# THE MYSTERY OF MORALITY

**Manuel Davenport**

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"Two matters," wrote Immanuel Kant, "fill me with ever renewed wonder: the starry heaven above and the moral law within."[1] The nature and origin of the moral law within has been a mystery not only for Kant but for all of Western philosophy. Historically, most attempts to resolve this mystery either traced the origin of morality to reason as it directs the ignorant or resistant will, to some cooperative combination of reason and will, or to the will alone viewed as irrational.

It was Socrates who first articulated the position that human reason alone is a reliable source of morality. For Socrates, reason alone can be trusted because, first, the will, although it does not know the good, naturally seeks it and, thus, does not oppose reason's moral quest,[2] and, secondly, because all humans as rational possess an innate knowledge of the good.[3] Plato, in his later dialogues, modifies this Socratic position by noting that humans are not equal at any given historical period in desiring and knowing the good, and by explaining this as a result of voluntary self-corruption similar in function to the Christian concept of "the fall."[4]

Aristotle, by contrast, seems to agree more with Socrates as he claims that we never *choose* what is immoral, but this is not because he thought the will always naturally seeks the good. Rather "choice," by definition, always involves "a rational principle and thought,"[5] whereas the will may give in to and follow the irrational appetites.[6] We do not possess, as Plato thought, an innate knowledge of the good which is called forth by moral training, but we aquire knowledge of the good "as a result of virtue and some process of learning or training."[7] The moral law within, then, is a result of conditioning the will to follow reason as it determines "the right mark" and "the right means,"[8] and moral training teaches the agent to imitate the behavior of those who have found the highest happiness.[9]

The traditional Christian view, as developed by Augustine and Thomas, is quite similar because it presupposed that reason was the source of morality, but it had to incorporate two new elements provided by revelation: God as the creator and original sin. For Christianity, then, human rationality is the result of being created in God's image[10] and reason could be trusted implicitly were it not for original sin. The wills of Adam and Eve were subject to God's will, but when they sinned, the will and thus all the other powers of the soul that are driven by the will "were turned away from God."[11] What was once a reliable internal source of morality has been impaired and must be supplemented by divine grace.[12]

Kant's own solution to the mystery of the moral law within involves a partnership between reason and will and occupies a middle ground between the traditional Christian position and later positions which make the will alone the source of morality. Reason is, for Kant, the human capacity that allows us to act and organize our experiences in accord with fundamental principles, but reason cannot lead us to moral action unless it influences the will. Reason without the current provided by the will is but an empty channel. Thus, what is morally good is a will that follows the principles provided by reason, and follows them simply because they are provided by "ordinary human reason."[13] But what is the source of ordinary human reason? Kant could have given the Christian answer that human reason was implanted by God. He did not, however, because he did not believe that such a claim was either justifiable or necessary.[14] It was his view, rather, that we postulate the existence of a God who rewards moral behavior in order to validate our moral knowledge. What follows is not that morality is justified as commanded by God but that it is justified by human beings as we have faith in the existence of such a God.[15] God is beyond the reach of reason, thus our belief rests on a faith that is necessary because "otherwise reason would have to regard the moral laws as empty figments of the brain."[16] The source of the moral law, then, for Kant is ultimately a partnership between will and reason in which reason forces the will to acknowledge that what we ought to do is not the same as what we want to do and the will forces reason to accept God on faith to guarantee that doing the right thing will be rewarded.

David Hume was the first Western philosopher in modern times to argue that in matters of moral judgment there can be no conflict between will and reason because will alone determines what is right or wrong.[17] Only our passions can tell us what gives us pleasure and is, therefore, right. All reason can do is to show us what will serve our passions.[18] Hume's position, however, was not nearly as radical as it seems because he believed that our "feeling for the happiness of mankind" was a passion the satisfaction of which provided us with the greatest possible pleasure.[19] He, therefore, built into the will a desire for the greatest happiness for the greatest number, and thereby anticipated Mill's utilitarianism. He also believed that the source of this passion, which he called, "the moral sentiment," was "the internal frame and constitution of animals,"[20] and, thus, he also anticipated the biological ethics of Darwin, Spencer, Nietzsche, and Schweitzer.

John Stuart Mill did agree with Hume that the basis of morality is "a powerful natural sentiment," which is "the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures."[21] However, he did not believe, as Hume did that this desire alone is strong enough to guarantee moral behavior and, thus, he argued, as did Aristotle, that it requires support and nourishment from the most "powerful agency of the external sanctions," including "religion, and the whole force of education, of institutions, and of opinion."[22] For Mill, then, our natural desire to be in unity with others when strengthened and conditioned by such external sanctions becomes what we call our "conscience," and it is our conscience, although it is acquired rather than divinely implanted, that is the source of morality.[23]

Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer were contemporaries of Mill; in fact, Mill was aware of the moral implications of the theory of evolution although he did not support it,[24] and he provided generous support for Spencer's publications.[25] The basic difference between Mill and his evolutionist colleagues was that Mill believed that conscience as the source of morality for the most part could be accounted for by the experiences of the individual, whereas Spencer and Darwin believed our moral sense was determined largely by heredity and evolution.[26] Although Darwin believed there was an "immense" difference between the minds

of animals and humans, he believed it was a difference "of degree and not of kind," and like Spencer he believed that "the faculties of moral intuition" are the result of the evolution of primitive social instincts.[27]

This difference between Mill, on the one hand, and Spencer and Darwin, on the other, turns out to be upon closer examination a very subtle difference. All three of them believed that our moral sense, or conscience, is the end-result of natural desires conditioned by the natural and cultural environment, and, thus, none of them argued that the will alone is the source of morality. At most we can claim only that for the evolutionists the natural instincts are more moral "by nature" than Mill thought they were.

According to Spencer, who used the phrase, "survival of the fittest," four years before Darwin did,[28] the basis of morality is sympathy, and the necessary conditions of sympathy are sexual, social and family relations.[29] But such sociobiological factors are not sufficient. Sympathy cannot be a guiding force unless we are able to understand and represent it. Early in our lives emotions are represented by natural language; frowns represent anger and smiles represent joy, and as we grow we become acquainted with words and concepts that "re-represent" the feelings of the group.[30] Such re-represented feelings, or "sentiments," are culturally relative in content, and must be so as long as we must struggle for survival.

Darwin's position was essentially the same. In his *The Origin of the Species*, he writes:

> To do good in return for evil, to love your enemy, is a height of morality to which it may be doubted whether the social instincts would, by themselves, have ever led us. It is necessary that these instincts, together with sympathy, should have been highly cultivated and extended by the aid of reason, instruction, and the love or fear of God, before any such golden rule would ever be thought of and obeyed.[31]

We see, then, that Spencer and Darwin are not nearly so optimistic as Mill concerning the utility of social conditioning to lead us to an unselfish love of others. Spencer, indeed, argued

that only when we no longer need to struggle for survival will we be able to exercise a sympathy for others that is untinged by egoism, and only then can we follow Mill's utilitarianism.[32]

The one moral philosopher of the Twentieth Century most strongly influenced by Darwin was Albert Schweitzer, who based his ethics of "Reverence for Life" on what Darwin described as the naturally optimistic and life-affirming "will-to-live."[33] Schweitzer, however, could not agree with Spencer and Darwin that the will-to-live can become ethical, given sufficient time, merely as the result of social conditioning and sanctions applied to a natural sympathy for others. The will-to-live, which is naturally both egoistic and altruistic, cannot become ethical except by a deliberate, voluntary choice by the individual human being. What we do as a result of instinct or society may be good enough for Hume, Mill, Spencer, and Darwin, but it cannot be deemed "ethical."[34] In this sense, Schweitzer turns back to the Classical and Kantian notion that morality requires cooperative interaction between the individual agent's will and reason.

In a further parallel to Kant, but with an evolutionary twist, Schweitzer claims that reason forces him to make "my will-to-live feel everything around it as also will-to-live." It is possible, then, "to show to all wills-to-live the same reverence as I do to my own"[35] because there is in my will-to-live this "yearning" forced upon myself by reason "to arrive at unity with itself, to become universal."[36] As Kant used faith in God to guarantee the sufficiency of moral knowledge and a reward for moral actions, Schweitzer uses faith in Being as infinite manifestations of the will-to-live to guarantee that our desire for unity with Being could have a focus and reward.

If Schweitzer's "Reverence for Life" may be viewed as a kind-hearted version of biological ethics, then Friedrich Nietzsche in his earliest works gave us a tough-minded¾or "pathological," as Schweitzer called it¾version of Spencer and Darwin in which the will is more than a mere "will-to-survive," but is a "will-to-power," a will to dominate and exploit all

other living things.[37] Even those who are weak and unable to dominate others directly seek to dominate by exercising their wills-to-power indirectly. What they do, Nietzsche claimed is advocate a soft-hearted Christian or altruistic morality which seeks to bring down the strong by making them feel guilty for being powerful.[38] All moralities for Nietzsche, then, are the same in that they are devices for serving the will-to-power. But if this is so, Nietzsche realized, there is no way to justify as superior any one moral position.[39]

All attempts to be moral are pitiful attempts on the part of individuals to impose their will upon the universe. Add to this the apparent fact that each person has only one finite existence and it became almost impossible for Nietzsche to attach any moral significance at all to any life, including his own. To provide human life with moral significance, Nietzsche found it necessary to develop the notion of "eternal recurrence," the belief that each life will be repeated over and over eternally. From this perspective each life with the morality it generates to serve its will-to-power is at least as valuable as any other, is necessary to the cosmos, and has, thereby, its own individual yet eternal purpose and meaning.[40]

What makes Nietzsche a significant figure in the history of ethics, however, is not this concept of eternal recurrence but rather the implication that if he is correct in his belief that the source of morality is nothing but our will-to-power, that we choose our moral beliefs as tools to serve our wills-to-power, then what is right and wrong is completely subjective and arbitrary. In fact, many contemporary thinkers contend that the beginning of the post-modern age and the end of history can be dated from this proclamation, in Nietzsche's terms, of "the death of God,"[41] or, in other terms, the proclamation that morality has no rational or objective basis whatsoever.

At this point, it might be useful to pause and note, quite carefully, that Nietzsche is right in this conclusion if the sole basis of morality is the individual's will and if that will seeks nothing but power over others. But note also that what prevented us in the past from drawing Nietzsche's conclusion was faith that reason possessed innate knowledge of the good,

implanted either by Nature or God, which was replaced, as that simple faith weakened, by faith that God or Nature would guarantee in eternity or evolutionary time that our moral urges have some purpose. As this latter faith faded, Nietzsche himself was left with nothing to cling to except an irrational will repeating itself over and over, forever and forever. The only remaining hope, as suggested by Mill, Spencer, and Darwin, is that we can tame our irrational wills by means of some kind of social conditioning.

This is the course followed by Alasdair MacIntyre, a contemporary American philosopher, who assumes that Nietzsche is correct, that the rational person has no advantage over the irrational person in terms of knowing what is right or wrong, and that for all it matters we might as well give all persons the same rights because in all cases rights are merely "moral fictions."[42] MacIntyre's solution is to replace reason and God with the social community and justify morality as based on conceptions of good created by communities as they create and enforce moral practices, myths and traditions.[43] In other words, we must give up the notion that in any meaningful sense our moral beliefs are correct, but that is not important. What is important is that we have some moral beliefs and that they are accepted and enforced by the community.

How promising is this attempt to retain the objectivity of morality by substituting society for reason and God? The answer must depend on the nature of language and human nature itself. As Foucault and Derrida have pointed out, MacIntyre's solution presupposes, at most, that there are common moral practices, myths, and traditions in a society or, at the very least, that they can be created. In either case they must exist or be created and sustained by means of language. But, according to Foucault,[44] in our post-modern period the words in our language no longer stand for any particular representations, meaning depends on who is speaking, and this is why Nietzsche was correct in claiming that morality has no rational or objective basis. Derrida, however, believes it is possible that we may be able to discover or create by means of language some social foundation for morality because the very use of

language presupposes that we value ourselves as human and seek community with other humans.[45] To use language to deny our humanity and our desire to communicate is absurdly self-contradictory. The problem is to discover common values and a means of communication. In the philosophical past, before Nietzsche, we did not see this as a problem, and what Nietzsche did, according to Derrida, was reveal that we have destroyed our moral community and, thus, our basis for communication.

Richard Rorty, a contemporary American philosopher, provides a useful paraphrase of Foucault's position and attempts to show us why Derrida's optimism is unjustified. Science and philosophy do not discover the truth about anything. Talk about "the truth" presupposes a divine language. What science and philosophy do is provide descriptions that make things look useful or good, and in doing so they serve as instruments of cultural change. If proposed new language-games are adopted, new behavior will follow.[46] But Derrida is wrong in thinking that we can find somehow new language-games and behavior that are in some way more accurate or right. Revolutions in human thought are metaphoric re-descriptions which require and allow new theories, but the new theories or language-games have their own criteria of truth and goodness and cannot be judged in terms of similar criteria of the old theories.[47]

As an illustration of his point, consider the change in descriptions of human nature that took place when we moved from the Christian and Cartesian dualism, in terms of which humans are divine souls implanted in corruptible bodies, to Freudian phychoanalytic theory, in terms of which both the human soul, or conscience, and body are viewed as the products of time and chance. According to this view, the contingencies that make up conscience and self are beyond our control, but we can shape and re-shape them by creating new languages and, thereby, new consciences and selves.[48] We can choose, as Rorty does, to create a new form of life by establishing a moral community that encourages free and open encounters and the creation of more and varied vocabularies.

Rorty believes that MacIntyre was right in thinking that there is no morality without the

language of a community, but he believes that MacIntyre was mistaken in thinking that there is some language or community that is better than others. All we can do is to be faithful to our moral community while knowing that it is contingent, and while knowing that there is no way to prove that either its science or morality is superior to that of other possible communities.[49] Rorty also believes Derrida is wrong in believing that the use of language itself presupposes that all humans have something in common and, thus, it should be possible to establish a common morality superior in the sense that it is the one most appropriate for humans. For Rorty, Derrida's hope is without foundation because Derrida provides no evidence for a common human nature that could serve as the basis for a common morality. He gives us no reason to disagree with Rorty's pragamatic and behavioristic view of humans as bundles of plastic impulses each made unique by different and contingent genetic and environmental factors.

I believe, however, that there is evidence provided by neurophysiology[50] which indicates that that all humans do have a common nature which can provide an objective basis for moral judgments. According to this evidence, all humans in their early years develop a set of core pre-dispositions in terms of which they respond to the ever-changing flow of new stimuli. A comparison with a computer may be useful because a computer can do no work unless it is given a set of memories, and once it has a memory it responds to new inputs in terms of the programming allowed by that memory. Like a human, its memory can be expanded, but no matter how large it becomes it will not respond in ways contrary to that core memory.

We normally call the core memories of a human its "self" or "personality," and we know that the forms of "selves" and "personalities" are maintained much more persistently than the patterns of inputs or "experiences." A human self, in fact, has a strong tendency to maintain a constant form and it accepts only those new experiences that are appropriate to its form and rejects those that are not. Normal human behavior ranges between the extremes of

nervous breakdown, on the one hand, which occurs when incoming experiences disrupt the self due to their intensity or the fragility of the self, and catatonic states, on the other extreme, which occur when the self maintains its integrity by refusing to respond to new inputs. Most humans, living between these extremes, work hard to maintain the structural integrity of the self and modify it only under great pressure and with great reluctance.

This tendency of the self to maintain its integrity is so strong that normal perception is selective. We tend to see and hear, in ordinary language, what we want to, or, in psychological language, what is confirmed by past perceptions and motivations. What is true for us is only that portion of the ongoing flow of experience that is compatible with the self's need to maintain its integrity. In order to see things differently or to accept new criteria of truth and rationality requires a radical change in the structure of the self that does not destroy the self but allows it to cope with stimuli that it previously rejected. Such rare changes in selves are called "conversion" or "crises experiences."

In terms of the above theory, it is the aim of the self is to preserve its ability to integrate inputs from both the external environment and internal physical needs. What the self values, then, are inputs that contribute to its continued integrity. The normal self, thus, values its integrity more than the mere satisfaction of physical needs or mere adjustment to the external world. To the extent that all selves have similar structures moral judgments are objective in form. But to the extent that different selves have been made up of different inputs moral judgments are subjective in content. Take truth-telling as an example. Formally all selves value accurate information because it is difficult to maintain structural integrity if inputs are unreliable, but what constitutes a reliable input varies from culture to culture or even from individual to individual. Every self, in general, values integrity, but what will contribute to the integrity of each self may differ from self to self.

In terms of this neurophysiological view of human nature, then, the source of morality is the tendency of the human organism to develop into a self that seeks to maintain its ability to

integrate inputs from the external world and internal physical needs. Because the self as it seeks to maintain this ability often chooses to postpone or act contrary to internal physical needs for sex, food or drink it is plausible to claim, as did the ancient Greeks, that in order to be moral the will must be subject to the control of reason. Because few of us are able to constantly avoid giving in to external or internal pressures it is plausible to claim, as Christians have, that we are imperfect and can use divine assistance. Because commitment to personal integrity is less difficulty to maintain if carried out for the sake of a higher cause it is plausible to claim, as Kant and Schweitzer did, that it requires faith in a reality than transcends our own existence. This tendency of the self to maintain its integrity can be explained as the result of evolution, as Spencer and Darwin did, because human organisms that do not have this tendency can survive only if cared for by those who do.

Nietzsche, Foucault, and Rorty, I contend, drew pessimistic conclusions concerning the possibility of an objective human morality because they did not begin with a proper understanding of human nature, but they did see clearly that criteria of truth and rationality may be relative to cultures and even individuals. What they failed to see is that the self's demand for integrity, for which notions of truth and rationality serve as means only, is more basic and more objective. Derrida's intuition that language itself presupposes a common human nature is plausible, therefore, because language also serves as a means to our need for structural integrity. We may, indeed, change our language-games, but we do not do so casually. We do it only when such a change seems the only way to continue to survive as human beings seeking integrity, and changes in language-games result in changes of behavior only when they are embraced for this reason.

Clearly, I am engaging in a metaphoric re-description of human nature which I find necessary because it allows me to retain my intuitions concerning the nature of morality intuitions which I think we share in the face of the erosion of most of the historical supports for those intuitions. I embrace this re-description as true and offer it to you because it is

consistent with and resolves the mystery of "the moral law within."

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[1]Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Practical Reason* in *The Philosophy of Kant* (New York: The Modern Library, 1949), p. 261.

[2]Plato, "Meno," in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Hamilton and Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 360-361.

[3]Ibid., pp. 370-371.

[4]Plato, "Republic," pp. 838-844.

[5]Ibid., p. 969.

[6]Ibid., pp. 967, 973.

[7]Ibid., p. 946.

[8]Ibid., p. 1034.

[9]Ibid., pp. 1027-1028.

[10]Thomas Aquinas, *The Basic Writings of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis, Vol.1 (New York: Random House, 1945), pp. 890, 893.

[11]Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 676.

[12]Ibid., Vol 2, p. 982.

[13]Kant, *The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1938), pp. 8-20.

[14]Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), pp. 254-256.

[15]Ibid., p. 644.

[16]Ibid., p. 639.

[17]David Hume, "A Treatise of Human Nature," in *The Philosophy of David Hume,* ed. V.C. Chappell (New York: The Modern Library, 1963), pp. 247-248.

[18]Hume, "An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals," p. 464.

[19]Ibid., pp. 464, 460-461.

[20]Ibid., pp. 470-471.

[21]John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1953), p. 33.

[22]Ibid., pp. 34-35.

[23]Ibid., pp. 30-32.

[24]Mill, *Theism* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1957), pp. 30-32.

[25]Michael St. John Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1970), pp. 433-434.

[26]cf. Ibid., p. 432; Mill, *Utilitarianism*, pp. 76-77.

[27]Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species and The Descent of Man* (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.), pp. 492-494.

[28]Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill*, p. 432.

[29]Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol 2 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1897), pp. 566-568.

[30]Ibid., pp. 595-601.

[31]Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, p. 484, fn. 27.

[32]Ibid., pp. 616-622.

[33]Albert Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1960), pp. 282-284.

[34]Ibid., p. 287.

[35]Ibid., p. 309.

[36]Ibid., p. 312.

[37]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufman, (New York: Modern Library, 1968), pp. 391-394.

[38]Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, pp. 572-576.

[39]cf. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 419-420; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 235-238.

[40]Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 331-332.

[41]Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), pp. 96-97.

[42]Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 66-68.

[43]Ibid., p. 240.

[44]Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), pp. 304-307.

[45]Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 218-221.

[46]Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 3-9.

[47]Ibid., pp. 16-20.

[48]Ibid., pp. 27-33.

[49]Ibid., pp. 45-59.

[50]This evidence is summarized in my paper, "Self-Determination and the Conflict Between Naturalism and Non-Naturalism," *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, 15(1959): 633-644.