

On Moral Truth

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WHEN we reflect philosophically about morality we are very typically concerned with determining whether we can have any knowledge of good and evil, whether any moral claims have an objective rationale; that is to say, in thinking about the foundations of moral belief, we want very much to know whether any ethical code or any moral claim at all can be shown to be objectively justified.

In making such an inquiry, we run into trouble right away. What does it mean to say that moral claims can be objectively justified? Presumably it means that some moral claims are objective. But what does *that* mean? Some moral philosophers write as if moral judgments or moral statements would be objective if and *only* if moral values had a real existence apart from any reference to a human mind or to human attitudes. But now we are surely up queer street, for moral values are not objects like a table or even like an electron. To speak of moral values is to speak of what is good or right *to do*, or to *have done*, or what is good to seek, or of what one ought to be or to have been. But then we are surely not talking of what exists but of what is *to be* brought into existence. Sometimes we do indeed make assertions about what is the case when we make moral judgments, e.g., when we assert that someone has an admirable character, but moral utterances usually involve a *telling to*, not a *telling that*. (In talking about the past we are talking about what to have done.) Given this peculiarity of moral discourse, it is absurd to think of moral values as some peculiar sort of "non-natural object" or of norms as existing in some odd noumenal realm. If we note the actual uses of moral discourse we will immediately recognize that it is absurd to think of moral values as existing either apart from or as being dependent on human minds. Talk of existence cannot gain a foothold here. Moral values are neither natural nor non-natural objects. To ask whether in that sense they are objective is like asking whether a wife is unmarried. Such a request is self-refuting because it is nonsensical.

Yet, as Westermarck recognized, though he was not entirely free of the above kind of confusions, there are other, quite separable

elements in the concept of an objective moral judgment that perhaps can be satisfied. First, if someone is claiming that the statements "x is good" or "x is wrong" are objective statements, he is claiming, at the very least, that such statements are not reducible to *x is thought* to be good or *x is thought* to be wrong. If our moral claims are objective, they must be something of which we could correctly say that though people *think* so and so is wrong, they are mistaken, for it is not wrong. There are people who think that the earth is flat but their thinking so does not make the earth flat. Only if we can get beyond "thinking makes it so" can we be justified in claiming that there are objective moral claims.

Westermarck adds another condition that must be satisfied if moral judgments can be correctly said to be objective. This is the condition that some moral judgments can be true and others false. To believe in the objectivity of morals is to believe that some moral statements are true. In short, to correctly claim that a certain "course of conduct is objectively right, it must be thought to be right by all rational beings who judge truly of the matter and cannot, without error, be judged to be wrong." Now we must be careful here to use the word "rational" in a non-moralistic way, if we are to avoid going in a short and vicious circle.¹ In short, to assert "x is objectively right" and "x is objectively speaking the best thing to do" is to give one to understand that statements asserting that x is objectively right or that x is objectively speaking the best thing to do are true and that they are thought to be true by all rational beings who properly consider the matter. But apart from difficulties about "rational" and "properly consider the matter," there are notorious difficulties about saying moral statements are true or false. I want here to consider these difficulties.

Most emotivists and other non-descriptivists claim that it is misleading to say that fundamental moral statements are either true or false.² They readily admit that it is linguistically quite in order to say of certain very typical moral statements that they are true or false. In that way they differ very markedly from commands or imperatives or mere expressions of emotion. A. J. Ayer puts this general point very well when he remarks:

¹ It is used in a moralistic way in the following examples. "A rational man will never simply use people to further his own interests," "A rational man will not pursue his own lesser good at the expense of the greater good of his society," "A rational man will be fair in his dealings with others."

² I say *most*, for C. L. Stevenson makes it quite evident that he does not think it is misleading. See C. L. Stevenson, *Facts and Values* (New Haven, 1963), pp. 214-220.

For, as the English language is currently used—and what else, it may be asked, is here in question?—it is by no means improper to refer to ethical utterances as statements; when someone characterizes an action by the use of an ethical predicate, it is quite good usage to say that he is thereby describing it; when someone wishes to assent to an ethical verdict, it is perfectly legitimate for him to say that it is true, or that it is a fact, just as if he wished to dissent from it, it would be perfectly legitimate for him to say that it was false. We should know what he meant and we should not consider that he was using words in an unconventional way.³

Ayer stresses all this, but he still argues, as have many others, that it is logically misleading to follow ordinary usage here. These non-descriptivists are recommending a new way of speaking that will be, so they think, logically speaking less misleading than the old way of speech. Ayer argues that when we consider carefully the actual use of moral language—its depth grammar rather than its surface grammar—we will see that moral utterances, even when declarative in form, are not verifiable or even confirmable. If I say “The dog is in the snow,” “The Russians are invading Alaska,” or “Frustrated people tend to respond with aggression” you know what facts count in establishing the truth or falsity of my claim. These statements assert certain quite empirically identifiable states of affairs which, if the asserted state of affairs in question actually does exist, will establish the truth of my claim. If it does not exist then my claim can quite correctly be said to be false. My attitudes, my interests, do not at all affect the truth or falsity of what I assert. I may hate to see dogs romping in the snow, I may fear the Russians coming to Alaska, I may deplore the fact that frustrated people keep the whole cycle going by responding aggressively, but all the same the facts are what they are no matter how I or anyone else may feel about them. But how do we verify or confirm, falsify, or disconfirm “Dogs ought to be allowed to romp in the snow,” “The Russians ought not to invade Alaska,” or “Frustrated people ought not to become aggressive”? We can and do give reasons for these statements, but what would it be like to verify the statements as distinct from verifying whether some of the factual statements given as supporting reasons are true? There seem to be no facts that we can point to that would verify such statements; and if there is no *conceivable* direct verification of them then we cannot sensibly speak of an indirect verification of them either, for where nothing could conceivably count as direct verification the phrase “indirect verification” could have no meaning. If this is so, we do not know what it would be like for such claims to be true, for

³ A. J. Ayer, “On the Analysis of Moral Judgments” in Milton Munitz (ed.), *A Modern Introduction to Ethics* (New York, 1958), p. 537.

we do not know what we would have to apprehend to make them true or, for that matter, false. Because of this, Ayer argues, we had better, for philosophical purposes at least, amend ordinary language and stop speaking of moral statements as true or false.

This, and more complex considerations as well, have counted heavily in favor of the "no truth" account of moral discourse. But there are difficulties here as well. Even if, as with descriptive statements, there are no facts that moral statements simply describe—even if there is nothing like "'The cat is on the mat' is true" if and only if the cat is on the mat—it does not follow that it is not proper to say that statements of logically diverse kinds are true. Mathematical and logical statements are true; more generally there are analytic truths even though such a "correspondence theory" will not begin to work for them. Just as we recognize factual truths and logical truths, why cannot we recognize moral truths as well?

It is here where the good reasons approach and Kurt Baier's analysis in particular can be of considerable help. Baier thinks he has a way around our problem. His first move is indirect. It consists (1) in showing how we determine the truth of claims about what is legal or customary, and (2) in showing how very different moral concepts are from legal concepts or from mere customs. To find out whether it is true that it is illegal for Caucasians and Negroes to marry in Mississippi, we need only to find out what the law is in Mississippi and how this bears on U.S. Federal laws; to find out whether it is customary for white men to flirt with Negro girls in Mississippi, we need only determine what the practice is in Mississippi. Once we discover what the law is or what the custom is, we have unequivocally settled the question of the truth of our legal claim or our claim about what is customary. But this is not so with moral questions. If we make a moral claim, if we assert "It is immoral to prevent Caucasians and Negroes from marrying in Mississippi or anyplace else" or "It is wrong for white men to flirt with Negro girls when they cannot marry them, have no intention of marrying them, and do not even treat them as persons," the truth or falsity of these claims is *not* decided and cannot be decided simply by discovering what are the moral convictions of the group. Morality differs radically from law and custom here. If I know what is demanded or prohibited by the moral code of my society, I do *not* thereby know what is right in my society or elsewhere. Once a person knows what the law or custom of his own or some other culture is, he cannot intelligibly ask whether his convictions about what is

legal or customary in *that culture* are true, but this is not so for morality. How then do we determine whether a moral conviction is true?

Baier's answer is very simple: "Our moral convictions are true if they can be seen to be required or acceptable from the moral point of view."⁴ When we say that a moral judgment is true we endorse that judgment; we endorse it as a judgment that is rationally warranted; and when the judgment in question is a moral judgment, to say that it is rationally warranted comes to acknowledging it as acceptable from the moral point of view.

But what is it for something to be acceptable from the moral point of view? What is it to take the moral point of view? In Chapter 8 of his *The Moral Point of View*, Baier explicates what it is to take "the moral point of view." To take the moral point of view, three conditions must be satisfied.

1. We must adopt rules of conduct not as rules of thumb designed to promote our own individual interests, but as matters of principle. As Baier points out, "this involves conforming to the rules whether or not doing so favors one's own or anyone else's aim."⁵
2. A moral agent must adopt rules to which not only he and his friends conform as a matter of principle, but rules to which everyone can conform as a matter of principle. Moral rules are meant for everybody.⁶

There are four subsidiary conditions which need to be noted under this condition.

 - a. It must be possible to teach a moral rule to everybody.
 - b. It must be a rule such that its purpose would not be defeated if everyone acted on it.
 - c. It must be a rule such that it would not be defeated if a person let it be known that he adopted it.
 - d. It must not be a rule such that it would be literally impossible for everyone to act in accordance with it.
3. Moral rules must be rules which are adopted for the good of everyone alike. The principle of impartiality or justice is involved here, since the interests of all people must be furthered, or at least given equal consideration when some moral rule has to be overridden. Baier gives us a case to make clear exactly what it is that he means. This condition excludes from morality any set of rules "which enrich the ruling class

⁴ Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View* (Ithaca, New York, 1958), pp. 183-184. In my "History of Ethics," vol. III, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Paul Edwards (New York, 1957), pp. 109-112, I have given a general characterization of the good reasons approach and tried to place it in contemporary ethical theory.

⁵ Kurt Baier, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

at the expense of the masses.”⁷ It excludes any rule that is not reversible. This is to say, the behaviour in question “must be acceptable to a person whether he is at the ‘giving’ or ‘receiving’ end of it.”⁸

One further point is important in considering what it is to take the moral point of view. When one takes the moral point of view one must, when one has a specific moral perplexity, review the *facts* in the light of one’s moral convictions.⁹ The important thing to see here is that if one is reasoning morally, one must attend to the facts relevant to the case.

According to Baier, we can determine true from false moral statements by determining which statements are *acceptable* from the moral point of view. If a statement is acceptable from the moral point of view, it is true; if not, not. Only certain rules of conduct will satisfy these conditions. This means that no moral statement can be true unless it is made in accordance with and acceptable from the point of view of those norms which incapsulate the moral point of view.

This view, if correct, would give us some moral truths, some knowledge of good and evil. But Baier’s view and the good reasons approach generally has not escaped thorough criticism. It has been thought by many in some way to enshrine, as *the* logic of moral discourse, the rather limited moral views of some particular men at a particular time and place. Paul Taylor has made this reaction specific and penetrating in his striking article “The Ethnocentric Fallacy.”¹⁰ Taylor argues that Baier’s effort is reduced in essence to the claim that a moral claim is true only if it is made in accordance with the moral principles of liberal Western society, but these principles in turn are not testable—nothing establishes their truth or falsity. But to argue in this way—to argue as Baier does—is, Taylor argues, to commit the ethnocentric fallacy.

Let me explain exactly what Taylor means when he makes this claim. Baier, Taylor argues, defines “the moral point of view” in terms of the moral code of liberal Western Society.

As a logical consequence of his definition, all moral convictions which do not accord with those of that particular society are false. But this assumes that one set of moral convictions are true, and does not tell us how we know *this*. In fact, by making moral knowledge relative to or dependent upon these convictions, it places the convictions themselves beyond truth and falsity and hence renders them arbitrary.¹¹

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

¹⁰ Paul Taylor, “The Ethnocentric Fallacy,” *The Monist*, vol. 47 (1963), pp. 563–584.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 565.

This challenge of Taylor's is a powerful one—a challenge that cannot in some form or other but occur to any thoughtful reader of Baier's book. Let us take a close look at Taylor's incisive arguments.

Taylor points out that "if we define the word 'moral' in terms of an impartial set of rules, according to which no act is right unless reversible, then it becomes *self-contradictory* to talk of the moral code of a society which, for example, places women in a subordinate position to men."¹² But if we adopt this definition, we in effect make the truth of someone's moral convictions "relative to the moral code of what might be dubbed 'liberal Western society'—the society which had adopted a moral code embodying principles of justice, impartiality, and brotherhood extending to all human beings."¹³ At this point Taylor drives home his most crucial point. For all his sophistication, Baier has been very culture-bound, very ethnocentric in his characterization of the moral point of view. Taylor remarks that the above liberal code of conduct

. . . is only one among many. However deeply our own conscience and moral outlook may have been shaped by it, we must recognize that other societies in the history of the world have been able to function on the basis of other codes. There are societies with caste systems, societies which practice slavery, societies in which women are treated as inferior to men and so on. To claim that a person who is a member of one of those societies and who knows its moral code, nevertheless does not have true moral convictions is, it seems to me, fundamentally correct. But such a claim cannot be justified on the ground of Baier's concept of the moral point of view, for that is to assume that the moral code of liberal Western society is the only genuine morality. This renders it nonsensical to talk about alternative moral codes, unless we place "moral" in brackets or quotation marks . . . to indicate that such codes are somehow alleged to be moral but are not genuinely so.¹⁴

To proceed in this ethnocentric way, Taylor argues, produces the very reverse effect of what Baier was after. Baier wanted to show how one could correctly assert that the moral convictions of a society, including his own, could be false. But given this ethnocentric definition of "the moral point of view" and given Baier's definition of "moral truth," moral truth comes to depend on which codes of which societies are referred to. If a moral claim is acceptable from the point of view of Western liberal morality, it is true; if not, it is false. This is a perfect rationalization for ethnocentrism. Moreover, it will now become senseless to ask whether a person's moral

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 568–569.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 570.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

convictions are true if they are acceptable from the point of view of liberal Western morality. But this is itself, Taylor argues, surely nonsense for if this were so (1) "Act x is forbidden by the moral code of society S , but is it really wrong?" would become equivalent to (2) "Act x is forbidden by the moral code of society S , but is it forbidden by the moral code of liberal Western society?" But the two questions are not equivalent. (2) could be settled in the way we settle questions of what is customary or what is legal, but, as Baier has shown himself, we do not and cannot settle moral questions in this way. Furthermore (1) would make sense when asked of any society, but (2) does not make sense when society S is liberal Western society. Thus (1) and (2) are very different questions.

Surely Taylor is right if to take the "moral point of view" is to take a point of view wherein we must, to be even *reasoning morally*, have the ideal of the brotherhood of all men. There have been plenty of societies that have had moral codes that did not even remotely have this ideal. As Westermarck points out,

Primitive peoples carefully distinguish between an act of homicide committed within their own community and one where the victim is a stranger: while the former is in ordinary circumstances disapproved of, the latter is in most cases allowed and often considered worthy of praise. And the same holds true of theft and lying and the infliction of other injuries. Apart from the privileges granted to guests, which are always of very short duration, a stranger is in early society devoid of all rights.¹⁵

Westermarck, utilizing a wealth of empirical material, goes on to show how in Greek society, Roman society, among the early Teutonic groups, through the Middle Ages and down into the seventeenth century in Europe, similar moral conceptions were very widespread. Even today, Westermarck points out, such ideas are not entirely dead within Western culture. Modern moral philosophers argue against it, but such tribal moral beliefs—beliefs which come to the fore during wartime and in times of political and economic pressure—are surely not dead among us. As normative ethicists, as moralists, we may surely deplore such "moralities" and seek to argue for a universalistic morality in which the ideal of brotherhood and beneficence is extended to all men, but plainly such alternative moral codes and moral conceptions do exist.

Certainly this is a powerful attack. In a very plain sense of "adopted for the good of everyone alike" not all rules that as a matter of linguistic propriety can be properly called "moral rules" or "moral principles" enshrine such an intent.

¹⁵ Edward Westermarck, *Ethical Relativity* (London, 1932), p. 197.

Yet this is not the whole tale. What Baier says about the third condition for the moral point of view, perhaps with a little stretching in the direction of Hare, can be *interpreted* in a way that does not fall prey to the ethnocentric fallacy.

A key to what I want to claim here lies in Baier's Kantian claim that moral judgments must be reversible. When we say that a moral claim must be reversible, we are saying that whatever is to count as "a moral claim" must be acceptable to the agent whether he is on the giving or receiving end of it. Now it has been argued that this reversibility is not analytically linked with what it is for something to count as "a moral statement." After all, people have said, "Women should not vote," "Black men should not live in the same apartment blocks as white men," "The ruling classes have a right to enrich themselves at the expense of the masses," "Germans deserve one kind of treatment, Jews another," "People who are shipwrecked may be plundered." But, it has been argued, clearly non-reversible and neanderthal though they be, that these judgments are unequivocally moral judgments. It is, Taylor and others have argued, not a necessary condition for something's being a moral judgment that it be reversible. In thinking that it is, so the argument runs, Baier and Kant reveal an ethnocentric understanding of morality.

I want to argue that these examples notwithstanding, reversibility *is* such a necessary condition and this Kantian claim, *properly understood*, does not commit us to an ethnocentric view of morality. There remains a very crucial sense in morals—in which even people who hold such apparently non-reversible views as the anti-Feminist, the racist and the Nazi quoted above, if they are reasoning morally at all, must be applying the criterion of reversibility. Consider this snatch of a dialogue:

A: Women should not vote. They must always remain in a subordinate place in our society.

B: If you were a woman you wouldn't say that.

A: No indeed I wouldn't. I would be quite justified in maintaining that if I were a woman I would have the right to vote, but I still would say that other women ought not to vote.

B: But then it isn't "being a woman" that should disqualify one from voting, but "being a certain kind of a person." There is something about *you* that entitles you, whether you are or are not a woman, to vote and the women whom you say should not vote lack that quality.

A: No, I'm not saying anything of the kind. There is—I confess—nothing distinctive about me. I am just saying that women *ought* not to vote. But I am *not* at all willing to say that if I were a woman, in all relevant respects like the women whom I say should not vote, that then *I* should not vote.

When *A* replies in this way he is saying something that is not intelligible as a bit of moral or normative discourse. It is in this sense that reversibility is a necessary requirement of the moral point of view. But such a limitation does not make it self-contradictory, as Taylor thinks, to set forth a moral code that places women in a subordinate position to men. Neanderthals who so argue will come up with some spurious factual claim that women are somehow either naturally or, as a matter of sociological fact, inferior to men and cannot therefore be given the responsibility of voting. But if such a man is reasoning morally, he must—logically must—be prepared to admit that if he were a woman or were inferior in the same specified way, then he too ought not to be allowed to vote. If he is not prepared to so reason, we would not *understand* what he could mean by saying that he was making a *moral* claim. He would not be playing the moral language game. He would not be thinking as a moral agent. The same thing can be said for the other examples I gave. They do not count against the contention that moral judgments must be reversible. This requirement of reversibility is but a facet of universalizability or the generalization principle, a principle that Taylor himself takes to be analytically tied to anything that could count as a normative judgment.¹⁶ It is, Taylor rightly argues, analytic to “say that whatever is right or wrong for one person is right or wrong for every similar person in similar circumstances.” In this sense all normative judgments and *a fortiori* all moral judgments must be reversible, and in *that sense*, impartial. As moral agents, we must be committed to such an idea of impartiality.

Yet we must not forget what both Hare and Taylor have stressed, that this requirement *by itself* does not determine the *content* of any moral judgment. It does not, by itself, block a tribal morality. Greeks can (and have) said of Barbarians that they ought not to have the rights of Greeks; Germans can (and have) said of Jews that they do not have the rights of Germans. But to say this, and make their remarks intelligible as moral remarks, they must contend that there is something about Barbarians or Jews that makes them different from Greeks and Germans.

¹⁶ Paul Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 575-576.

But, as Westermarck and more recently Hare have recognized, once we dwell on and take to heart this generalizing feature of moral discourse, it becomes very difficult—if we are at all clear-headed—to be a tribalist in ethics, for if Barbarians, Jews, Negroes, women, the proletariat, and the like are not to have the treatment the tribalist claims for himself, there must—logically must—be something about them that justifies that difference in treatment. That is, there must be something that the maker of the moral judgment would acknowledge as justifying a like treatment for him if that characteristic could be correctly attributed to him. It takes a very fanatical and irrational German to be prepared—to really be prepared—to put himself and all his family into the concentration camp if it turns out that they are Jews. We could play the little trick on him Hare proposes. First, by forged documents we get him to believe that he really is what the Nazis would call a Jew and then, if in true fanatical fashion he agrees that he and his family should have a first-class ticket to the gas chambers, we prove to him that the documents are forged and then ask him, what reason he has for claiming in the first place that he and his family should be gassed and why moments later he has changed his mind. What has changed about him and his family that justifies freeing them from this torment? Does he really see or notice anything about his family and children or about his own person in the two different situations that would justify a switch in treatment? He can, of course, continue to say that it is their “Jewishness/non-Jewishness” that justifies the switch in treatment, but then he is really caught up in obscurantism and mystagogy, for our very trick has shown that there is nothing empirically detectable about being a Jew that is relevant to his moral claim. Perhaps Jewishness is a non-natural intuitable, toti-resultant quality supervening on all Jews and only on Jews.

In sum, I have tried to argue, as against Taylor, that Baier’s characterization of the moral point of view can be interpreted in such a way that it does not commit the ethnocentric fallacy. I have, as Taylor has, concentrated on Baier’s third condition, but now I shall show that the first two conditions do not commit Baier to identifying morality with liberal Western morality and that the three conditions, taken in conjunction with Baier’s claim that in reasoning morally we must attend to the facts, give us adequate criteria for deciding when a moral judgment is true.

Let us consider Baier’s second condition, namely his contention that a rule, to count as a “moral rule,” must be one to which everyone can conform and a rule must be meant for everybody. Our prior

discussion should have made it evident that condition two is plausible only under a rather distinctive interpretation. That is, we have to give a distinctive reading of "rule meant for everybody" or "rule to which everyone can conform as a matter of principle." My above remarks about reversibility make it plain how and in what way moral rules are meant for everybody and are rules to which one can conform as a matter of principle. If something is a moral rule it must apply to like people in like circumstances. If it is all right for a starving Brazilian farmer to steal in order to keep alive, if he can't get the means of life in any other way, then it would be all right for anyone like this farmer and in the same kind of situation to steal. In that way, and without ethnocentrism, moral rules are for everyone. But this does not commit us to the absurdity that psychotics and mentally defective people can conform to them, but only to claiming that if, and when, such people can act as moral agents, then they too must, in the relevant circumstances, act in certain prescribed ways.

If a "rule" to have the logical status of "a moral rule" must be universalizable in the manner I have described, it clearly must be a rule that can be taught to anyone capable of moral agency to whom the moral rule correctly applies. If a moral rule applies to men of a certain sort, distinctively situated, this commits us to the assertion that when certain conditions obtain they ought to do what the rule enjoins; and this, in turn, implies that they can do it. But surely a necessary condition for their following the rule is that they understand it. Thus the moral rule must be teachable to the men to whom it correctly applies. But in specifying these men we must specify them by pointing to the fact that they have certain determinate characteristics, and *universalizability* commits us to saying that the moral rule in question must apply to anyone who has these characteristics. This would hold for anything recognizable as "a moral rule." This is a plausible, if somewhat reduced, reading of Baier's claim that a moral rule must be teachable to everybody. I am saying rather that it must be capable of being taught to everyone to whom it can be correctly applied.

Baier's first condition poses more difficulties. Some have thought that there are, or at least can be, "egoistic moralities," but Baier tells us that to adopt the moral point of view is to conform to rules whether or not conforming to them promotes our self-interest. If something counts as a "moral rule" or as a "moral claim" it must (and the force of the "must" here is logical) override self-interest.

That this is so and why it is so is plain enough when we think of the

raison d'être or, more modestly and more appropriately, a central *raison d'être*, for having a moral code—*any* moral code at all. Any society needs some device for impartially adjudicating conflicts of interest. Society is necessary for human beings, and when human beings live together, band together in a society with at least the minimal cooperation this implies, they will have conflicts of interest. If, when such conflicts occur, each man were to seek to further his self-interest alone, there would be the kind of conflict and chaos in society that no reasonable man could desire. In fact, if men were to act in this way, it would not even be correct to speak of them as living together in society. Thus to live together, to further one of the main ends of morality, men must adopt rules which override self-interest. To take the moral point of view of necessity involves conforming to such rules. But to conform to such rules is not simply to commit oneself to liberal Western morality. It is rather to adopt a point of view that is and must be implicit in all moral reasoning.

We are not out of the dark woods yet. Granting that moral judgments must be universalizable, granting that in the sense specified they must be for the good of everyone alike, we still do not know and cannot determine *what* is for the good of everyone alike, until we can determine something of the content of "for the good of everyone alike." Until we can do this we can hardly be said to have any knowledge of good and evil or any moral truth.

What is it for something to be for the *good* of everyone alike or even for something to be good for me or good period? If we leave the content of "good" unspecified in stating the moral point of view, then if two moralists both adopt the moral point of view and make logically incompatible moral judgments both of which are—under these circumstances—acceptable from the moral point of view, because they both satisfy Baier's three conditions, then we would have two logically incompatible moral judgments both of which, according to Baier's specifications, would be true. But it is a self-contradiction to assert that two logically incompatible assertions could both be true. Baier would surely add, but, of course, two mutually incompatible statements cannot be true, but the problem remains that if we accept his explication of "moral truth" there is no possible way of determining which of the two mutually incompatible moral statements are true.

An example may make my claim clearer. Suppose *A* claims that wives ought not to have lunch alone with men who are not their husbands, and *B* claims that this is absurdly medieval, that it is perfectly all right for a woman to have lunch alone with a man who

is not her husband. Now these two judgments are both moral judgments, both satisfy Baier's three conditions and they are logically incompatible. We should want to say that they both can't be true, but given Baier's account, as explicated above, we could not possibly say which moral statement was true.

The way out here is to realize that in characterizing the moral point of view, we must *not* speak of "the good of everyone alike" in such a way that "good" is used so that it can have *just any* content. But when we claim "good" must have a certain content, we again run the risk of committing the ethnocentric fallacy. It is tempting to argue that in adopting the moral point of view, we attribute a certain content to "good" but not everyone would use "good" in this way; there are, as J. O. Urmson argues, alternative and often conflicting criteria for "good." But we must—if we follow Baier—specify moral truth with reference to the moral point of view and here we find that once we consider "good-making criteria," we get a relativity in the very specification of the moral point of view that defeats Baier's claim that we can develop an objective test for the truth of moral statements.

The question I want to ask here is this: Are the "good-making criteria" used in such moral appraisals all *that* relative? When we are trying to develop a rational criterion for deciding whether certain actions, rules or practices are good or bad, we are concerned with whether they are, more than any of their alternatives, in the best interests of everyone; and in talking of the best interests of everyone, we are talking about their most extensive welfare and well-being. Now, if you like, you may call "general welfare" and "human well-being" grading labels or evaluative terms or prescriptive terms or normative terms or what you will, but they are, all the same, so tied to certain descriptive criteria that actions, rules or practices which did not satisfy these criteria could not be properly said to be in the general welfare or to serve the human well-being.¹⁷ Practices or rules which sanctioned starving everyone to the point where the human animal could just barely keep alive, prohibited all sexual relations, constantly interrupted people's sleep to the point where they were just capable of keeping alive, made both play and work impossible and destroyed all human affection, could not possibly be correctly said to be in the

¹⁷ In this context see also my "Appraising Doing the Thing Done," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 57 (1960); "Progress," *The Lock Haven Review*, no. 7 (1965); "On Looking Back at the Emotive Theory," *Methodos*, vol. 14 (1962); and "Problems of Ethics," vol. III, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Paul Edwards (New York, 1967), pp. 130-132.

general welfare and serve human well-being. And if they could not serve human well-being or be in the general welfare they could not be in the best interests of everyone and if they could not be in the best interests of everyone they could not be for the good of everyone alike and if they could not be for the good of everyone alike they could not be compatible with the moral point of view.

Such criteria give content to the moral point of view and make it impossible for both the judgments of *A* and *B* to be true. Furthermore, while such an explication of "for the good of everyone alike" may commit what has been called the "naturalistic fallacy," it does not commit the "ethnocentric fallacy." To accept such criteria about human welfare or human well-being does not commit us to liberal Western morality or even to Western morality, it is part of *any* morality.

It could be argued that what I have said above is mistaken; such a conception of "general welfare" or "human well-being" is still ethnocentric, for Buddhists striving after nirvana and Plains Indians on the vision quest regard certain forms of behavior as supremely desirable even though they run contrary to what I have said is in the general welfare or for human well-being. After all, we can have an "ethic of renunciation." Someone with such an ethic, it is natural to argue, would have a concept of the general welfare very different from the one just put before you. As such ascetics conceive of man's deepest well-being and welfare, we have something that sharply conflicts with what I have said. Such renunciation, they would argue, in reality serves men's deepest well-being and is for the general welfare. "General welfare" and "human well-being" are essentially contested concepts.

This objection to my argument will not do. It will not show that my criterion is ethnocentric, for such behavior was never advocated as a basis for social action or as a way of life for *all* Buddhists or *all* Plains Indians to adopt. It was prescribed for the holy man and not for the ordinary Plains Indian or the ordinary Buddhist. Such behavior did not, even for the holy man, serve as criteria for what was for *human* well-being or in the *general* welfare. Here their criteria overlap with the criteria used by what Taylor calls "liberal Western morality"; and the overlap includes the criteria I gave. There is no good reason to think such criteria are ethnocentric.

There is a further consideration that deserves attention here. As we noted before, in adopting the moral point of view, we are committed, when we are able to review the facts carefully, to clarifying these facts for ourselves before making decisions, advocatig certainn

moral rules, or supporting certain moral practices. Now where there *seems* to be some alteration or qualification of the criteria for human well-being that I have offered, it has been in the service of some superstitious, ideological, or wildly metaphysical scheme. That nirvana can be attained, that there is a numinosity answering to the Indian's quest, is either false or without factual significance.¹⁸ Attention to the facts, including the understanding we would achieve if we attained even a minimum of conceptual clarity, would lead us to reject such seeming alterations and qualifications of Baier's characterization of the moral point of view. To carry out moral reasoning fully, we must attend carefully to the non-moral facts and we must seek to be clear-headed. If we are clear-headed and do attend to the facts, we will not go on the vision quest or seek or even expect to attain nirvana.

We must also note that moral judgments are judgments that are ideally made in the light of a full knowledge of the relevant facts and they must, logically must, be made in the light of the facts that it is reasonable to expect the moral agent to have in his possession when he must make his moral decision or render judgment. To take the moral point of view is to reason in this way and it is to use "good" in the relevant contexts with this factual content. Since this is so, it cannot be the case that two logically incompatible moral judgments, like *A*'s and *B*'s about wives' dining with men who are not their husbands, could both be acceptable from the moral point of view. They have different consequences for human well-being and, everything being equal, if *A*'s judgment is such that it would, if followed, make for greater general welfare than *B*'s, then only *A*'s judgment is acceptable from the moral point of view; and, if there are no other alternatives acceptable from the moral point of view here, then *A*'s judgment is required from the moral point of view and *a fortiori* true.

The concept of good is sufficiently vague and moral reasoning is sufficiently complex to make it the case that for a wide and important range of cases, we cannot determine what we ought to do with any objectivity. But there are also standard cases and contexts in which we can determine moral truth—that is, we can determine how we ought to act from the moral point of view. Moreover, given a sophisticated and a determined application of moral reasoning

¹⁸ My remark here may seem brusque and dogmatic, but I could hardly develop my arguments for it here, though I have in some detail in my "On Speaking of God," *Theoria*, vol. 28 (1962), Part 2; "Religious Perplexity and Faith," *The Crane Review*, vol. 8 (1965); "God-Talk," *Sophia*, vol. 3 (1964); "On Fixing the Reference Range of 'God'," *Religious Studies*, vol. 2 (1966); and in my book *The Quest for God* (forthcoming).

and an extensive knowledge of man and his world, our knowledge of good and evil can constantly expand. The concept of truth has an application in morals and we have definite ways of determining truth in morality.

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