to other members of the society generally. It is consistent with the ancient view to allow that someone's standing in a certain relationship or holding a certain role is a valid reason for behaving towards that person in a certain way. But again Plato and Aristotle would insist that such a reason can be overridden. Other things being equal, that you are a person to whom I am bound by a promise to deliver a dangerous weapon makes it wrong for me to withhold it; but it may be right to withhold it if you are in a homicidal state of mind.

The controversial issue concerns specifications of acts in these ways, as causing harm or damage, or as acting in a certain manner towards someone in a certain relationship or role. Could it be that *any* act that satisfies some such description is wrong, that acts satisfying it are wrong whatever the circumstances? People who think so are apt to say things like 'It is never right to sleep with a neighbour's spouse', 'Castrating a human male (or circumcising a human female) is always wrong'. On the ancient view it is always possible that there should be a situation in which performing an act that satisfies this sort of

specification is right and the best thing to do.

It is obvious that this issue is highly theoretical. In practice a situation in which an adherent to the ancient view would say that it was right to cause a serious harm or to do something you are under a strong obligation of duty not to do might never arise. But that does not stop philosophers from arguing over the issue, and their arguments can be subjected to critical scrutiny.

Against the ancient view it might be argued that it deprives morality of any objective basis. If there are no exceptionless rules we can never say that a particular act is objectively wrong. This is an non-sequitur; or at least Plato and Aristotle did not think it followed. They were convinced that it is an objective question whether taking a particular course of action is or is not best, but that the question cannot be answered by seeing how the proposed course compares with an exceptionless rule. In that respect it is like the question what it is best for a doctor to prescribe to a particular patient, or what economic policy a government ought to pursue at a particular time.

We must not imagine that rejecting exceptionless rules means rejecting rules and generalisations in morals altogether. I have already said that the ancient view allows us to say that causing pain or harm is *pro tanto* evil, or that Nicky's being my friend's spouse is *prima facie* a reason for not making love to Nicky. It also allows us to make generalisations of a different kind. We can say that a certain sort of circumstance is never of itself sufficient to justify a certain sort of act or that it can never, of itself, outweigh a certain sort of counter-reason. Perhaps that Nicky is attractive and willing *cannot* outweigh the marital relationship, and my sending a love-letter to Nicky *could not* justify my friend's killing us both.

Rejecting exceptionless rules would debar us from pronouncing any act objectively wrong only if what makes acts right or wrong is their according or conflicting with rules. Locke actually says this, but it involves difficulties. An act cannot be wrong simply because there is some rule that forbids it. If the rule does not forbid it because, independently of being forbidden, it is wrong in itself, at least the rule must carry some special authority.

Some people who say that there are exceptionless rules, think that these are laid down by God. But if it is really true that no general rule can encapsulate what is best for everyone on every occasion, it is awkward for a theist to suppose that God makes such rules. As Plato says in the *Statesman*, if a law-giver could be at everyone's side all the time, he would not put obstacles in his own way by making general rules. A theist might believe that God is constantly beside each of us and

able to tell each of us what is best. Even if that seems far-fetched, the theist would surely agree with what Plato says about the travelling doctor. He says that if a doctor planned to go abroad and be away from his patients a long time, he might leave the patients some general instructions in writing. But if he then came back and found them doing things actually conducive to their health, he would be ridiculous if he complained that some of the things they were doing conflicted with his written instructions.

The main difficulty with the view that there are exceptionless moral rules is that it seems to open up a gap between how it is morally best for us to act and how it is most advantageous to us in the long term to act. Popular thought is ready to accept this, at least at first. Moral rectitude often seems to require us to sacrifice our personal advantage, and sometimes even our happiness for the foreseeable future. But reflective thinkers have always wanted to maintain that in the long run, what is morally right, even what is heroic, and what is to the agent's advantage coincide. To deny this is to invite the questions 'Why be moral? What is good about morality?'

Those who think that the exceptionless rules are made by God, probably think that God has the power to confer enormous benefits after death on those who obey them; so obeying them is, after all, the most advantageous course. But this solution raises difficult questions. Why does God care more about obedience to rules than any other virtue? Is doing what the rules enjoin and refraining from what they forbid good only as a means to post mortem happiness? And how is that happiness to be conceived? Philosophers argue that the good for human beings is a kind of life in which intelligence and imagination are applied in worthwhile projects and in entering into the feelings, thoughts and purposes of others. An ethical theory founded on self-fulfilment goes badly with an eschatology of Valhalla, and the reflective Christian will be unwilling to conceive the supreme good as something like a pleasant bodily sensation except that it is non-bodily and goes on for ever.

If the ancient and the modern views cannot be reconciled, should one of them be rejected? It is tempting to say that belief in exceptionless moral rules is simply irrational. The rules that people are readiest to take as exceptionless, it may be argued, are rules forbidding certain sexual acts: intercourse with close relatives, intercourse with strangers, intercourse at certain times, masturbation etc. Attempts are sometimes made to group with sexual prohibitions a veto on killing or maiming human beings. Now most people would agree that what is harmful to human beings is *pro tanto* bad; and it is tautologous that we ought not to kill human beings we have a duty to refrain from killing. But different

societies put different people in this category. Primitive societies often restrict it to members of the society; there is nothing appalling about killing strangers; and advanced societies exclude unborn or newly born infants, criminals and others. No society says that taking human life is wrong in all circumstances. So this is not a good counter-instance to the claim that exceptionless rules are always to do with sex. But now, the argument continues, there is an element in our makeup the function of which is precisely to formulate exceptionless prohibitions concerning sex, and enforce them with great severity. Freud calls it 'the Superego'. We all develop Superegos early in childhood, and it is as natural that we should then feel guilt about certain sexual acts and punish ourselves and others for doing them, as that we should feel pain when touched by nettles, or warmth when we sit in the sun. These reactions are natural but not rational. Different societies prohibit different sexual acts, and the reasons for forbidding them are in general no better than reasons for forbidding certain ways of eating, urinating or defecating.

This account of our belief in exceptionless rules of conduct is defective. It ignores their social character and the fact that there are many other rules of the same kind that concern neither sex nor homicide. To take the social character first, exceptionless rules are absolutely necessary for human society. If we could achieve happiness as isolated individuals then it would indeed be ideal to have a Platonic counsellor beside each individual saying what is best in each situation as it arises. But in fact we are essentially social, and to participate in social life we must do some things and refrain from doing others, or at least we must think we ought to do some and refrain from others, partly because that is the rule or custom of our society.

It is important to understand the extent to which this obedience is voluntary and rational. We do not share in the life of a society simply by pursuing our private ends with an eye open for policemen and penalties, any more than we share in some kind of social life when we keep an eye open for wasps and bear in mind the pattern of the seasons. We have to want to live as social beings. And we do not respect laws and customs as a means to this: our respect for a society's laws and customs is identical with our desire to be members. I want to live in my society just insofar as the fact that there is a rule requiring everyone in all circumstances to do this or to refrain from that seems to me a valid reason for doing the one thing and refraining from the other. Anyone who cannot see how this could be a reason, cannot see how social life could be a goal for its own sake, an end in itself, to a rational being. On the other hand, precisely because the rule has to seem a reason for obedience, participation in social life requires a minimum of critical thought. If we

think that the duties attached by our society to a particular relationship or role are inappropriate, we ought to try to persuade our fellow members to change the rule.

Social life does not require blind obedience; rather it excludes it. And it is also important to recognise that social life is not the whole of human good. It is one thing to say that exceptionless rules are necessary for society, another to say it is always best to obey our society's rules. Plato and Aristotle could happily accept the first proposition, while the second is just what they deny.

The fact that we need exceptionless rules to live in society explains why some of our rules concern sex. Who is to have intercourse with whom is a matter of social interest, and so are the reproductive organs of individuals. But our social nature is not exhausted by building up inhibitions about sex. The element in our makeup which Freud calls 'the Superego', Plato calls 'the *thumoeides*', an expression usually translated 'Spirited Part'. Besides controlling our sexual desires this is responsible for our competitiveness, our desire for social status, and our fear of being despised or excluded. Feelings of shame at cowardice in battle or at failure to avenge insults, and feelings of humiliation at appearing poorly dressed or accompanied by relatives like Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, are clearly akin in strength and general character to feelings of guilt about sex. And just as every society has exceptionless rules about sex, so every society has exceptionless rules about standing by comrades in danger, about suitable dress, about sport and about macho behaviour generally.

If we see the rules forbidding sexual acts as just some among the rules we have to accept as social beings, we shall not try to outroot them or dismiss the idea of exceptionless rules of conduct as simply irrational. They may be made by societies and mutable; there may be no rules that every society must have; but still every society must have some rules. Plato points the way forward in his account of the relationship of his Spirited Part to that in us which judges each case on its merits and calculates what is best. He thinks that these parts can conflict, but that they do not have to. If they conflict and the rule-following part gains ascendancy there results a gloomy, repressive kind of person who often subordinates everything else to being respected in the community. But in a well integrated person the Calculating Part (which corresponds to conscience as conceived not by Freud but by Bishop Butler) has supreme authority, and the rule-following part acts as its ally.

Contrary to what might be apprehended, this is less likely to result in selfish, egotistical behaviour than being guided by respect for rules. For the most serious conflicts between what rules prescribe and what the

agent judges best are not over courses that are to the agent's personal advantage. When we have a serious duty to do something that is contrary to our private interests we usually judge that it would be best to sacrifice our private interests to duty. We may not succeed in making the sacrifice, but here the rule-following part is a natural ally. Conflict occurs when duty seems to require us to cause some serious harm to others: to torture a prisoner, persecute a religious opponent, or reject the desperate plea of a friend. In these cases self-interest or fear for oneself is often the ally of duty; and it is much easier to go horribly wrong through following duty than by doing what we judge best. When heart and mind speak with a single voice, society should defer.

Tall Tale, c. 850 A.D.

Leonard Cochran OP

It was alleged, by some, that students
of John Scotus Erigena,
Angered by his tyrannical teaching,
Rose as a body in their unheated
Aula, quills clutched
in raw, chilblained fists,
Top the great surprise of their master,
Who, in the middle of his lecture
De divisione naturae, looked up
To see a score of pens
Stabbing at his tonsured head.