



Simon Blackburn

ETHICS

A Very Short Introduction

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Preface

This Very Short Introduction is shorter than *Think*, my other introductory book, to which it stands as a younger sibling. *Think* grew from a conviction that most introductions to philosophy were unnecessarily dry and offputting; the present volume grew from a parallel conviction that most introductions to ethics failed to confront what really bothers people about the subject. What bothers them, I believe, are the many causes we have to fear that ethical claims are a kind of sham. The fear is called by names like relativism, scepticism, and nihilism. I have tried to weave the book around an exploration of them. But by the end it will be up to each reader to decide whether they have been laid to rest, or whether, if like Dracula they rise again, they are at least de-fanged.

I was invited to write this book by the editor of the series, Shelley Cox, whose confidence and encouragement have been towers of strength to me. The actual writing was done (will date the book) at the Research School of Social Sciences of the Australian National University, perhaps the most agreeable place in the world to embark on such a project. I owe thanks to Michael Smith for the hospitality of the School. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has always given me marvellous research support, and an equally marvellous critical audience of colleagues and graduate students. Among them, I owe thanks to Adrienne Martin, who read the proofs. As always, my principal debt is to my wife Angela, whose editorial and typesetting skills are not

usually at the service of an author under the same roof, and so needed
matching by her equally remarkable patience and cheer.

SWB

24 November 2000

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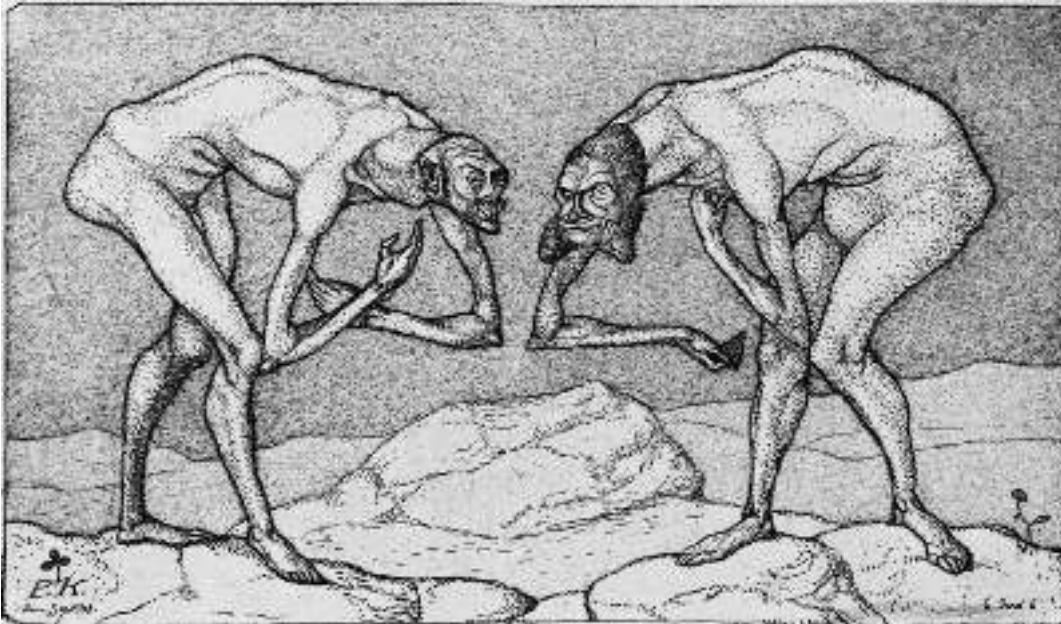
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Introduction

We have all learned to become sensitive to the physical environment. We know that we depend upon it, that it is fragile, and that we have the power to ruin it, thereby ruining our own lives, or more probably those of our descendants. Perhaps fewer of us are sensitive to what we might call the moral or ethical environment. This is the surrounding climate of ideas about how to live. It determines what we find acceptable or unacceptable, admirable or contemptible. It determines our conception of when things are going well and when they are going badly. It determines our conception of what is due to us, and what is due from us, as we relate to others. It shapes our emotional responses, determining what is a cause of pride or shame, or anger or gratitude, or what can be forgiven and what cannot. It gives us our standards – our standards of behaviour. In the eyes of some thinkers, most famously perhaps G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), it shapes our very identities. Our consciousness of ourselves is largely or even essentially a consciousness of how we stand for other people. We need stories of our own value in the eyes of each other, the eyes of the world. Of course, attempts to increase that value can be badly overdone, as Paul Klee shows (Fig. 1).

The workings of the ethical environment can be strangely invisible. I was once defending the practice of philosophy on a radio programme where one of the other guests was a professional



1. Paul Klee, 'Two Men Meet, Each Believing the Other To Be in a Higher Position'. A comment on the servility often involved in the ambition for respect.

survivor of the Nazi concentration camps. He asked me, fairly aggressively, what use philosophy would have been on a death march? The answer, of course, was not much – no more than literature, art, music, mathematics, or science would be useful at such a time. But consider the ethical environment that made such events possible. Hitler said, ‘How lucky it is for rulers that men cannot think.’ But in saying this he sounded as if he, too, was blind to the ethical climate that enabled his own ideas, and hence his power, to flourish. This climate included images of the primordial purity of a particular race and people. It was permeated by fear for the fragile nature of this purity. Like America in the post-war McCarthy era, it feared pollution from ‘degenerates’ outside or within. It included visions of national and racial destiny. It included ideas of apocalyptic transformation through national solidarity and military dedication to a cause. It was hospitable to the idea of the leader whose godlike vision is authoritative and unchallengeable. In turn, those ideas had roots in misapplications of Darwinism, in German Romanticism, and indeed in some aspects of Judaism and Christianity. In short, Hitler could come to power only because people *did* think – but their thinking was poisoned by an enveloping climate of ideas, many of which may not even have been conscious. For we may not be aware of our ideas. An idea in this sense is a tendency to accept routes of thought and feeling that we may not recognize in ourselves, or even be able to articulate. Yet such dispositions rule the social and political world.

There is a story about a physicist visiting his colleague Niels Bohr, and expressing surprise at finding a good-luck horseshoe hanging on the wall: ‘Surely you are not superstitious?’ ‘Oh, no, but I am told it works whether you believe in it or not.’ Horseshoes do not, but the ethical climate does.

An *ethical* climate is a different thing from a *moralistic* one. Indeed, one of the marks of an ethical climate may be hostility to moralizing, which is somehow out of place or bad form. Thinking that will itself be a something that affects the way we live our lives.

So, for instance, one peculiarity of our present climate is that we care much more about our rights than about our 'good'. For previous thinkers about ethics, such as those who wrote the Upanishads, or Confucius, or Plato, or the founders of the Christian tradition, the central concern was the state of one's soul, meaning some personal state of justice or harmony. Such a state might include resignation and renunciation, or detachment, or obedience, or knowledge, especially self-knowledge. For Plato there could be no just political order except one populated by just citizens (although this also allows that inner harmony or 'justice' in citizens requires a just political order – there is nothing viciously circular about this interplay).

Today we tend not to believe that; we tend to think that modern constitutional democracies are fine regardless of the private vices of those within them. We are much more nervous talking about our good: it seems moralistic, or undemocratic, or elitist. Similarly, we are nervous talking about duty. The Victorian ideal of a life devoted to duty, or a calling, is substantially lost to us. So a greater proportion of our moral energy goes to protecting claims against each other, and that includes protecting the state of our soul as purely private, purely our own business. We see some of the workings of this aspect of our climate in this book.

Human beings are ethical animals. I do not mean that we naturally behave particularly well, nor that we are endlessly telling each other what to do. But we grade and evaluate, and compare and admire, and claim and justify. We do not just 'prefer' this or that, in isolation. We prefer that our preferences are shared; we turn them into demands on each other. Events endlessly adjust our sense of responsibility, our guilt and shame, and our sense of our own worth and that of others. We hope for lives whose story leaves us looking admirable; we like our weaknesses to be hidden and deniable. Drama, literature, and poetry all work out ideas of standards of behaviour and their consequences. This is overtly so in great art. But it shows itself just as unmistakably in our relentless appetite for

gossip and the confession shows and the soap opera. Should Arlene tell Charlene that Rod knows that Tod kissed Darlene, although nobody has told Marlene? Is it required by loyalty to Charlene or would it be a betrayal of Darlene? Watch on.

Reflection on the ethical climate is not the private preserve of a few academic theorists in universities. After all, the satirist and cartoonist, as well as the artist and the novelist, comment upon and criticize the prevailing climate just as effectively as those who get known as philosophers. The impact of a campaigning novelist, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Dickens, Zola, or Solzhenitsyn, may be much greater than that of the academic theorist. A single photograph may have done more to halt the Vietnam War than all the writings of moral philosophers of the time put together (see below).

Philosophy is certainly not alone in its engagement with the ethical

Introduction



2. Hung Cong ('Nick') Ut, 'Accidental Napalm Attack, 1972'.

climate. But its reflections contain a distinctive ambition. The ambition is to understand the springs of motivation, reason, and feeling that move us. It is to understand the networks of rules or 'norms' that sustain our lives. The ambition is often one of finding system in the apparent jumble of principles and goals that we respect, or say we do. It is an enterprise of self-knowledge. Of course, philosophers do not escape the climate, even as they reflect on it. Any story about human nature in the contemporary climate is a result of human nature and the contemporary climate. But such stories may be better or worse, for all that.

Admiring the enterprise, aspiring to it, and even tolerating it, are themselves moral stances. They can themselves flourish or wither at different times, depending on how much we like what we see in the mirror. Rejecting the enterprise is natural enough, especially when things are comfortable. We all have a tendency to complacency with our own ways, like the English aristocrat on the Grand Tour: 'The Italians call it a *coltello*, the French a *couteau*, the Germans a *Messer*, but the English call it a knife, and when all is said and done, that's what it is.'

Ethics

We do not like being told what to do. We want to enjoy our lives, and we want to enjoy them with a good conscience. People who disturb that equilibrium are uncomfortable, so moralists are often uninvited guests at the feast, and we have a multitude of defences against them. Analogously, some individuals can insulate themselves from a poor physical environment, for a time. They may profit by creating one. The owner can live upwind of his chemical factory, and the logger may know that the trees will not give out until after he is dead. Similarly, individuals can insulate themselves from a poor moral environment, or profit from it. Just as some trees flourish by depriving others of nutrients or light, so some people flourish by depriving others of their due. The Western white male may flourish because of the inferior economic or social status of people who are not Western, or white, or male. Insofar as we are like that, we will not want the lid to be lifted.

Ethics is disturbing. We are often vaguely uncomfortable when we think of such things as exploitation of the world's resources, or the way our comforts are provided by the miserable labour conditions of the Third World. Sometimes, defensively, we get angry when such things are brought up. But to be entrenched in a culture, rather than merely belonging to the occasional rogue, exploitative attitudes will themselves need a story. So an ethical climate may allow talking of 'the market' as a justification for *our* high prices, and talking of 'their selfishness' and 'our rights' as a justification for anger at *their* high prices. Racists and sexists, like antebellum slave owners in America, always have to tell themselves a story that justifies their system. The ethical climate will sustain a conviction that *we* are civilized, and *they* are not, or that *we* deserve better fortune than *them*, or that *we* are intelligent, sensitive, rational, or progressive, or scientific, or authoritative, or blessed, or alone to be trusted with freedoms and rights, while *they* are not. An ethic gone wrong is an essential preliminary to the sweat-shop or the concentration camp and the death march.

I therefore begin this book with a look at the responses we sometimes give when ethics intrudes on our lives. These are responses that in different ways constitute threats to ethics. After that, in Part Two, we look at some of the problems that living throws at us, and in particular the clash between principles of justice and rights, and less forbidding notions such as happiness and freedom. Finally, in Part Three we look at the question of foundations: the ultimate justification for ethics, and its connection with human knowledge and human progress.

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Part One

Seven threats to ethics

This section looks at ideas that destabilize us when we think about standards of choice and conduct. In various ways they seem to suggest that ethics is somehow impossible. They are important because they themselves can seep into the moral environment. When they do, they can change what we expect from each other and ourselves, usually for the worse. Under their influence, when we look at the big words – justice, equality, freedom, rights – we see only bids for power and clashes of power, or we see only hypocrisy, or we see only our own opinions, unworthy to be foisted onto others. Cynicism and self-consciousness paralyse us. In what follows we consider seven such threats.

1. The death of God

For many people, ethics is not only tied up with religion, but is completely settled by it. Such people do not need to think too much about ethics, because there is an authoritative code of instructions, a handbook of how to live. It is the word of Heaven, or the will of a Being greater than ourselves. The standards of living become known to us by revelation of this Being. Either we take ourselves to perceive the fountainhead directly, or more often we have the benefit of an intermediary – a priest, or a prophet, or a text, or a tradition sufficiently in touch with the divine will to be able to communicate it to us. Then we know what to do. Obedience to the

divine will is meritorious, and brings reward; disobedience is lethally punished. In the Christian version, obedience brings triumph over death, or everlasting life. Disobedience means eternal Hell.

In the 19th century, in the West, when traditional religious belief began to lose its grip, many thinkers felt that ethics went with it. It is not to the purpose here to assess whether such belief should have lost its grip. Our question is the implication for our standards of behaviour. Is it true that, as Dostoevsky said, 'If God is dead, everything is permitted'? It might seem to be true: without a lawgiver, how can there be a law?

Before thinking about this more directly, we might take a diversion through some of the shortcomings in traditional religious instruction. Anyone reading the Bible might be troubled by some of its precepts. The Old Testament God is partial to some people above others, and above all jealous of his own pre-eminence, a strange moral obsession. He seems to have no problem with a slave-owning society, believes that birth control is a capital crime (Genesis 38: 9–10), is keen on child abuse (Proverbs 22: 15, 23: 13–14, 29: 15), and, for good measure, approves of fool abuse (Proverbs 26: 3). Indeed, there is a letter going around the Internet, purporting to be written to 'Doctor Laura', a fundamentalist agony aunt:

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Dear Dr Laura,

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's Law. I have learned a great deal from you, and I try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind him that Leviticus 18: 22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the specific laws and how to best follow them.

a. When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord (Lev. 1:9). The problem is my neighbors.

They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. How should I deal with this?

b. I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as it suggests in Exodus 21: 7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?

c. I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual uncleanness (Lev. 15: 19–24). The problem is, how do I tell? I have tried asking, but most women take offense.

d. Leviticus 25: 44 states that I may buy slaves from the nations that are around us. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify?

e. I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35: 2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?

f. A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination (Lev. 10: 10), it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this?

g. Leviticus 21: 20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?

I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.

Things are usually supposed to get better in the New Testament, with its admirable emphasis on love, forgiveness, and meekness. Yet the overall story of 'atonement' and 'redemption' is morally dubious, suggesting as it does that justice can be satisfied by the sacrifice of an innocent for the sins of the guilty – the doctrine of the scapegoat. Then the persona of Jesus in the Gospels has his fair share of moral quirks. He can be sectarian: 'Go not into the way of the Gentiles,

and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matt. 10: 5–6). In a similar vein, he refuses help to the non-Jewish woman from Canaan with the chilling racist remark, 'It is not meet to take the children's bread, and cast it to dogs' (Matt. 15: 26; Mark 7: 27). He wants us to be gentle, meek, and mild, but he himself is far from it: 'Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?' (Matt. 23: 33). The episode of the Gadarene swine shows him to share the then-popular belief that mental illness is caused by possession by devils. It also shows that animal lives – also anybody else's property rights in pigs – have no value (Luke 8: 27–33). The events of the fig tree in Bethany (Mark 11: 12–21) would make any environmentalist's hair stand on end.

Finally there are sins of omission as well as sins of commission. So we might wonder as well why he is not shown explicitly countermanding some of the rough bits of the Old Testament.

Ethics Exodus 22: 18, 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live', helped to burn alive tens or hundreds of thousands of women in Europe and America between around 1450 and 1780. It would have been helpful to suffering humanity, one might think, had a supremely good and caring and knowledgeable person, foreseeing this, revoked the injunction.

All in all, then, the Bible can be read as giving us a carte blanche for harsh attitudes to children, the mentally handicapped, animals, the environment, the divorced, unbelievers, people with various sexual habits, and elderly women. It encourages harsh attitudes to ourselves, as fallen creatures endlessly polluted by sin, and hatred of ourselves inevitably brings hatred of others.

The philosopher who mounted the most famous and sustained attack against the moral climate fostered by Christianity was Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Here he is in full flow:

Under Christianity the instincts of the subjugated and the oppressed come to the fore: it is only those who are at the bottom who seek their salvation in it. Here the prevailing pastime, the favourite remedy for boredom is the discussion of sin, self-criticism, the inquisition of conscience; here the emotion produced by power (called 'God') is pumped up (by prayer); here the highest good is regarded as unattainable, as a gift, as 'grace'. Here, too, open dealing is lacking; concealment and the darkened room are Christian. Here body is despised and hygiene is denounced as sensual; the church even ranges itself against cleanliness (- the first Christian order after the banishment of the Moors closed the public baths, of which there were 270 in Cordova alone). Christian, too, is a certain cruelty toward one's self and toward others; hatred of unbelievers; the will to persecute . . . And Christian is all hatred of the intellect, of pride, of courage, of freedom, of intellectual libertinage; Christian is all hatred of the senses, of joy in the senses, of joy in general.

Obviously there have been, and will be, apologists who want to defend or explain away the embarrassing elements. Similarly, apologists for Hinduism defend or explain away its involvement with the caste system, and apologists for Islam defend or explain away its harsh penal code or its attitude to women and infidels. What is interesting, however, is that when we weigh up these attempts we are ourselves in the process of assessing moral standards. We are able to stand back from any text, however entrenched, far enough to ask whether it represents an admirable or acceptable morality, or whether we ought to accept some bits, but reject others. So again the question arises: where do these standards come from, if they have the authority to judge even our best religious traditions?

The classic challenge to the idea that ethics can have a religious foundation is provided by Plato (c. 429–347 BC), in the dialogue known as the *Euthyphro*. In this dialogue, Socrates, who is on the point of being tried for impiety, encounters one Euthyphro, who

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