

# ON TAKING HUMAN NATURE AS THE BASIS OF MORALITY

*An Exercise in Linguistic Analysis*

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GENERALIZATIONS about linguistic analysis and ethics are not likely to be very useful; nor, as a general rule, are general descriptions of linguistic methods in philosophy enlightening. Unless one has actually seen some live philosophical tangle unsnarled by such a technique, one will not be very convinced by even a very accurate general description of the methods used. On the other hand, sample analyses of moral concepts often do not make clear their relevance (direct or indirect) to actual moral perplexities. Nevertheless I shall brave the latter barrier, rather than launch into yet another general description of linguistic analysis in ethics. In doing this I want to illustrate some of the things that can be achieved by paying careful attention to our language, and to show the relevance of linguistic analysis to philosophical perplexities about morals by exhibiting how at least one practitioner of linguistic analysis in ethics would appraise some of the efforts to ground morality in human nature. I choose this as a topic for a sample analysis because of its intrinsic importance, because important confusions have arisen around it, because a lot of nonsense has been written about it, and finally because it is a topic whose depths we have not yet plumbed. I am not so arrogant as to pretend that I have plumbed its depths, but I do hope to clear away some of the rubbish that has been written about it, exhibit some of the complexity of the problem, and show some ways in which we can intelligibly appeal to human nature in justifying moral claims.

In trying to show how fundamental moral claims can be supported, it is natural to make an appeal to human nature. Certain

psychologists and psychoanalysts, as well as some religious existentialists, have tried to base their ethical theories on anthropological considerations. Their arguments seem to me very confused, and similar efforts by philosophers, though far more adequate, are not without serious difficulties. Such an appeal remains very tempting, but if we are to get beyond rhetorical remarks about it we must become perfectly clear about what exactly is at issue.

## I

Before proceeding to the conceptual difficulties involved in basing morality on human nature, I would like to risk certain general methodological remarks about linguistic analysis in philosophy. People have criticized linguistic analysis for being a kind of arm-chair, unscientific linguistics: instead of doing the hard work of scientific linguistics—the work of men like Bloomfield, Harris, or Chomsky—it putters around in an impressionistic way with what “Uncle Tom Cobly and all” say. As Ziff illustrates in his *Semantic Analysis*, work in descriptive linguistics can be of genuine value to the analyst, but the linguistic philosopher is not a kind of amateur linguist or even someone paving the way for a truly scientific study of language.

The linguistic philosopher is no more interested in language for its own sake than is Plato or Sartre. If he is a moral philosopher he is interested in the traditional perplexities that disturbed Plato, Aquinas, Kant, and Dewey, but he brings to these problems a partially new technique for resolving or at least relieving philosophical perplexities about the nature of morality. He tries to give an accurate description of the conceptual area where there is philosophical trouble, in order to dispel those muddles that result from a failure to understand the workings of our language in that particular area—and while it may be true that not all philosophical problems in ethics arise from such conceptual confusions, the vast majority of them do. The job of the linguistic philosopher, as I see it, is purely descriptive; it is neither in competition with nor

a prolegomenon to the linguist's task of describing and comparing the forms of language. The philosopher's job is over when he has dispelled a philosophical confusion that has arisen because of a failure to take sufficient note of the workings of certain segments of our language. If there were no philosophical perplexities there would be no need for linguistic philosophers, but there would be a need for linguists.

It is felt in some quarters that all this talk about talk, or about the use of talk, is dreadfully dull and remote from the great moral harassments of our age. People who feel this way are inclined to say that existentialists and people like Fromm and Reik, though they may be conceptually confused, at least concern themselves with the really disturbing problems of men and do not talk endlessly about the naturalistic fallacy, whether good is a unique object of thought, whether there are evaluative rules of inference, and the like—that they at least give us the real, stern stuff of life and not mere chatter about chatter. It seems to me that such remarks are poorly taken. I will readily grant that a lot of boring, pointless, pedantic work has been done by linguistic philosophers; but this is only to say that the class of linguistic philosophers is included in the class of philosophers, and the class of philosophers in the class of scholars, and genius in any class is rare. The relevance of linguistic analysis to moral perplexity may not be apparent to the man in the street, and such analyses are not normally spiced with emotive, oracular sayings. But if one is sensitive to the emotive force of words, it is apparent when reading the meandering prose of a Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, or Maritain that these philosophers are no less boring or pedantic than even the run-of-the-mill linguistic analyst.

There is a more important point to be made about this general complaint. When the linguistic philosopher talks about the uses of language he is not talking about something remote from life and society. If we elucidate the meaning of a word or phrase, we give an account of how it is used; and to describe how a word

is used is to describe the social intercourse into which it enters. Words are not simply our counters to do with what we will. Before we can give anything a meaning, before we can make innovations or alterations in language, there must be words or linguistic units of some sort, which as a matter of social fact mean so and so—primary uses of language which we do not create or just decide on. Language as a social fact must already exist if the language is to be put to work for the special purposes of particular language-users, who in some way deliberately alter the meanings of the terms in question. The words must already have a use as part of an ongoing system of social intercourse.

In this sense the forms of language are the forms of life. If a linguistic philosopher comes to a thorough understanding of the forms of moral discourse, he will come to understand the nature of the moral life and not some pale imitation of it. There is no turning to pure moral experience innocent of all linguistic taint and then creating meanings to designate that experience. Far from being remote from the moral life, linguistic analysis pursued with care and discrimination takes us to the heart of it. That this has not yet been done nearly well enough attests to the fact that moral philosophy awaits its Wittgenstein and not—as some would have us think—its Newton.

## II

Moral problems characteristically arise when we must decide what to do or what attitude to take toward what has been done, is being done, or will be done. In making moral judgments we have a complex network of moral maxims that direct us to do one thing rather than another. These maxims have excusing conditions built into them, and they assume a certain context for their proper application. But moral rules or maxims do not by any means cover all moral contingencies. Sometimes we must make a moral judgment that does not admit of an unequivocal subsumption under a moral rule; sometimes, if we judge that we should do a certain thing, we must violate an accepted maxim in order to act

in accordance with another accepted maxim. Many moral philosophers have said that in these various situations, where we cannot simply judge in accordance with a moral rule we accept, we must appeal to more general rules that are best called principles, with which anything that could count as a "moral judgment" must be in accordance. We decide whether our maxims or lower-level rules are justified by testing them against these general principles.

Yet how can we know whether these principles are themselves sound? To answer this question philosophers like P. B. Rice, C. I. Lewis, and W. D. Falk make an appeal to human nature: <sup>1</sup> we need not regard our rules and principles simply as social conventions, for their rationale lies in our very human nature as rational and social animals. "Man," as Bishop Butler has put it, "has the rule of right within: what is wanting is only that he honestly attend to it." Here I am going to examine in particular the arguments set forth by Rice, and I shall then turn in section IV to the similar but more extravagant claims made by certain psychologists.

Rice defends a variety of utilitarianism and tries to show that such a moral philosophy is grounded in our very human nature. Naturally the principle he has in mind as a test for our moral judgments and maxims is a utilitarian principle: that conduct is objectively right which in the circumstances produces the greatest happiness on the whole for all the people whose interests are involved. He admits that there are crucial subordinate principles, though he contends that they are probably best understood as implicitly contained in any fully adequate statement of the principle of utility. The principles he has in mind are those with which Sidgwick was so concerned: the smaller present good is not to be preferred to a greater future good; "one is morally bound to regard the good of another individual as one's own, except in

<sup>1</sup> P. B. Rice, *On the Knowledge of Good and Evil* (New York 1955); C. I. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (LaSalle, Illinois, 1945), and *The Nature and Ground of Right* (New York 1954); W. D. Falk, "Morality and Nature," in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 28 (September 1950) pp. 69-92.

so far as we judge it to be less, when impartially viewed, or less certainly knowable or attainable"; we should never allow arbitrary inequalities.

What grounds can Rice or anyone else have for claiming that such principles are based on human nature? What can it mean to claim that they are so grounded? Rice is perfectly clear that we cannot deduce or inductively infer such principles from factual statements asserting that man has such and such a nature. All such efforts, he agrees, "end in nothing." He argues, furthermore, that such principles are not analytic, and are not in any other way certain or self-evident. They can be neither confirmed nor disconfirmed. Thus we are back to the question how our general moral principles can be based on human nature. To see how they are related it is first necessary, in Rice's view, to see that these general principles help *define* what is to count as confirmation and disconfirmation in morality. Furthermore, it is important to realize that it is sometimes reasonable to believe principles that are not believed for a reason. Ultimate principles in any sphere cannot be proved—else they would not be ultimate—but it may well be that it is reasonable to accept them rather than some alternative candidates for ultimacy. Rice, like Mill, tries to give considerations indicating that these principles ought to be accepted, and it is his claim that such pragmatic justification, as he calls it, springs finally from our very nature as human beings: if a man sees clearly what he is like and how the world goes, it is humanly speaking impossible for him to deny such principles.

Let us assume for the sake of the argument that we are clear about how this pragmatic justification or vindication works. What evidence have we for claiming that all people accept these fundamental moral principles? Hindu mystics, some Calvinists, and Nietzscheans appear not to accept them. That there are only a few such people does not make their disagreement less important, for to simply disregard them would be to assume a kind of majoritarianism that could hardly be claimed as a moral principle

based on human nature. If, alternatively, we rule out such moral eccentrics by saying they are irrational or have a diseased moral conscience, we must—if we are appealing to human nature—show how our grounds for so ruling out such people are in turn based on strictly factual considerations about the nature of human nature, and not on our own prior moral conceptions. It is not at all apparent how this could be done. Suppose we say that all men who have not been confused have accepted the moral principles stated above as their basic moral principles. We must then be careful not to make our claim tautological by so defining “confused” that we would say a man is confused if he does not accept these principles. If we don’t trivialize our position in this way, what evidence do we have to support it? Is the man confused logically, factually, morally, or in some different way? Or is he confused in several or all ways at once?

If we say he is confused logically, what is his confusion? In rejecting such principles a man need not contradict himself: it is not at all like saying *p* and not-*p*. And in what way need he be mistaken about the facts? He may well understand that most people accept these principles; he may be quite aware that people will punish him if he does not act in accordance with them; he may be quite clear that social harmony depends on them; and finally, he may recognize vividly that, by acting in accordance with them, he and others could to the maximum degree possible satisfy their desires. But if he were a Hindu mystic he might not be concerned with social harmony, but would want to escape, as far as possible, from the “wheel of desire.” That is to say, a man may very well understand the factual consequences of not acting on those principles and still not choose to act on them. If he does this in a clear-minded way, how is he confused factually? On the other hand, if we say he is morally confused, we must be able to show why a man who clearly understands his own nature and the world must assent to the moral principles Rice asserted; and we must still demonstrate how these moral principles are vindicated

by an appeal to human nature. Rice has not shown us how to do this. We have yet to see how our morality is grounded in human nature and his is not; the basis for our assertion is simply that "the moral eccentric" does not accept our moral principles. We have morally disagreed with him and we have, in effect, justified certain moral conceptions by an appeal to other moral conceptions. But we have not done what we started out to do: we have not grounded morality in human nature.

If we now say that a man is irrational who does not accept Rice's principles, the relevant considerations are similar to those that apply in saying that such a man is confused. Doubtless it could be shown that people who do not act in accordance with such principles are those who act in a way that many would regard as mad. But "mad" functions here not only to classify but to give a *moral* mark. And again we are accepting the values of the majority, and perhaps a Western majority at that.

Let us even waive all these considerations as somehow too academic, and grant for the sake of argument that there is good evidence for saying that men who are not confused have accepted these principles. What follows? No normative principles follow directly—and Rice would not challenge that statement. He would presumably say that such evidence constitutes a *good reason* for accepting these principles and gives us a sound foundation for asserting that morality is based on human nature. But why is it a good reason? For it to be a good reason we must assume that what people generally value is the best thing to value. Such a claim is not self-evident, and again it is hardly the sort of statement we could confirm or disconfirm. Then why accept it? And in what way could it be said to substantiate the contention that morality is grounded in human nature?

Rice could answer this way: let us carefully qualify our above statement, so that we speak about what intelligent, well informed people prize or value when they understand very well the causes and consequences of achieving or acting on what they prize. We would then say that what people so situated prize is the thing we



should prize. It does not follow that it is valuable because they prize or value it, but their prizing or valuing it in such circumstances is as good a reason as one could ask for saying that what is taken to be of value under such conditions ought to be valued.<sup>2</sup> We can vindicate this contention by saying that if a person does not value what is generally so valued under such conditions, he will be sorry (or will not get what he desires, or will not be able to live the life he wants to live). This gives a clear meaning to the claim that morality is based on human nature, and it is in effect what Rice asserts when he makes that claim. If it is true that all (or even most) intelligent, well informed, non-confused, non-neurotic people value certain things, and that other people like them will regret it if they do not value the same sort of things, then it seems to me there is very good reason for saying that such things ought to be valued; and if this is so, we can reasonably say they are valued because we human beings have the nature we have. If we so interpret Rice, we can now say that he has given a sense to the contention that the vindication or pragmatic justification of morality lies in human nature. It seems to me that he has not been able to show either that non-confused men must accept his basic moral principles or that they will come to regret it if they do not accept them. But a careful examination of what his claim could come to shows that it is not entirely without point.

Yet there is a further consideration that makes such arguments not so decisive as commonsense would like to think they are. Even if it is true that men will regret that they did not act on such principles, it can be argued that we have a very shaky grip on what we want or what would make us happy. Sadism and masochism, it can be pointed out, are very pervasive; like love, they have many disguises. We are morally confused, and the propensity to evil

<sup>2</sup> To say that nothing could possibly count as a better reason, for nothing could possibly count as a reason at all, would be simply playing with words by defining "reason" in such a way that the term is inapplicable here. For an analysis of the protean senses of "reason" and an analysis of the senses in which it is relevant to morality, see my article, "'Appealing to Reason.'" in *Inquiry*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 1962) pp. 65-84.

runs deep in us all. There is a reasonable, non-metaphysical, non-mythical sense to the ancient talk of the sinfulness of man. Sinful man can find inner peace nowhere but in God. No man-centered, utilitarian ethic can possibly do. It is true that we cannot deduce that something is good or ought to be done from finding out there is a being whom some call God. We must antecedently have some understanding of what "good" means in order to know if what such a being wills is good.<sup>3</sup> But even with an understanding of the use of "good," we quickly come to recognize, if we are reflective, that we have only a fleeting understanding of what particular things and actions are good, though with God's grace the believer may increase his understanding and gain a slightly less precarious grasp on the nature of true virtue. What people want or prize, even when they are intelligent and fully informed, is not a good clue to what ought to be sought, because man is such a wretched and cruel creature.

I do not wish to deny that such claims are exuberant, to say the least, and that one could go on and press the believer to explain what he means by saying there is a God whom he accepts on faith. It may well be that some of his crucial claims are in an important sense unintelligible. But their unintelligibility would not be established by stating facts about the nature of human nature. Rice would presumably contend that most people would not accept such views if they were not confused. But unless we can show that such a religious moralist is confused in some non-moral sense of the word, we have simply begged the issue, for he may not care in the least whether on ordinary moral standards his beliefs are regarded as "confused." He might even claim that if his views are not accepted by most people, this is good evidence in support of them, for most people are beguiled by sin. And in any event, we have given no grounds for treating moral issues as questions that can, in effect, be decided by vote. Rice's defense from such a chal-

<sup>3</sup> See my papers, "Some Remarks on the Independence of Morality from Religion," in *Mind*, vol. 70, n.s., no. 278 (April 1961) pp. 175-86, and "Morality and God," in *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 47 (April 1962) pp. 129-37.

lenge could be that these religious moralists must be confused in their logic, or confused in some other non-moral sense. But in doing so, his appeal to human nature would have to be supplemented by powerful theoretical arguments that did not turn on an appeal to human nature.

### III

Even if it were established that we could vindicate the general principles Rice argues for by an appeal to human nature, this would not carry us nearly as far as we would like to go. Rice is aware that sometimes these principles themselves conflict. It is not always the case that what is in the best interests of an individual is what would give the greatest amount of happiness all around. And our principles of justice or fairness need not always square with what would be for the greatest good of the greatest number. We are committed to the view that human life (ours and others) is precious, yet sometimes in the interest of morality—a quite human morality—people must be sacrificed; and, given the world as it is, this remains true under any version of the utilitarian principle. In such contexts it is not clear why the people sacrificed are not being treated only as means. Here we find some of the crucial tensions and even conflicts of the moral life. It is not evident how a further understanding of the nature of human nature, and of moral principles based on it, would give us grounds for resolving these tensions and conflicts in a rational manner or enable us to know what we ought to do in a large number of quite determinate circumstances.

Take, for example, two reasonably typical moral conflicts that arise in C. P. Snow's novel, *The Masters*. The old Master of the college is discovered to have an incurable cancer. He has only a few months to live. The doctors advise not telling him until it is absolutely necessary, and letting him think he is going to get well. His wife agrees, his daughter does not. The fellows of the college take various sides on this issue. Now what should they have done? How could very general principles, like utility, fair-

ness, the categorical imperative, or the injunction to seek a greater future good rather than a smaller present good, be of much aid in resolving what they should do? One immediately thinks of what one would want for oneself; and what one would want for oneself, others, if they were like one, ought to be allowed as well. Since this is so, knowledge of what people would want in such circumstances would be of help in deciding what to do. But we feel bewildered by such an issue because, if we are honest and if we are reflective, we are not at all sure what we would want, and we tend to feel there could be very considerable differences in what others might want (they would not then, of course, be "like us"). The knowledge that there are general principles grounded in our very human nature is not of much help in such a situation. But other facts about the human animal would be: if we had some insight into what we and others would really want in such circumstances, we would be in a much better position to decide what ought to be done.

The second moral issue arises during the manoeuvring to gain votes in the election of a new Master. The election is going to be close, and one group of fellows is trying to round up enough votes for their candidate. They discuss whether they ought to ask the youngest fellow, John Luke, to join them, but they realize that since he is a scientist and his seniors, who are scientists, are in the other camp, his joining them might jeopardize his future. Yet his vote is crucial, and the issue over who is to be the new Master is an important one for all involved. Again there is considerable perplexity about what should be done. It does not look as if our general principles would be of much help here either. It is indeed plain enough that the Masters reason in accordance with them. They attempt to make an impartial appraisal; and, in their deliberations, considerations of fairness and utility come to the fore. But such considerations take us only a little way; they give only very general guidance; the Masters cannot determine from them what they ought to do in this situation. It seems to me reasonable to assume, however, that certain factual knowledge

about human nature would be very important in deciding what to do. As moral agents we would want to have some knowledge of what it would be like to be in Luke's shoes, what we and others would probably want if we were so placed, and a knowledge of what the people were like who could hurt Luke's chances.

In solving such typical moral problems, it is evident that a solid understanding of human nature is a *sine qua non*. Given the ground rules of morality, we know very well what *kind* of factual considerations are important and what are not, and we know that if certain things are true we should act in one way, and if something else is true we should act in another. But we first need the ground rules or basic principles of morality. And when we speak of grounding such basic rules or principles on human nature, it seems to me that we are, to say the least, on slippery ground. What is more to the point here, even if we do establish that general moral principles are grounded in human nature, we will not have shown that from such a general knowledge of human nature we can discover how to resolve such harassing, specific moral conflicts.

Thus there are major difficulties in Rice's position, though it does not seem to me so untenable as is assumed by many analytic philosophers who are impressed by the force of the naturalistic fallacy. In short, it is right to claim, as Rice does (p. 254), that the general principles he describes, taken jointly, partially specify what is meant by reasonableness in morals. It does not seem to me that he or anyone else has shown this reasonableness to have its basis in human nature. Perhaps it does. But in any event, exactly what is being claimed here needs careful elucidation, and then it must be shown that what is claimed is indeed so. A conventionalist could contend, against Rice, that in this context the appropriate use of "reasonableness" contains an irreducible moral element.<sup>4</sup> What facts about the human psyche could Rice point to that would meet such a conventionalist claim? I do not know

<sup>4</sup> See J. J. C. Smart, "Reason and Conduct," in *Philosophy*, vol. 25 (1950) pp. 209-24.

what they are. Again, it seems to me that to meet such an objection Rice would have to supplement his appeal to human nature by powerful theoretical arguments. With such supplementation the appeal to human nature would become at once less controversial and less significant.

## IV

I have discussed what I take to be an intelligent attempt to show how our moral beliefs are grounded in human nature. I have tried to show that there are crucial ambiguities in such a claim, and to illustrate how a linguistic analysis could help clarify the issues. But it seems to me also true that a lot of the work of linguistic philosophy consists in a perennial cleaning of the Augean stables. Such a task is indeed unending. In moral philosophy there is a prodigious amount of just this sort of work to be done. A lot of talk about grounding our values in human nature (to cite a relevant case) is sheer gobbledegook, though in some quarters it is honored as profound revelation of the human condition. I would like to illustrate very briefly what I mean, and to indicate how analysis can be of help in such stable cleaning. Here it is not so much a matter of bringing to light the nonsense in a piece of disguised nonsense as it is of making what *should* be recognized as plain nonsense plainer still.

Some paradigm cases of the kind of nonsense I am talking about occur in a recent volume edited by Abraham Maslow.<sup>5</sup> In the preface we learn (p. viii) that "the ultimate disease of our time is valuelessness," and that "all the traditional value systems ever offered to mankind have in effect proved to be failures." Our present state of anxiety over values proves this to be so. We need to work out a new system of values. It is the belief of many of the authors of this volume that a new scientific morality can be constructed that is "based squarely upon valid knowledge of the nature of man, of his society, and of his works."

Paul Tillich, as one of the volume's heretical contributors,

<sup>5</sup> Abraham Maslow, ed., *New Knowledge in Human Values* (New York 1959).

agrees that we are threatened with valuelessness, but he, of course, thinks that a scientific morality is a will-of-the-wisp. Nonetheless, he shares an important assumption with the orthodox contributors: that a moral system can be built on a proper understanding of the nature of man and his relationship to reality. There can be, according to Tillich (pp. 193–95), a science of value in the sense that there can be an “ontology of value.” Values must be *derived* “from essential structures of being which appear within existence though in a state of distortion.” “Ethical values are commands derived from the essential nature of man.” “The moral law is man’s own essential nature appearing as commanding authority.” “Value is man’s essential being.”

Martin Buber makes similar assumptions, though his language is not quite so elaborate. The truest source for our knowledge of good and evil is our own awareness of what “in truth” we were intended to be. This is a fundamental awareness inherent in all of us, though some of us have it to a far greater degree than others.<sup>6</sup> And Buber, like Tillich, goes on to add that there can be no full knowledge of one’s self without “a personal relationship with the Absolute.” Without this encounter we cannot understand our true condition, the essential nature of our being. Without God man lives with a sense of estrangement or alienation, for he realizes his “essential nature” only when he enters into a conscious, freely chosen relation with God, “the ground of being.”

As compared with theologians like Tillich and Buber, one might expect scientists to be a little more circumspect about what they claim, but Abraham Maslow and Erich Fromm, while leaving out God, set forth equally vaporous arguments about man’s purpose and “essential humanness.” We learn from Fromm’s “Values, Psychology and Human Existence,” his contribution to the Maslow volume, that man is alienated from himself. Man has made himself into a kind of thing. To achieve his wellbeing—his unique human flourishing—he must become creative, aware, and responsive (p. 163). Man, Fromm tells us, must live in accordance

<sup>6</sup> Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God* (New York 1954) p. 95.

with the very nature of life. Of course if he cannot help living this way it is senseless to tell him that he ought to. Fromm, however, has persuasively defined "life" in such a way that not all ways of living, but only some preferred ways, are in accordance with the "very nature of life." It is like Orwell's "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than other animals." The psychoanalyst Fromm shares with the religious existentialists the assumption not only that our lives have purpose, in the sense that we pursue aims, intentions, goals, and the like, but also that there is a purpose of life itself. This purpose consists in fulfilling our *telos* or essential nature.

The thinly veiled theological orientation is even more explicit in the work of the psychologist Maslow. In "Psychological Data and Value Theory," his own essay in the collection he edited, Maslow tells us (p. 121) that to find out how we ought to live we cannot simply take a Gallup Poll and determine what people prize and prefer, but we should consider what healthy human beings choose, prefer, and judge to be good. Obviously we must be careful about what we mean by "healthy human beings," for after all, storm troopers were characteristically healthy human beings, in one plain sense of the term. We must include something called "psychological health," or, alternatively, "self-actualization," integration, autonomy, or self-realization. Maslow holds that there is a central, cross-culturally valid sense of "psychological health," and that it is the conscious or unconscious aim of all men. In his words, it "amounts to realizing the potentialities of the person, that is to say, becoming fully human, everything that the person *can* become."

Maslow, like Fromm, assumes that not all life is in accord with the very nature of life, but that if we will realize our many potentialities we will become truly human. We have many potentialities; we can become many things—not only farmers, lawyers, or physicians, but bullies, liars, and pornography collectors as well. Maslow and Fromm, however, have only certain potentialities in mind. They plug for the development of our potentialities for



love, constructive creative activity, solidarity with our fellowman and with nature, a keen sense of personal identity, knowledge, rationality, and devotion. These are indeed essential human virtues, and as such I have nothing to say against them. If we agree with Stuart Hampshire, as I do, that any morality must contain, as a very central notion, a certain conception of what man should be, such virtues certainly should be part of it.<sup>7</sup> But to pick out these particular potentialities as those that are peculiarly human is, in effect, to apply a moral ruler to human nature, rather than to determine what is moral by finding out what is distinctively human.

Fromm and Maslow think they are engaging in the latter activity. They think that with our brand-new knowledge of man we are at last well on our way to putting morality on a strictly scientific footing: we can objectively and scientifically judge which moral codes are best by finding out which of them tend to actualize all the potentialities that define "a human being." We all yearn to actualize these potentialities, and thus we all long to become more human. Actually, however, all we can say from a scientific point of view is that there are many different human potentialities, and that, given different environmental, cultural, physiological, and psychological conditions, different potentialities will be realized. If we hold that the realization of certain potentialities is "more human" than the realization of others, we must mean, provided we intend to say anything at all scientific, that the former are more frequent, have a greater statistical distribution, are more distinctive of the human animal, or tend to be more persistent. But when Maslow tells us (p. 124) "It is true that human beings strive perpetually toward ultimate humanness," he has long ago left anything remotely like science, and is in effect advocating his own rather occult brand of metaphysical or theological morality. In a metaphorical description (p. 124) that strikes me as being rather sexual, Maslow tells us that "We are again and again rewarded for good-becoming by transient states of absolute Being,

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (London 1959).

which I have summarized as peak-experiences . . . each of which are absolute delights perfect in themselves." A healthy man, apparently, has many of these peak-experiences; and this, we are told, is "healthy growth." All of us, he attests, have tendencies to grow in this direction. We human beings are so constructed that we press "toward fuller and fuller being," that is, we are driven to attain greater "self-actualization."

Even if we were to find certain characteristics that all humans, and only humans, possess or yearn to possess, this of itself would not establish anything of a normative nature; it would not follow that it would be a good thing to have that yearning satisfied. We often "yearn" for what is not good. Moreover, it may be, as D. H. Lawrence would advocate, that we ought to try submerging those traits that are peculiarly human and try identifying ourselves more closely with our animal ancestry. It may be that we ought to try to develop potentialities not yet distinctive of the human animal. In assuming that there are certain imposed limits that define "humanness," the thinkers I have been talking about have been tripped up by a faulty analogy, whose ancient lineage does not make it any the less faulty.

Fromm and Maslow, like Tillich and Buber, assume that life will be without sense or point if there is not some core to the human onion. Tillich and Buber look for man's purpose in his relationship to what Buber calls the Absolute and what Tillich calls "the ground of Being." But Fromm and Maslow, unwittingly treating man as a kind of gadget or homunculus, try to find a function that gives man a purpose in the way a corkscrew has a purpose. There is no reason whatever to believe man has such a purpose or function. We know or can find out what gadgets or physical organs are for, and we can sometimes sensibly complain that they are not functioning in the way they were made to function. In talking about a man we cannot sensibly speak in this way. We can of course say he is sick, neurotic, or psychotic, but can we say he is morally bad or evil because he doesn't function properly, as we say he has a bad electric razor or bad heart because they

don't function properly? Unless we assume esoteric doctrines like those of the prophetic religions or adopt some whimsical kind of metaphysics, we in reason ought to deny, and, morally speaking, we can deny indignantly, that people exist *for* anything. Man can *give* his life a purpose, or find for himself and perhaps for others a purpose *in* life even though we cannot properly speak of "the purpose of life."

To deny that we can properly speak of "the purpose of life" raises for Tillich and Buber the specter of nihilism, for Fromm and Maslow the threat of valuelessness. Like disappointed theologians, Sartre and Camus add their voices to this hue and cry. If man has no essential nature, his lot on this earth is absurd, and one can only arbitrarily choose one's values and in stoic fashion try to live by them. But there is no need to be driven to romantic despair with Sartre and Camus, or to a leap of faith or an obscurantist ontology with Buber and Tillich, or, with Fromm and Maslow, into a pseudo-empirical search for some illusive "ultimate authentic humanness." Because man does not have a function as a bottle-opener or a heart has one, and thus *in this sense* lacks a purpose, it does *not* follow that in another sense man's acts are without purpose or man's life is purposeless. Sometimes the word "purpose" refers to the function of an organ or an artifact, and sometimes the word "purpose" connotes the aims, intentions, interests, and goals of human beings. If the traditional theistic picture is false, or in some appropriate connotation senseless, then it is true that man does not have a purpose—and life is purposeless—in this *first* sense, but it does not at all follow that our lives are without purpose in the *second* sense. It is in this second sense that it is important for life to have a purpose, for a life without a purpose *in this sense* would be a life without aim or point. But that life lacks purpose in the first sense does not make it aimless or pointless. In fact, it would be quite plausible to argue that a life *without* purpose in this first sense would be a better life; if, like artifacts, we are designed for some end, it becomes very questionable whether, in certain basic

respects, we have any freedom at all, for we are then a kind of God-made puppet or Frankenstein-monster moving toward ends we did not choose.<sup>8</sup>

Tillich and Buber, Fromm and Maslow, Sartre and Camus are led into "pointless laments" because they fail to take proper note of the workings of our language. Failing to take note of what in an operative sense they must already understand, they make for themselves and for us a needless bewilderment. Attention to our language can topple such houses of cards that stand in the way of genuine knowledge. To be sure, clarity is not enough, and there are other concerns in the life of reason. But in areas like those we have been discussing, clarity is a necessary condition to any fruitful work.

<sup>8</sup> For many of these ideas I am indebted to Kurt Baier; see the pamphlet containing his inaugural lecture, "The Meaning of Life" (Canberra, Australia, 1957).