

Social Coordination, Egoism, and Nature
Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurreti

1. SPIRITUALITY

Anyone undertaking a lecture bearing this honourable name must feel a great burden upon him or her. It is not for me to remind you of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's distinction not only as a philosopher, but as an historian and a statesman. Nor, unhappily, is it for me to continue the work to which he so laudably devoted so much time: the reconciliation of strands in Indian and in Western thought, for that takes an immersion in each culture that I cannot pretend to imitate. What I wish to do instead is to take up a particular theme: the relationship of the spiritual to the ethical life of people, and their relationship in turn to the social bonds that make up political society. In doing so I hope to say something not only of philosophical interest, but also to anyone concerned about the problems of justice in a pluralist, and secular society.

It is of course commonplace to contrast the spirituality of former times or different places with the 'crass materialism' of the consumer societies that we live in, and of which western societies form the most spectacular examples. But while crass materialism is, obviously, crass, the legacies of the West and East include more that is of value. One of the things they include is the liberal ideal of toleration and impartiality, eventually embodied in the constitutional neutrality of the state between different religious conceptions of the good. The founders of India's constitution who made India a secular state were surely influenced by this typically Enlightenment ideal. A just constitution, in a recent formula, is made of principles which could not reasonably be rejected 'by parties who, in addition to their own personal aims, were moved by a desire to find principles that others similarly motivated could also accept.'² The formula models an ideal of impartiality in terms of the possibility of a rational contract. Impartiality of course does not mean, as Bernard Williams sometimes seems to represent it, failing to give proper priority to one's own personal projects, or failing to make close links with one's immediate family, or failing to find their safety or their benefits of more importance than those of others. On the contrary, it is precisely to regulate such natural partialities that the sphere of justice exists. Impartiality merely means delineating an area within which personal concerns are situated—a respect for the property of others, the contracts made with them, the rights they can legitimately claim against legal and private violence, theft, and deception. Constitutionally, any principle of state favouring a partisan conception of what is worth aiming for is to be ruled out. So, for example, principles favouring the adherents of just one religion amongst many could reasonably be accepted by adherents of the others, and would therefore fail the test. This is what is meant by saying that liberalism is neutral between different conceptions of the good.

In spite of the appeal of this formula, and others like it, we should pause to ask if the simple dualism between 'personal aims' on the one hand, and the desire for impartial principles on the other, is in fact adequate to our problems.

For as well as personal aims, people are typically in the grip of particular principles, which may not be shared by everyone. A Hindu will not regard it as a merely personal aim that cows not be killed for meat, nor a Muslim regard it as a personal aim that the Koran be respected. Such principles may be settled in the very core of a person's identity: this is recognized, for instance by tribunals that will excuse someone from what would otherwise be a political obligation, if it can be shown to be contrary to a principle of his or her religion. People may not be willing to put such principles aside when they contemplate coming to terms with others who do not share them. And if the principles are divisive, then they will stand in the way of just accommodations with those on the other

side of the divide. The liberal believes that they ought to be put aside in the interests of toleration and impartial justice, and the problem is then one of motivating people to respect this ideal more than they respect their own differing conceptions of the good.³ I return to this problem of motivation below.

Perhaps the central question in front of liberal political theory, is whether it represents, as classically it is supposed to do, a set of universal norms telling us what counts as a just basic social organization, or whether, as critics maintain, it covertly imposes one conception of the good amongst others. If the latter, it may seem to come with no special credentials. It was the creed of the Enlightenment, perhaps, but that makes it just one more option in the shopping basket of creeds, of no overarching authority. This is no armchair scepticism, of interest only in the study. Such views can be used as a defence by would-be theocracies everywhere, and stand to undermine everything that liberalism stands for, including toleration, the protection of women and minorities, and the ideal of just accommodations between potentially conflicting parties. In this lecture I shall sketch a defence of a different answer. But first, since religious principles are so often the cause of the problem, I should like to say a little about the philosophical difficulties in front of certain religious ideals.

An ideal of spirituality usually implies renunciation of the world. Such an ideal is found in parts of the Gospels, in Buddhism, and as it is counselled for the last stages of life in Hinduism. Alongside this ideal is the ambition of subduing natural desires, or gaining mastery or self-control, as it is wisely counselled and practiced in the East more than in the West, and I shall touch on this in due course. A related ideal is that of serenity, thought of as a lofty indifference to the teeming world of human endeavour. By spirituality I mean something that is commonly thought to imply such renunciation or such serenity, but which is itself regarded as a separate foundation of such attitudes. It is a plane of thought, or of emotions together with thoughts, that make some authoritative claim to represent the world in a deeper or more true way than we commonly manage. Getting onto this plane and acquiring this spiritual insight is the goal of religious and mystical exercise, and a few people in the Western tradition, but perhaps a greater number in the East, are supposed to have achieved it.

This topic is not a common topic in the tradition that I represent—that of contemporary Western analytical philosophy. The reasons, I think, are complex, and some reasons are intellectually more interesting than others. One part of the reason is probably a kind of embarrassment: it seems bad taste to raise the topic without claiming spiritual credentials of one's own. Saintliness or holiness certainly claims to occupy high ground, ground that the rest of us are scarcely fit to tread upon, but since it is precisely this claim that I want to scrutinize, I must, as it were, indelicately ignore the etiquette that normally keep us out. Partly the topic may have fallen into decay through sheer sociology. It is clear that in the early twentieth century through to the time of Radhakrishnan Western philosophers and intellectuals were much more receptive to the idea of mystical or spiritual illumination than they are now. Not only philosophers like Bergson or Bertrand Russell—an atheist who nevertheless wrote movingly and at firsthand about mystical experience—but military administrators like Francis Young-husband, and scientists like Teilhard de Chardin, took very seriously the possibility of spiritual transformation: the new birth or coming of enlightenment or religious awareness, given to some people some of the time, and of infinite worth and importance. We may or may not regret that such concerns are less popular today. Obviously, those of a religious temperament will see the change as decline, as a symptom of the crass materialism I just mentioned. But there may be other ways of looking at it.

Of course, spirituality is one thing, and popular religion another. It needs no emphasis, in

India any more than in many other countries, that many typical manifestations of the religious spirit are far from admirable. Indeed, in its most obvious manifestations, the religious frame of mind stands absolutely opposed both to ideals of spiritual development, and to anything easily recognized as ethics. Where there is religion, there is religious division; where there is religious division there is little attempt to find accommodation. There is instead the excuse for treating people of the other side as less than human. Even when the overt message of a religion embraces everyone (as with one interpretation of Christianity) its deep structure can remain divisive. The message is to separate the sheep from the goats; the point of joining the religion and practicing its observances is to ensure that you belong to the sheep, or sometimes to try to atone for being amongst the goats. For the religious spirit, the first question is too often whether you are with us or against us. If you are against us, then at the best your civil rights and concerns are trampled upon; at the worst you are exterminated. Throughout history theocracies have elevated sectarianism and fanaticism into principles of government. There is of course a deep question here of whether religion is itself responsible for divisions, or whether it is more a symptom or epiphenomenon: the whistle on the engine that is no part of the mechanism. If we see religion as a symbolic and literary crystallization of a way of life which has its own independent rationale, then divisions and wars occur just because peoples of different ways of life cannot get along together, and religion has no independent motivating power. Allegiance to a religion is then simply a kind of rallying cry in a war that would be fought anyway. There is some truth in this, but I find it hard to believe it completely; at the very least the symbols take on a life of their own, and then form their own points of contention.

Now this world of inquisitions, of fatwahs, of riots, and persecutions, may seem to have nothing to do with the world of the sage or mystic, distinguished largely by the renunciation of political and worldly interest. Indeed one might expect that spirituality, with for instance its denial of a difference between the self and others, would have nothing to do with vulgar sectarianism. There need be no opposition between those following one path to enlightenment, and those following another. But there is a relationship, albeit of an indirect kind. This is that the credentials of the religious spirit rest squarely upon the credentials of spiritual insight. For a religion to present itself as more than a set of symbols around which to construct tribal and nationalistic identities and exclusions, it needs to claim a real authority, and this authority is found in its particular connection with deep cosmological reality. It is this deep connection that gives defenders of the faith their sense of unity with each other, and difference from infidels outside.

The twentieth century has seen enough of the terrible consequences of religious division in action. But philosophically it has seen very little discussion of the claim upon which the authority of religion depends: the claim to a possible dimension of spiritual insight or wisdom, found by one path, present to some people and denied to others. Yet philosophically there are good reasons for mistrust of this ideal. I do not here have in mind the trite and overworked opposition between religion and science. I have in mind a more profound set of problems arising from the philosophy of mind. Many philosophers are convinced by a philosophy of mind called functionalism, and heralded in the work of Wittgenstein. The thrust of this argument is that 'an inner process needs an outer criterion. That is, mental states are essentially identified by how they make us act. Mental states are essentially functional. They are given their identity by what they make us do.' Pain is what it is, because of the way it disposes us to behave; a person is thinking one thing or another because of what they are disposed to say or do by way of expressing their thought. This line of thought quickly becomes hostile to inexpressible, purely private states of any kind. Consider a saint or mystic, passive, imperturbable, beyond desire, but unable to communicate anything else about his or her mental life, or what he or she takes herself to have discovered about the universe. We may be apt to think that

this is *because* they have achieved a deep understanding of an inexpressible kind. But the functionalist line of thought denies this. All that we apparently have is someone who does not have anything to say, or does not care about anything, or who prefers to sit still than to move. This behaviour, says the functionalist, signifies only the *absence* of a mental life, not the brimming overflow of thoughts too rich for normal expression. If there is no vehicle for communicating and making public these alleged thoughts, then there are no thoughts. There is no more possibility of inexpressible, private thought than there is of an inexpressible private cricket match. Putting it harshly, in Wittgenstein's own words: 'Nothing would do as well as something about which nothing can be said.'

This is a bold line of argument, and would immediately need a host of qualifications and complications. And it might be thought to be well countered by the ancient parable of the envoys from the city of the blind, who go out to feel an elephant. Each feels but a part of it, and they differ totally in their account of the beast. It is tempting to think it is like that with truth: the scientist gets his part; others get their parts. The mystic or spiritual adept finds a further part, or, more ambitiously, a synthesis of all the partial views of other explorers. One point of the parable is that we, the blind, are in no position to judge the claims made by explorers who have been where we have not. It is unfair to ask that the elite manifest their understanding to us, the vulgar, because we have not got what is needed to recognize their understanding for what it is. (Equally, it would be unfair to require that a professor of physics manifests his or her understanding of quantum theory to an unlettered and innumerate audience). Although the point is correct as far as it goes, it seems to me that we must at least be able to identify the elite as explorers, that is, as persons who have undertaken an attempt to represent the world rightly, although in unfamiliar ways. And then we are back with disappointment if any attempt to validate that claim leaves only inexpressibility, or silence: if, as the functionalist charges, it is impossible to distinguish serene wisdom from callous empty-headedness.

If we press further, we can see that the matter is even more difficult. For suppose the spiritual adept is granted real thoughts, only of an inexpressible kind. Still, thought needs something else before it can count as understanding: it needs to be successful, in accordance with the truth. However convinced I may be that some experience gave me a moment of illumination, the two questions are what it told me, and whether what it told me is true. And so long as the spiritual adept cannot even communicate what he thinks, there can be no special reason for supposing that anything he or she thinks accords with a deep reality, or is in any sense true.

Here someone may be inclined to object that this demand may apply to knowledge, but there is an ancient distinction between knowledge and wisdom or illumination. Perhaps wisdom or illumination comes with different credentials. I believe this is also true: a person may certainly know lots of things, but be unwise and foolish, and there are people who are rightly revered as wise, but who, by the standards of universities and examinations, do not know very much. There is the old contrast used by Isaiah Berlin, between the fox, who knows many little things, and the hedgehog, who knows one big thing.

There is this contrast, but can it be used as a straight defence of the possibility of mystical understanding? Not if wisdom itself needs other criteria, perhaps different from those for knowledge, but real and practical (and demanding) for all that. And this I think is so. In the normal way of things wisdom comes out in numerous ways: most obviously a wise person knows how to do things, particularly in the social and emotional world, which others do not know how to do. But this is like deploying a skill, and once more there will be criteria for it. Just as a good sailor knows how to live on the sea, so a wise person knows how to interpret the human world that is presented to him or her, and how to react

to it, and advice, and educate others to do so as well. A wise person, for instance may be quick to empathize with others and patient with them, able to appreciate their problems and what is to be done about them and generous in helping them towards solutions. We can identify people who do this well, and people who do it badly. But the sailor's skill is not distinct from the use he can make of it (you cannot have a good sailor who cannot live on the sea, in appropriate circumstances) and similarly, wisdom, on this account is not distinct from knowing how to live virtuously in the human world that surrounds us. But then the idea of a specific, higher, mystical or spiritual plane has again got lost. If this is how it is, the topic becomes not so much one of spiritual understanding and its special nature, but one of how best to understand others and respond to them. In other words, it becomes the topic of ethics, but ethics conducted as it were in an Aristotelian, worldly, mode, rather than in terms of an elitist (and hence divisive), Platonic vision.

Mention of vision brings up yet further issues in the philosophy of mind, and again ones that are not entirely congenial to the defense of mystical understanding. Vision gives us visual experience, and there is often felt to be something about all experience that is ineffable: it is notoriously hard to describe exactly the colour you saw, or the smell or taste of something, to those who have not seen the colour or sampled the smell or taste. Calling a mystical awareness a vision assimilates it to such everyday cases of things we find inexpressible. Does it gain credibility as a result? A first-question might be whether a visual experience could possibly have the *content* or the *consequences* usually thought to attach, as if by right, to elite mystical awareness. Unless it is interpreted, as it is automatically in normal cases of perception, a visual scene presents itself only as a kaleidoscope of colours in various shapes, and various motions. But how can such a kaleidoscope have implications for how I am to live my life, or recommend emotions and actions to others? It has, by itself, no more ethical implications than an unrecognized sound or smell. On the other hand, if the visual experience is interpreted, for instance as a realization that the world is timeless or that it is safe and secure or just and good, then the question becomes whether any pure experience could bear an interesting evidential relationship to such thoughts, and what their other credentials are. Having such thoughts is not by itself entering into a higher plane of understanding. Saying such things is just beginning to express, and not very convincingly, reasons for living in the world one way or another.

A flamboyant or provocative way of putting the points we have been exploring would be that there is no such thing as religious experience. But if it is put this way, a number of caveats need to be entered to avert misunderstanding. First there is no attack on the sincerity of many people who take themselves to have had just such experience. A person may sincerely interpret himself as having had an insight into the deep way that things hang together, whether or not he has had such insight, and whether or not any insight of the kind he takes himself to have had is even possible. To mention a parallel: psychologists are now becoming familiar with what is called False Memory Syndrome, whereby sufficiently suggestive patients, encouraged by various kinds of psychotherapists, come sincerely to 'remember' traumatic events that in fact never happened to them. They are perfectly sincere, but their memories are deluded for all that. And in fact there may be good reason for denying that memories of the type they take themselves to have are even possible: for example, people can become convinced that they remember events with a detail that normal memory simply cannot provide. First-person authority only goes so far, and the would-be claimant to religious insight can be sincere without having the least idea whether what he believes himself to understand is in fact sense or nonsense, and if sensible, true or false. This is why an analysis of the actual function of religion is needed at the sociological rather than the psychological level.

A second caveat is that I am not concerned to deny the efficacy of characteristic religious practices, such as retreat, meditation, fasting, or ritual observance. I do not doubt that these have genuine effects. On different people at different times, some of these will be good, and some bad. A third and more important concession concerns nearby relatives of religious experience. The most familiar near relatives are provided by aesthetic experience, and I believe that the experience of great music, architecture, or painting is to many people a kind of entry point, where they glimpse what they take to be a portent of something divine. Similarly, we may take it that such work is an expression of superior spiritual insight. The truth, in my view, is that it is an expression of genuine feeling, sure enough, but that our feelings may be genuine without affording us insight into the nature of the cosmos. But the most persuasive near relative of spiritual insight, and one that is also expressed in innumerable ways in the art and literature of the world, is what I shall call astronomical fatalism.

2. ASTRONOMICAL FATALISM

I suppose many of us, gazing at the huge heavens, contemplating the unimaginable extent of space and time, or the rise and fall of civilizations or the eventual death of the solar system, feel a sense of awe, a sense of our own insignificance in the scheme of things, a modesty about the extent of human understanding of the whole, and perhaps a sense of the futility of human action. I think such reactions are admirable and right; I would pity anyone who cannot feel them. Certainly, they have been given innumerable impressive expressions in all literatures, (and in music and architecture) but they also form the foundations of ethical systems such as that of the Stoics. Perhaps for many people they count as religious experiences; they certainly serve as a counterpoise to the narrow-minded concern with the here and now that marks most of our lives.

Nevertheless, there is something wrong about elevating what we might call astronomical fatalism to the status of a higher plane of understanding. Of course, in a trivial sense someone who learns the actual size of the physical universe, or the extent of its history, gains an understanding. But that is a piece of scientific gain. What is wrong is elevating such a scientific reminder of our own small part in nature to a different pedestal.

Astronomical fatalism is fundamentally an attitude. And as an attitude it is one thing to regard it as a component of a full and admirable reaction to the human predicament, but quite another thing to let it take over and determine our lives. Here we might remember the wise words of Hume, when he discusses the ethical system of Stoicism:

There are many philosophers, who, after an exact scrutiny of all the phenomena of nature, conclude, that the WHOLE, considered as one system, is, in every period of its existence, ordered with perfect benevolence; and that the utmost possible happiness will, in the end, result to all created beings, without any mixture of positive or absolute ill and misery. Every physical ill, say they, makes an essential part of this benevolent system, and could not possibly be removed, even by the Deity himself, considered as a wise agent, without giving entrance to greater ill, or excluding greater good, which will result from it. From this theory, some philosophers, and the ancient Stoics among the rest, derived a topic of consolation under ail afflictions, while they taught their pupils, that those ills, under which they laboured, were, in reality, goods to the universe; and that to an enlarged view, which could comprehend the whole system of nature, every event became an object of joy and exultation. But though this topic be specious and sublime, it was soon found in practice weak and ineffectual. You would surely more irritate, than appease a man, lying under the racking pains of the gout, by preaching up to him the rectitude of those general

laws, which produced the malignant humours in his body, and led them through the proper canals, to the sinews and nerves, where they now excite such acute torments. These enlarged views may, for a moment, please the imagination of a speculative man, who is placed in ease and security; but neither can they dwell with constancy on his mind, even though undisturbed by the emotions of pain or passion; much less can they maintain their ground, when attacked by such powerful antagonists. The affections take a narrower and more natural survey of their object; and by an economy, more suitable to the infirmity of human minds, regard alone the beings around us, and are actuated by such events as appear good or ill to the private system.

Hume's attitude is echoed in Ramsey's famous remark that he sees the world not as a model drawn to scale but in a perspective in which his own surroundings and concerns inevitably loom larger than those further away. Now Hume may, perhaps, have underestimated the remarkable degree of control over natural emotions and reactions that is possible with practice. But he raises acutely the question of why such control should constitute an ideal: why shouldn't it be that in this area, like others, nature provides the norms? We are, naturally, two-legged; if someone with intense practice manages to walk on one leg nearly as well as with two, this would be a remarkable feat, but also a remarkably pointless one. Similarly, it might be thought, our senses are, naturally, adapted to warn us of bodily harm and motivate us to avoid it. They provide us with what we can call natural desires—for food, drink, warmth, shelter, human contact, relief from pain, love, dignity, and so on. If we overcome their authority by practised acts of will, why is this not merely a trick, a gratuitous attempt to drive nature from the area where the adaptations of time have firmly placed it? Of course, the exercise of control might have a real purpose—a purpose in the human world. If I know I am to go a journey in the Himalaya, hardening myself to cold will be a good idea. There are things we can learn to put up with, and if they afflict us, learning to do so may be required. But these are exceptional cases. Such a strategy is essentially selective. It does not turn into a blanket rejection of natural desire, but only a practical attempt to make it work for us, perhaps in strange conditions or ones for which it is not originally adapted. And, again, as Marx noticed, there is the more sinister political consequence: the main function of encouraging astronomical fatalism in society is often consolation to those who suffer from unjust political and economic orders.

What Hume reminds us of so forcibly is that what he calls 'enlarged' views do not automatically occupy the ethically high ground. If for a moment, in the study, we gain a sense of the vanity of human action, well and good. But taking that sense into the market place, refusing all action, all relief from pain, all attempts to satisfy our own needs and those of others, is not only unnatural, but only expresses a fatalism of very doubtful merit. It only leads to a life, in Hume's words, that is neither useful nor agreeable to ourselves or others. Seeing this as bad is of course giving an ethical verdict, but then action is the domain of ethics, and it is at the tribunal of ethics that recommendations to action must be tried, whatever spiritual credentials they seem, to their protagonists, to possess. Astronomical fatalism, coupled with what would otherwise seem to be culpable indifference to human problems and serenity in spite of them, seems to me like the filament of a bulb. It glows well enough in a vacuum, but take it outside, into the real air, and it burns out on the spot. It is here, too, that a different insidious consequence of the religious way of life surfaces. I have mentioned the obvious divisive and sectarian political expressions of such a spirit, and its function in damping down indignation at injustice. But in more private and everyday ways there are consequences as well. When some kind of astronomical fatalism becomes *the* virtue, the sign of merit and the badge of saintliness, then naturally other more social virtues become pushed aside. It is not just compassion for the unbeliever, or justice in dealing with him that disappears. Rather the whole host of small concerns that make for generosity, sensitivity, respect for the needs of

others, as well as the more demanding obligations of honesty and justice, suffer. They are no longer visible against the supposed divine radiance. It no longer matters that the saint makes demands upon others, treats them as nothing, ignores their needs, is deaf to their cries, for what are these needs and cries in the context of eternity? And who is to blame us for what we do, since we are not saints? Human life then becomes compartmentalized: ethical concerns are taken care of within the temple, or church, where astronomical fatalism is agreeably encouraged, and outside, in the rest of life, in the melee, virtue has no place. It is thus not surprising that the most religious societies can contain the most predatory, and predated, lives.

3. THE FOUNDATIONS OF ETHICS

If the credentials of spiritual authority are as poor as I have been proposing, why are we so drawn to respect it? Why does it seem irreverent or indecent to expose it as fit only for a vacuum? What deep function does it possess in our emotional or social living? Part of the answer, I believe, is that it answers an intellectual need, and a need that we cannot see fulfilled in other ways. The function is that which knowledge of the Forms has in Plato. They are there to provide a ground of moral and ethical authority. Plato, I believe, put his finger upon a perennial problem, which is the difficulty of providing a secular, natural, foundation for ethics. And we need such a foundation so badly that when a secular, natural one is lacking, we turn in desperation to religious and supernatural ones. The Forms are, in this respect, intellectually purified versions of the need for God and Gods. The demand is that the natural order reflects a moral order: even so great a metaphysical sceptic as Kant succumbs to this thought, believing that we have no conceivable alternative but to practice as if it is true. In this respect the doctrine of *karma* is very possibly the most developed of all the philosophies that, one way or another, seek to show that justice triumphs, and that right living is rewarded.

To understand this further we ought to separate two different needs that the introduction of a moral order may meet. One is strictly foundational: it purports to explain how it is correct, more than an illusion, to see ourselves as subject to strict obligations and requirements. This is showing how the world makes duties, and the idea is that the search fails if it is confined to the natural and mundane world. Then, since duty and obligation are not found in the world of empirical nature, they must be found in the demands of the supernatural order. The other need is not so much foundational as motivational: it is to show us that our self-interest aligns with our duty. If in the mundane world duty sometimes opposes self-interest, then the two can be brought back into line by claiming that in the larger picture there is no opposition. In the final day of judgment, or the final working out of *samsara*, the moral order of the universe aligns the two perfectly.

The foundational requirement can be put as the need to avoid a purely subjective or relativistic attitude to ethics. Yet, the appeal to a supernatural order as a foundation for ethics is philosophically famously weak. First, there is the difficulty made evident in the Euthyphro dilemma: are pious things pious because the Gods love them, or do the Gods love them because they are pious? If the latter, then we must search for some other source of value than the acclaim of the Gods. But if the former (voluntarism), then the subjective choice of the Gods is being supposed to confer value by a kind of arbitrary decree, and it is at best unclear and at worst incoherent to suppose that this is the right kind of source for genuine ethics. How can the arbitrary favour of a God make it so that cruelty is bad or lying shameful? Would these things be better if the Gods decided otherwise? And wouldn't they have been bad whatever the Gods thought about them?

In the human world, as we have seen, religious belief does not make for better ethics, but often for worse. But even more damagingly to theologically based theories in the modern

world, we will suppose that invoking a God only postpones the issue of subjectivism. For faith in the God and belief that he or she favours some particular kinds of action and ritual seem themselves to be massive exercises of purely personal faith, or subjectivity. Indeed according to many thinkers (including many who regard themselves as believers) religious thought and feeling simply give a decent mythical covering to naked subjectivity. And religious discourse is only authoritative when people choose to give it authority.

In this century the more popular reaction to the loss of authority is to substitute a conventional and relativist ethic, according to which ethics is not 'relative' to a particular subject, but to a whole society. This may or may not be called a form of subjectivism. It has one advantage over subjectivism, which is that there is something right about placing ethics within a shared social life. But it has one disadvantage, which is that one's own ethical life includes either acceptance or rejection of the shared standards of one's society. In this sense, as Sartre was fond of emphasizing, there is no escaping personal responsibility, but it is just here that subjective judgment returns to hold the centre of the stage.

My own view is that once ethics is properly located as a matter of emotion and attitude, the problem of foundations can be answered. The question becomes one of which attitudes and emotions to foster: which forms of human life, and human society, to admire; how to react to different kinds of people, how to select some traits as virtues and others as vices. The problem of foundations seems urgent if we think that these stances need to be underwritten by a cosmic order or by the requirements of empirical science, or by reason itself. But they do not. They stand on their own feet, as urgent, indeed essential, practical questions, but ones to which, fortunately, the experience of human societies in all times and ages provides the framework of an answer. For we know, roughly, under what conditions life goes forward well, and under what conditions it goes forward badly. We know well enough how to select for certain essential virtues—cooperation, benevolence, honesty, justice, courage, industry—and to select against other vices—malevolence, cowardice, intemperance, laziness. The list does not look very different in most of the circumstances in which human beings need to cooperate and to band together against the difficulties of the world.

Much harder is the motivational problem. If we abandon any theological help, how are we to motivate respect for ethics? Here we return to the problem with which I started, the nature of the authority of impartiality, the essential Enlightenment ideal. Let us consider this in connection with the requirements of justice, including not only the sphere of social rights, but simple truth-telling and honesty in regard to property and contracts. Suppose someone says, that while he recognizes the general benefits to human beings of being able to rely upon the truthfulness, or the honesty and integrity of others, he feels no compunction about telling lies, being dishonest, or breaking promises himself, when it is to his benefit to do so. He might recognize that this would expose him to the anger or disdain of others if he is discovered, but this would be simply a factor in a cost-benefit analysis (the advantage of a particular case of cheating would have to be calculated remembering the possible negative effects on his reputation). This psychology is not wholly that of the normal socialized human being, for the fact that a piece of behaviour is of the kind that he despises in other people leaves him cold. It provides no motivation, on its own, to avoid any action which, all things considered, is to his benefit.

Western moral philosophy has consistently seen this figure as a central challenge. In Plato's *Republic* it is dramatized in Glaucon's question of the ring of Gyges. Part of the reason for Machiavelli's notoriety was that he not only describes the character, but appears to commend him at least in the political sphere: 'one must know how to colour

one's actions and be a great liar and deceiver' he says of the Prince. In Hobbes's *Leviathan* the same challenge is embodied in the Fool. In the modern theory of rational choice, the problem is that of the Free Rider. In Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* the character is called the sensible knave: a sensible knave, in particular incidents, may think, that an act of iniquity or infidelity will make a considerable addition to his fortune, without causing any considerable breach in the social union and confederacy. That honesty is the best policy, may be a good general rule; but is liable to many exceptions: And he, it may, perhaps, be thought, conducts himself with most wisdom, who observes the general rule, and takes advantage of all the exceptions.

In each case the problem is that by the standard of self-interest the knave is acting perfectly rationally. He is not against social arrangements. It is just that he stands ready to exploit them when he can. If others make contracts with him, for example to abstain from some kinds of competition, he will make the contracts if it is to his advantage, and break them when that is to his advantage. If he can exclude some people from the institutions of his society, or design institutions so that they, while powerless, are systematically offered a lesser package of rights and protections, this is what he will do. The problem is usually posed as that of finding a way of arguing the knave back to good behaviour, and it is in this form that it preoccupied both Plato and Kant. The idea is to find a way of proving that the knave is 'irrational', and that if reason controlled him as it ought to do so, he would sacrifice his other interests out of his respect for impartial consideration of others.

The tradition of Hume and Smith gives a different, and perhaps more promising approach. The knave lacks what Adam Smith calls 'the desire of possessing those qualities, and performing those actions, which we love and admire in other people'. The crucial point here is that it is a desire that he lacks, and we cannot in general argue people into having particular desires. We may educate them to care that they share the qualities they admire in other people, but if our education has failed then perhaps it is too late. As Hume continues:

I must confess, that, if a man think, that this reasoning much requires an answer, it will be a little difficult to find any, which will to him appear satisfactory and convincing. If his heart rebels not against such pernicious maxims, if he feels no reluctance to the thoughts of villainy or baseness, he has indeed lost a considerable motive to virtue; and we may expect, that his practice will be answerable to his speculation.

The point being that a large part of education involves making sure that peoples' hearts do rebel against such 'pernicious maxims', and that if such education has not been effective, then it is too late to complain. What we can do is remind ourselves of the benefits of a social order based on honesty and cooperation, and strengthen our determination to make things difficult for those tempted to being knaves. What we cannot do is argue the knave back into upright behaviour, for we can advance no consideration except by appealing to his own self-interest, and on the occasions that he exploits this is not enough.

4. EDUCATION AND POLITICS

In Hobbes's *Leviathan* the state of nature is famously depicted as the war of all against all, 'and the life of man solitary, nasty, brutish, and short'. Hobbes's remedy is a contract, whereby people give up their freedom to a sovereign. The difficulty with this is well-known; in the bare warring landscape he draws, Hobbes leaves no room for a mechanism of forming associations and contracting to abstain from the advantages of war. As Hobbes himself notes, the first person to give a promise and then abstain from otherwise advantageous action for its sake 'doth but betray himself unto his enemy'. A

brief look at the international order may suffice to show us why this is so: the individual nations or confederacies in conflict are often unable to bring about peace themselves, or make reliable contracts with each other, and cannot police such truces as are agreed upon (Bosnia is perhaps the best current example). They lack any mechanism for aligning what they perceive as their own interests with any recognition of the interests of others. And there are well-known examples of communities in which collective action is impossible, because the limited allegiances each person forms, typically to close family, allow for nothing except conflict in their dealings with others from different families.⁴ In such a landscape, nobody can be motivated to the accommodations represented in the ideal of fair play, justice, or impartiality in their dealings with others. But is Hobbes right that the only fundamental solution is political? If so, the outlook for the international order, or indeed for a country such as India where rival conceptions of the good are primed to accrue more passion than procedural accommodation, is indeed bleak.

Hume, by contrast, eschews any mention of contract as a solution to the problem (and equally to the problem of the free-rider or the knave). His own solution is however usually thought of as overly optimistic: he presents a version of justice as reciprocity, whereby we recognize the gain to each of us in coordinating our actions together, even if this means, on occasions, departing from our own immediate interest. The model is that of establishing the conventions of a monetary system, whereby we can trade for mutual advantage. The difficulty is that this only apparently works within a society of (roughly) equals: it gives us no motivation for accommodations with the weak, or the excluded, or those who are one-way dependent upon us, such as future generations, or the handicapped or the old. Recoiling from this, Kant attempts to present such concern as a requirement of pure practical reason, but enterprise is unsuccessful, and the knave remains untouched.

Hume, and perhaps more clearly Adam Smith, also provides another way forward. Suppose we change perspective, asking not how we would behave or how it is rational to behave, faced with some opportunity of knavishness, but how we should bring up our children to behave on such occasions. We are to ask how we are to educate our children, given our natural care for their well-being. Suppose the options are either cooperative tendencies, with all their benefits, or the war of all against all. Then of course together, collectively, it is better if we encourage the cooperative psychologies. For that way our children, collectively do better (this can be seen in well-known models of the problem, such as the prisoner's dilemma, or the tragedy of the commons). Nevertheless, just as the knave looks out for occasions on which he can exploit the cooperative nature of others, so a parent may fear making their children into 'cullies of their integrity' as Hume memorably puts it. A parent may worry that they disadvantage their offspring by giving them too nice a respect for the requirements of others, and then feel it incumbent upon them to educate their child to become a knave. And in some social situations this may be a very real option. This occurs when some group can successfully be excluded from the bargain: the members of a different clan, or caste, or nation for instance. A businessman who has inclinations to behave with justice and integrity to his employees or competitors, may fail in competition with more ruthless members of the jungle. In the international order, a country that keeps contracts may become the victim of ones that break them when it is to their advantage to do so. A society that treats its neighbours justly may become vulnerable to their opportunistic injustice. As ecologists know, a population of doves (cooperators) may be vulnerable to invasion by one of hawks who can prey on them.⁵ And then, supposing others take the same strategy, we face degeneration into the war of one group against the other: once more, no treaties, no integrity, nothing to rely upon. The triumphalism of the west, when the communist regimes of Eastern Europe fell, is already proving short-lived in the light of the warring and anarchic nationalisms, but also the warring and anarchic economic orders, with their ever-increasing inequalities,

that are taking their place.

Inside stable, working, and just societies this will not be so. There will be nobody excluded, as 'them' rather than 'us'. Knavishness, however well-disguised, loses. It would be inconceivable that you could do best by your children by educating them to be knavish to the bottom; on the contrary only the strictest regard for truth, integrity, contract will flourish. Supposing that we can produce such a society, Hume celebrates our nature as long-sighted and social beings. But he also notices, and laments our natures as short-sighted, tribal, divisive, exploitative, and selfish beings. He notes the tendency for us to stay blind of what is in our long-term advantages, or to free-ride upon the social nature of others, and he pessimistically supposes that we cannot change our natures in this respect. The only cure is again political: the emergence of civil government with the power to coerce us to justice. So the problem, as Hobbes claimed, is essentially one of the absence of a political order that works to align cooperation with the other projects that make up our self-interest. As we have seen, Hobbes thought that we could contract into such an order, whereas Hume believes in its spontaneous emergence, given that it is in the interests of all of us that it should emerge. But this is not an available solution when the question is one of external relations with a group with which we are in conflict, or a group over which we have power. Indeed Hume himself draws the pessimistic consequence that the notion of contract and obligation, as applied to behaviour between states, is morally much weaker than within the group.⁶ But the same problem arises within society, when we can exclude powerless or alien groups from the benefits of cooperation, and seem to get away with it.

What then is the solution, if neither contract nor evolution guarantees it? We could imagine increasing the cost of bad behaviour: bringing about an increase in the power of those who can be disadvantaged, at present with impunity (an excellent example of this was the giving of American nuclear secrets to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. This increased the balance of power, and therefore contributed to peace. Unfortunately the Americans did not see it that way). An economic and political order can increase the economic and political costs of exploitative relations, by increasing the power of those previously excluded. Perhaps it is not idle to hope that we can see the advantages of this to all; to compute properly the immense cost, even to the advantaged, of the political and economic under classes amongst countries, and within them. What is seen as a zero-sum game, whereby their gains are our losses, may be better seen as a non-zero sum game, where cooperation generates increased benefit. Many economic examples suggest themselves. And politically perhaps a small ground for optimism on this score is the reflection that fear is itself a cost, so that uneasy awareness of the reciprocal hostility our behaviour may cause is itself a motivation to better it. If so, we should finally grow able to get beyond the aggressive and treacherous economic and political orders of the late twentieth century.

But the first remedy has to be ethical, for people will not quickly recognize their solidarity with those they have traditionally excluded. The motivation to justice is the discomfort of discounting a group: the discomfort of saying that principles to which they could not reasonably consent are nevertheless the ones that we will follow in our dealings with them. We certainly have a tendency to this discomfort. The point of ethical education must be to increase it, to sensitize us further to it, to increase the cost. It is not to be easy to bear the gaze of the excluded. Such an ethical improvement would also need to neutralize the forces of divisiveness. It is a question then of amplifying the voice of Adam Smith's man within. In this respect, perhaps Hume was wrong that we cannot change our nature. Indeed his own views show us how we can: the artificial nature of the virtue of justice consists in its power to motivate us independently of advantage or natural inclination; similarly the power can extend to motivating us to include just relations with

those with whom we do not, on grounds of self-interest, have to establish them. Justice can take on a life of its own.

So does this ideal represent just one conception of the good amongst others? Or does it represent, as Kant hoped, an overarching, transcendent requirement of practical reason itself? My own answer is to split the difference. Such impartiality represents an ideal, certainly, but not a parochial or local ideal. For a start it is not the monopoly of any particular historical epoch or any one part of the world. Nor is it an ideal that depends on any detailed conception of what is worth living for, and in this respect it is a second-order, procedural ideal that can be shared by all. Furthermore, it is hard to see how it could be as parochial as MacIntyre and others suggest.⁷ For the question is one of how we best regulate our conduct towards persons who in some ways differ from us, and with whom we are in conflict, or whom we think we can exploit with impunity. All human societies will have faced this problem, both externally and internally; for all of them the ideal of widening the circle to include putative outsiders within the sphere of justice must have occurred to them as at least the altruistic, and often the safest option (it may be that at this point Aquinas is right in supposing that justice presupposes benevolence or charity.) But perhaps we should also acknowledge that if it is part of human nature to recognize such an ideal, it is also part of human nature to stand ready to exploit it. As I already mentioned, populations of doves stand ready to be invaded by exploitative hawks. If things are sufficiently bad, a person may well become the cully of his or her integrity. The struggle for improved social and economic orders is the struggle to make sure that things are not that bad. And even when the fear that they are is real enough, this does not mean that we should be embarrassed by an ideal that regulates the respect with which we regard others: the desire that we can bear their gaze, and that we do not know ourselves, in our hearts, to be deaf to their voices.

¹If you drive out nature with a pitchfork, she will soon find a way back., Horace. *Epistles*, I. x. 24

²This formation is from Thomas Scanlon, 'Levels of Moral Thinking', in *Hare and Critics*, ed. D. Seanor and N. Fotion, p. 137.

³In *A Theory of Justice* John Rawls stipulates that all such specific principles and concerns be put aside when we imagine what parties could contract into in the 'original position'. The motivational problem is not solved, but merely displaced: it becomes that of getting people to respect what would have been chosen in that position.

⁴Banfield, Edward C., *The Moral Basis of A Backward Society*, New York, The Free Press, 1958.

⁵See, for instance Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press, 1989, esp. chs. 5,12.

⁶*Treatise*, III, 2., 2. p. 568.

⁷MacIntyre, Alasdair, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* London, Duckworth, 1988. In Chapters XV and XVI MacIntyre represents Hume's seminal account of justice as no more than an expression of the parochial ideology of the Scottish mercantile classes.