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Introduction to Ethics

Lecture Notes

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Contents

1. Introduction

In the *Philosophical Investigations* Ludwig Wittgenstein writes **that philosophical problems have the form "I do not know my way about."** (*PI* 123) Philosophy, this suggests, has its origin in a loss of way or a dislocation.

To be sure, not all problems having this form are therefore already philosophical. For example, to have lost one's way in a strange city hardly suffices to make one a philosopher? But why not? I would suggest that one reason is that in such cases our disorientation is only superficial: In a deeper sense we still know our place and what to do. Thus we could ask someone for help or look for a map. The problem poses itself against a background of unquestioned ways of doing things, on which we can fall back in our attempt to discover where we are and where we should be going.

The same holds for countless other situations: say your computer gives you trouble and you are at a total loss as to what to do; or you are on a sailboat for the first time and someone shouts at you to do something, speaks of sheets, and all you can think of are bed-sheets; or you are supposed to prove a theorem in geometry and don't have a clue as to how to begin. But it such cases there are those more expert than we are, persons to whom we can turn to for help, who will helps us find our way, will give us, so to speak, the right map.

Philosophical problems have no such background. The loss of way is here of a more radical nature. They emerge only where a person has begun to question the entire place assigned to him by his history, his society, and searching for firmer ground demands that this place be more securely established. The fundamental question of philosophy so understood is: what is our place and what should it be? This of course is to say that at the very center of philosophy we find an ethical concern. What I have called the fundamental question of philosophy is more specifically the fundamental question of ethics.

I pointed out that this question presupposes a certain dislocation. First of all and most of the time we find ourselves caught up in situations that suggest to us what is to be done. Family, society, common sense have provided us with maps that we accept more or less unquestioningly. We do what one does and do not worry much about it. And yet there are times when long established and taken for granted convictions disintegrate, when it becomes more and more difficult to rely on a common sense. Such disintegration invites reflection; reflection in turn may compound such disintegration as it lets us see what happens to be our way of life as precisely that: as just happening to be our way of life, as only one possible way of life. But there are of course other possibilities; we all have been placed on certain tracks, but there are other tracks. Perhaps some of these should be preferred. **Reflection** has thus both a **dislocating** and a **liberating** power. **Freedom and loss of way belong together**. Reflection thus lets us face the future as a future for which we, too, bear responsibility. A certain dislocation is inseparable from facing the future responsibly. But the more pronounced the dislocation, the more insistent the question: what should I do? will present itself. Freedom itself thus leads us to what I have called the fundamental question. Ethics, which traditionally has been understood as that part of philosophy that is concerned with what is morally right or wrong, good or bad, addresses itself to that question.

I have suggested that to face the future is to face different possibilities. We consequently face the challenge of having to choose among them, although often the choice seems to us so obvious or so insignificant that it hardly deserves to be called a choice. Even then our actions will bear witness to the criteria we use in arriving at our decision. These criteria will tend to form a pattern; together they govern a way of life. To put this point differently: in our actions we all betray what I want to call an **ideal image**, by which we measure our own situation. This ideal image may not be very coherent; it may not be clearly articulated. It may present itself in the form of persons we admire; or we may find it in literature; or in religion. Or it may be given to us by what

one says and does. But be this as it may: we all have some idea of what we take to be the good life. As long as someone is secure in such an idea, he or she will find little need to question it, will feel little need for philosophy. Such a person may well find philosophy unsettling, for philosophy bids us question that idea, attempts to measure it by the ideal that should govern human conduct. This attempt can of course succeed only **if there is indeed such an ideal to be discovered**. Is there? That question haunts what I have called philosophy's fundamental question. Philosophers have disagreed on this point. Perhaps the search for an ideal image or a set of values that would furnish all human behavior with the right measure is vain. Perhaps all such ideals are human creations that differ given different circumstances. Perhaps the demand for norms that are more than human inventions and conventions is vain and all ideals are only illusions. But even if this should be the case, it would still be true that human beings need ideals, and if these ideals cannot be discovered, they must be created.

To speak of an ideal image of human being or of values presupposes a distinction between **what human beings are** and what they **are to be,** between **what** as a matter of fact **is the case** and **what ought to be**, between the **actual** and the **ideal**. This implies a radical distinction between **science** and **moral philosophy**: Science is concerned with what is the case, not with what ought to be. Science describes and predicts, but as science it does not evaluate. When science uses language that pleads for a particular way of life it speak no longer just as science. Whenever it does so we have to be especially careful: there are words that invite a blurring of descriptive and normative concerns — take the word "normal." Normal is a descriptive term, but we all tend to think that normal behavior is also good, where the fact that the related term "average" tends to carry slightly negative connotations — say someone says of some politician that he is of average intelligence — should make us think. "Normal" has acquired the overtone of "normative." But what is the moral significance of the "normal"?

I have pointed to the distinction between what is and what ought to be. It makes little sense to say you ought to be of a certain height, ought to possess a certain I.Q., ought to be beautiful, etc. It makes little sense because **what I ought to be** must be something that **I can choose to become**. That is to say it must point to a **real possibility** and one that **I am free to choose**. But such choice is not arbitrary; it requires criteria or values if it is to be responsible and not blind. Social science can describe values that are held by certain individuals, but it cannot establish their validity. This is one task that it must necessarily bracket. It is to this dimension that what I called in the beginning the fundamental question of philosophy points.

A better candidate for answering that question is **religion**. Traditionally religions have given answers to such questions as: What constitutes the good life? or What ought to be done? And once, no doubt, and in many parts of the world even today, such answers were felt to be so securely established as to place them beyond philosophical questioning. In such cases philosophy, to the extent that it existed at all, had to serve theology. But to many today faith that can grant such security is no longer a living reality. We have become too free, perhaps too questioning, for such a faith. We have become uncertain about the moral maps we have inherited. To the extent that what Nietzsche calls "the death of God" has become reality, the traditional value system has lost founder and foundation. This has given a new urgency to moral philosophy or ethics, which is often called upon to assume functions that religion once fulfilled.

I have suggested that when we use a word like "ought" we presuppose a separation between what is and what should be, between the actual and the ideal. This again suggests that what is is experienced as in some sense deficient or lacking. The actual is given its measure in the ideal, but this is also to say that it in some sense lacks the ideal. To put this point differently: as a free, responsible agent the human being experiences himself as a being facing tasks, and this is also to say, experiences himself as in some sense incomplete, lacking. Trying to overcome this lack, this incompleteness,

the human being tries to become what he should be, tries to gain what is sometimes called his or her true self. In this sense we may be said to be in search of personal satisfaction, where such satisfaction is sought precisely in the coincidence of actual and ideal, when we exist as we ought to exist. But so understood such satisfaction is an empty, formal notion. It permits many different interpretations. Different interpretations in turn will provide different answers to my fundamental question.

In this course we shall examine in some detail three such answers.

One answer is given by **Jeremy Bentham**. Satisfaction is here understood as pleasure, where pleasure is thought of first of all as the pleasure of the senses. Pleasure is here made the ground of right conduct. Crudely put: an action is morally right if the doing of it is pleasant, where it is important to keep in mind the consequences of such an action, which may be good or bad for oneself and for others. Someone who disregards the second, who is only concerned with his own pleasures, is an **egoist**, while a **utilitarian** will insist that we heed the general good.

A very different answer is given by **Immanuel Kant**. Kant insists that a person is truly himself only when he subjects his natural being with its desires and pleasures to reason, the particular to the universal. On this view an action can be called right only if it is governed by a rule that can without contradiction be universalized, that is to say, by a rule that does not give undue significance to a person's particular desires and situation, that disregards his self-interest. Kant, we can say, places the universal higher than the particular. Lying, e g. has to be condemned on such a view, for while I may well find it in my interest to lie in particular situation, I cannot make lying into a universal rule without destroying the very basis of community. The very point of lying would be lost, were all people to lie most of the time..

A third answer to our fundamental question is given by **Søren Kierkegaard**. On his view, a human being can truly gain himself only when recognizing that human reason is not enough, that he must ground his existence in God. On this view only a return to

faith will let us find our place and quiet that restless questioning that leads one to philosophy in the first place. Reason is here subordinated to faith, and since faith is always a particular faith, the faith of an individual here and now, we can say that the particular is here placed above the universal, although it is of course no longer the particularity of pleasure.

Our study of these three thinkers, each representative of views that remain very much alive and the subject of vigorous debate, is framed by examinations of a very different nature:

Plato stands at the very beginning of moral philosophy. I shall use four of his dialogues to develop some of the main themes that have occupied subsequent philosophers and that will occupy us in this course. But Plato's dialogues also present us with a concrete example of moral behavior. Socrates remains true to what he considers the good life, even if this commitment leads him to his death.

The four dialogues that we shall read are tied together in that they have the death of Socrates for their common theme. One question they raise is whether Socrates is deluded, whether his death has indeed an exemplary significance as so many have thought. Our first response is likely to be unreflective and emotional. We may applaud his decision not to run away and escape from prison and thereby save himself or we may feel that he was a fool not to seize the opportunity to run when it was offered to him. We shall at any rate try to understand how Plato and his Socrates understood the necessity of this death.

Throughout this course we shall return to this death and its continuing challenge. It will provide our examination of the views of Bentham, Kant, and Kierkegaard with something like a concrete measure.

Nietzsche, the last thinker we will be studying, may be thought of as inverting Plato. Nietzsche will claim that Plato placed all of Western philosophy on the wrong track. Moral perfection was sought in the attainment of some ideal, satisfaction in the

coincidence of what is and what ought to be, in the elimination of the tension between is and ought. On Nietzsche's view moral perfection thus understood is a false goal. According to Nietzsche we should not strive for some state of satisfaction, but learn to accept the ever shifting tensions between what is and what supposedly should be, between the actual and ever shifting ideals, ideals that are not discovered or given, but are constructed, our own creations. On this view what I have called the fundamental question of moral philosophy cannot and should not be given a definitive answer, but must be kept open.

I suggested that moral inquiry has its origin in a dislocation, in a loss of way that is closely tied to a willingness to question inherited beliefs. The first Platonic dialogue we shall turn to, the ***Euthyphro***, gives us a concrete example of such questioning. It thus provides a good introduction to an ***Introduction to Ethics***.

2. Plato's *Euthyphro*

In my first lecture I indicated briefly what I hoped to accomplish in this course. I suggested that moral inquiry has its origin in a certain dislocation; that it presupposes a loss of way. Plato's *Euthyphro* allows me to develop this theme. Not surprisingly, in this case, too, dislocation is the result of the disintegration of a traditional belief system of which the inherited religion is an essential part. In reading this dialogue, in reading any of Plato's dialogues, it is important not to take the arguments out of the context in which they appear. What Socrates and Euthyphro have to say about piety is given special weight by the fact that Socrates has been indicted for impiety, that is why he is 'waiting about the porch of the King Archon ," while Euthyphro is there, because, out of his own sense of what piety demands, he is prosecuting his father.

But let us take a still wider context: we find ourselves in Greece, in Athens. The year is 399 B. C. The Peloponnesian war (431-404 B. C.) had been over for just five years. The Athenians had suffered total defeat and lost their foreign possessions, including the island of Naxos, where the deed for which Euthyphro is supposedly prosecuting his father is said to have occurred, which would mean that it must have happened some time before 404 BC, a time gap that raises the question whether Plato wanted the reader to understand this dialogue as a report of something that actually happened. As a result of its defeat the fortifications of Athens had been razed. The tyranny of the Thirty followed, an oligarchy that had been set up by the Spartans. Later this government was overthrown by democratic and anti-Spartan elements. We find **Anytus**, one of the most prominent and honest of these politicians, among Socrates accusers. And one can understand his uneasiness concerning Socrates' activities: look at whom Socrates had taught: **Alcibiades**, who, more than any other Athenian, was responsible for the disastrous outcome of the war, who had led Athens to embark on the disastrous Syracusan expedition (415-413 B. C.), had been charged with having enacted a

profane mockery of the Eleusinian mysteries, and was, probably unjustly, suspected of having been involved in the mutilation of the Hermae, sacred figures that stood at the entrances of temples and many homes. When recalled to Athens to defend himself, he went over to join the Spartan cause, only to have to leave Sparta, in part because he was suspected of having seduced the Spartan queen and fathered her child. He then sought refuge with the Persians, only to be recalled to Athens by his political allies. In the end he was forced to leave Athens once again. We don't quite know how he died.

Alcibiades may well have been the best known of Socrates's young admirers. Another student was **Critias**, the leader of the Thirty Tyrants, who had instituted a reign of terror that lasted less than a year, but certainly was well remembered by all concerned. Plato himself had been invited to join the tyrannical regime, but wisely declined the invitation. The situation in 399 must have remained very tense. Athens continued to be at the mercy of Sparta; a longing for the good old days when Athens was the cultural and political leader of Greece must have been widespread. It is important to keep this situation in mind. It warns us not to see the conflict between Socrates and his accusers in too black and white terms. Plato's positive portrayal of Socrates should thus not completely drown out the more negative portrayal we have been given by the poet **Aristophanes**.

But let us turn to the beginning of the dialogue. Euthyphro and Socrates meet on the porch of the king archon's hall, where "king" is the archaic title of the magistrate charged with jurisdiction over crimes relating to the religion of the state. Euthyphro expresses surprise to see Socrates. Socrates's more usual home is the Lyceum, a gymnasium, where he is usually found engaging the young aristocrats of Athens in dialogue. Socrates is thus not in his usual environment.

If Socrates appears on the Porch of the Hall of the King it is because he has been accused, while Euthyphro is there as accuser. Socrates has been charged by a certain Meletus, a poet as we learn later, with **corrupting the young and of inventing new gods**

and of refusing to honor the old gods. Euthyphro is quick to sympathize with Socrates: aren't they both misunderstood by the public, out of place because of their particularly intimate relationship to the divine. Two pious men, opposed to the impious many. Euthyphro considers himself an inspired prophet, indeed he proudly claims never to have foretold anything that did not come to pass. Of Socrates Euthyphro has heard that he has a divine guide. In other dialogues, too, we hear of this guide, a warning voice from within or above that allows us to speak of Socratic piety.

Worth noting is that Euthyphro suspects Meletus of undermining the foundation of the state, while Meletus himself of course will claim that it is Socrates, who is doing the undermining. If Euthyphro thinks himself and Socrates alike in their special relationship to the divine, he also thinks that they are alike in not being part of the crowd. He suggests that they should meet them boldly and not fear their laughter (3). Socrates replies that it is not their laughter he fears, indeed he would enjoy that, if that were all. But of course it isn't. Socrates love of engaging others in conversation without expecting a financial reward has become a nuisance.

When Euthyphro suggests that nothing will come of Socrates's trial (3), proving himself a bad prophet by refuting his earlier claim that he had never foretold something that did not come to pass. When he expresses the conviction that he, too, will be successful, Socrates asks him about the nature of his suit. Euthyphro is suing his father for murder. One of Euthyphro's servants had killed a slave in a drunken stupor. His father had then seized the man, bound him, and thrown him into a ditch, sending to Athens to ask the priest what should be done. Note what the father does: he asks a far-off representative of the divine for help. It is hardly surprising that the sought for advice came too late: the man in the ditch had died. So Euthyphro accuses his father of murder, not afraid to challenge a tradition that considers a suit against one's father and especially under such circumstances an impious act.

What is the point of this introduction? Note how uncertain the meaning of the term "piety" has become. Piety for the Greeks had meant not a subjective attitude of mind, but the right conduct of human beings in relation to the gods, and as parts of family and community. The very fact of Euthyphro's suit shows that in this sense "piety" has lost its hold on him. We are not surprised to learn that the common Athenian thinks him mad to accuse his father. But there is something very modern about his insistence that it makes no difference whether the murdered man is a stranger or not, no difference either that he is accusing his own father.

> You amuse me Socrates. What difference does it make whether the murdered man were a relative or a stranger? The only question you have to ask is, did the murderer kill justly or not? (4)

If the killing is unjust, the killer must be indicted. Euthyphro's self-professed piety betrays the loss of traditional piety and raises the question: what is piety.

Euthyphro of course would not admit to a loss of piety. Quite the opposite: he is a self-proclaimed paragon of piety, someone who has made piety his profession, who considers himself a divinely inspired prophet or priest, translating the story into our age we might say, a self-appointed minister of sorts, a self-styled expert in matters of piety and impiety. Socrates seizes on this and ironically suggests that in that case, he, Socrates, although much older, should become the student of Euthyphro. Then he could tell Meletus that he had learned form Euthyphro all that there is to know about piety, and if this should prove not acceptable to Meletus, he could accuse Euthyphro for corrupting Socrates. So Socrates asks Euthyphro: **what is piety?** The irony is lost on Euthyphro. Vain and rather flattered he is eager to answer.

1. The first answer is: "**piety means prosecuting the unjust individual, … as I am doing know**." (5) The standard is here Euthyphro's personal conviction. Euthyphro makes himself the measure of right conduct. He knows that he is right. Almost immediately he supports such conviction with stories people tell about the gods. Did

Zeus not bind his father Cronos for devouring his children, and had not Cronos castrated his father. A mythic worldview is invoked. The question is whether this world view is still believable. Socrates, at any rate, finds these stories difficult to believe, and he suggests that this may be one reason why he is accused. But presumably the same would have been true of most educated Athenians: the stories told about the gods had become incredible. The old myths have lost their power, have become fairytales. They can no longer be appealed to to legitimate one's actions. They no longer provide orientation. But disorientation requires reorientation. This is the task of the philosopher.

Euthyphro of course would deny that the old myths have lost their power and when Socrates asks Euthyphro whether he really believes these stories, Euthyphro replies that he certainly does and is eager to relate many more amazing things. Euthyphro is at home in the literature of the old religion. But it is just this that lets his denial ring hollow: there is no living experience behind his words. Religiosity has taken the place of living religion.

But Socrates returns to the question: what is piety, what is its idea or essence? Euthyphro has given only an example of what he considers a pious action. But what makes the action pious? The divine paradigm? Cronos castrated his father, is that reason to do the same? This would indeed make the pious act a repetition of a divine archetypal action, but this can hardly be what Euthyphro has in mind.

2. Euthyphro then offers his second definition: **what is pleasing to the gods is pious**. (7) There is an immediate difficulty with this definition: if the gods quarrel, as Euthyphro had affirmed, will they not also disagree on what they find pleasing? For example, in the *Iliad* Hera and Aphrodite find very different things pleasing. And we should not find this surprising: the former is associated with the power that presides over the family order, the second with the power that manifests itself in blind sexual attraction. But in Plato's *Euthyphro* no attempt is made examine the mythic worldview. The age of myth has perished. That is part of the setting of this dialogue. Euthyphro's self-

proclaimed piety with its unthinking invocation of inherited narratives is a product of this decay.

In response to Socrates's challenge, Euthyphro modifies his definition: **what all the gods find pleasing is pious**. (9) Impiety is what they all hate. And they all agree with Euthyphro: someone who has unjustly killed a human being must be punished. But when is killing just or unjust? Where do we find the measure? How does Euthyphro know what all the gods agree on? Where is the proof? Euthyphro tries to evade the question and such evasiveness is characteristic of Euthyphro, who has no firm ground to stand on.

But suppose we do know that piety is loved by all the gods. Do we know therefore what piety is? **Do the gods love piety because it is pious or is it pious because the gods love it**? (10) With this Socrates attempts to push beyond the mythic world-view. At issue is what takes precedence. If, as Socrates and Euthyphro evidently agree, the gods love piety because it is pious, then its being is independent of the fact that the gods love it. On this Socrates and Euthyphro agree. But this is to say that piety is piety regardless of whether the gods love it. But what then is it?

At this point there is an interesting interlude. Euthyphro, rather confused by this time, remarks on the fact that their statements are not standing still, they are going in a circle. Socrates then links Euthyphro to his ancestor Daedalus, who is said to have created statues that would not stand still. Euthyphro suggests that this is really the fault of Socrates, it is really he who is like Daedalus. And in some sense Euthyphro is right: it is Socrates' questioning that prevents Euthyphro's statements from standing still. Why do the statements not stay put? Euthyphro's convictions about piety, obvious as they seem to him, have not been thought through. He still appeals to the traditional stories about the gods, but the mythic ground that supported them has vanished. No longer does traditional religion provide a clear map. This creates a need for laying a new ground. Again: disorientation calls for reorientation.

3. After this interlude a new beginning is made that suggests that we might really get somewhere: Piety is linked to justice and with quite a bit of help Euthyphro comes up with a definition Socrates thinks a good one: **Righteousness and piety are that part of justice which has to do with the careful attention which ought to be paid to the gods.** (12) As in a logical exercise, we point to a general notion, here that of justice, and then add a more specific determination that determines what is to be defined. Human beings have thus been defined as animals that have reason.

To understands this definition it is of course necessary to know what is meant by justice and by the care that is to be given to the gods. The former Plato links to the will and ability to treat all things as their essence demands, but this is not pursued here. Socrates inquires about the latter, about the care to be given to the gods. **What kind of careful attention** is involved? We know what it is to take care of children or of animals? Is our care of the gods of that sort? Do they benefit from our care? Are they improved? The mythic language is rationalized, brought down to earth, and as a result becomes silly. Do the gods need improvement? Does divine perfection not rule this out? Euthyphro resists these questions and suggests that the service in question is like the service slaves should give their masters. Such service is said to produce wonderful results and to preserve the state and families:

> if any man knows that his words and actions in prayer and sacrifice are acceptable to the gods, that is what is pious; and it preserves the state as it does private families. But the opposite of what is acceptable to the gods is sacrilegious, and this is that undermines and destroys everything. (14)

One thinks of Alcibiades and the destruction of Athens.

At this point Euthyphro comes as close as he does in this dialogue to the essence of piety. Socrates calls this to Euthyphro's and to our attention, when he says:

> Just now, when you were on the very point of telling me what I wanted to know, you stopped short. (14)

This is more than just irony: True piety does lie in opening oneself to and in serving a divine power transcending human beings. In such service human beings gain their measure. Such a measure allows them to form genuine communities. That is not only Euthyphro's, but also Plato's conviction.

Why then does Euthyphro stop short? One reason is that he no longer has an adequate idea of the gods. His service has become pretty much a lip service to stories that are no longer being taken seriously. No longer can such stories give our existence a measure. This is apparent in the course the discussion takes after this high point. Pushed by Socrates, Euthyphro defines piety as **a science of prayer and sacrifice**. (14) The pious man goes through the motions demanded by a religion that has ceased to be a living reality. Euthyphro goes on to explain that the pious person asks the gods for certain favors and pays them back with prayer and sacrifice, a kind of business transaction. The problem with this **economic understanding of piety** is that it makes the relationship between gods and men too symmetrical. Do they need our gifts? Do they need our participation in religious rituals? Euthyphro can only answer that we participate in such rituals because the gods love us to do so: The pious man is one who does what the gods love. With this the circle closes. We are back at the beginning. There has been no progress. Socrates still does not want to let Euthyphro go: Euthyphro, he suggests, must know what piety is if he engages in such a serious matter as prosecuting his father in the name of piety. But Euthyphro is now in a hurry and dashes Socrates's hopes of learning from him what piety is and of so escaping his accusers.

The most striking aspect of the discussion is perhaps the lack of communication. At first Euthyphro and Socrates appear linked by their distance form the many, by what Euthyphro presents as their special relationship to the divine. And there is something to this claim: prophet and philosopher have something in common, as is made clear in other dialogues. But in the end it is very little they have in common: the appearance of

community has given way to a profound separation. Euthyphro now appears as closer to Socrates's accusers. Only they will be less friendly.

What Socrates, Euthyphro, and Socrates' accusers share, is that for none of them is traditional religion still a living reality. Euthyphro tries to meet this disorientation by insisting on the authority of the stories told about the gods. His piety then is little more than an unthinking invocation of an inheritance that Socrates questions: the divine dimension cannot be as these stories, with their quarreling gods, would have it. That dimension needs to be given a very different expression. Socratic reason demands this. But before this can be attempted that dimension must first be recovered. We have to open ourselves to the dimension that can provide our existence with the needed measure. Socrates is then the truly pious person of the dialogue. That piety forces him to take issue with the piety of a Euthyphro.

This throws a light on the charge raised against Socrates: he is accused of corrupting the young, and of not believing in the old gods, inventing new ones instead. In this dialogue we find that Socrates does indeed find it impossible to believe in the old gods of which the poets speak. And to the extent that the old faith, shaken though it may be, is still associated with the preservation of the state, Socrates has to be seen as a threat to its preservation. And the dialogue also gives us an idea of how Socrates corrupts the young. He challenges ideas that are left unquestioned. Thus he challenges Euthyphro's unreflective understanding of piety. There is something disorienting and disturbing about such questioning: more precisely, it makes the loss of foundations manifest: it sets what seemed stable convictions in motion. It brings out into the open that loss of way, which covers up what has been lost with his unthinking appeals to the old stories. Socrates faces Euthyphro and those like him with an *Either-Or*: either they can admit their ignorance, the inadequacy of the criteria on which they base their actions: in this sense

Socratic irony has a liberating power: it is to make the other free for the truth. But this would require an exertion Euthyphro is unwilling to make. Or they can refuse, like Euthyphro, to listen to further questioning and break off the discussion. They can run away and return to the seeming security of often repeated, but unexamined belief. Socrates's failure to reach Euthyphro is ominous: it suggests that Socrates will have similar difficulty communicating with his accusers. Se will meet them next tikme, as we turn to the *Apology*.

3. Socrates Accused

Last time we discussed the first of the dialogues that center on the death of Socrates. We have heard of the charge that has been brought by the poet Meletus:

> Socrates is guilty of corrupting the youth, and of believing not in the gods whom the state believes in, but in other new divinities. (24)

We have also been given a hint of what it is that lets Socrates say in the *Apology*, just before the guilty verdict is pronounced:

> I do believe in the gods as no one of my accusers believes in them. (35)

That may be read as a rejection of the charge of impiety: does Socrates not claim to have a more sincere belief than any of his accusers and in his defense he invokes God and the gods again and again. He does indeed believe in the gods as not one of accusers does. But this may also be construed as an admission of guilt: his belief is different from that of his accusers; he does not believe as they do. That is to say, his belief may be more profound, but it certainly is different from that of his accusers. He does not believe as they do. In the sense in which the ordinary Athenian thinks of himself as believing in gods, Socrates does not seem to believe at all. To them Socrates may look like an atheist.

What does Socrates have in mind when he speaks of God or of gods? Clear is that **if** Euthyphro has the right to call himself pious, then certainly Socrates is not pious. To him piety means something very different. It certainly is not literal-minded, pedantic insistence on the authority of inherited texts. But in what sense can Socrates be considered pious? The *Apology* answers this question by presenting us with the example of Socrates's behavior in court.

Who is on trial? In one sense the answer is obvious: Socrates of course! His accusers are three prominent Athenians, Meletus, the poet, Anytus a prominent and highly respected politician, and Lycon, an orator. But this is only one and the most superficial level. It is possible to turn the relationship between accuser and accused around and to say that it is the Athenians who are here being tried and are convicted and

> sentenced by truth to wickedness and injustice. (39)

And so Socrates can claim, after observing that it is far worse to put an innocent man to death than to suffer such a death, that he is arguing on behalf of his fellow Athenians.

> And now, Athenians, I am not arguing in my own defense at all, as you might expect me to do, but rather in yours in order you may not make a mistake about the gift of the god to you by condemning me. (30)

And following the verdict Socrates predicts that the punishment of his accusers will be far worse than his own.

But Socrates also places himself before a divine court of justice and he defends his actions by claiming to have been faithful to a divine command, a theme that is taken up again in the *Crito*. Precisely because he takes this **spiritual authority** so seriously he cannot take those who would judge him now too seriously. Here, too, the relationship of judged and judge tends to turn around: in his concluding remarks Socrates thus opposes "the pretended judges here" to those "true judges," who are said by the poets to sit in judgment in the beyond, such as Minos, Rhadamantus, Aeacus, and Triptolemus (41).

But let me consider the dialogue in more detail: it begins after Socrates's accusers have stated their case. Socrates speaks of two kinds of accusers: there are his **present accusers** who have just been heard; and then there are his **old accusers**, as he calls them. The latter are the rumors about Socrates that are circulating in Athens, the stories that

have been told about him, and one of these story-tellers is named, the poet Aristophanes. Plato suggests in this dialogue that the brilliant caricature of Socrates presented much earlier in the *Clouds* helped shape the atmosphere that allowed Socrates to be condemned. A widespread understanding of Socrates then goes like this:

> "there is a certain Socrates, a wise man, who speculates about the heavens, who investigates tings that are beneath the earth, and who can make the worse argument appear the stronger." (18)

Such popular opinion confuses Socrates both with such philosophers of nature as Thales or Anaxagoras and with the sophists, and Plato is eager to distinguish Socrates from both.

The first charge is indeed a stock charge against philosophers, who have been said to pursue matters that are really none of their business, who inquire for the sake of inquiry, governed by idle curiosity. In this connection it is interesting to note that the first philosopher, Thales, is also presented to us as the first absent-minded philosopher. Gazing at the stars, i.e. investigating things in the sky, he failed to watch where he was going and fell into a well, to be ridiculed by that pretty Thracian servant girl for whom he had no eyes. The first philosopher is also the first absent-minded philosopher.

But Socrates should not be confused with Thales, nor with Anaxagoras: Socrates does not understand philosophy as such disengaged theoretical inquiry. He is not a proto-scientist concerned to discover the way nature operates. The issue for him is the good life: what is its nature. His then is first of all an ethical concern. He is first of all an **educator**. This makes him a bit like the sophists, professional educators like Gorgias, Prodicus, or Hippias, who taught young aristocrats how to succeed in life and how to influence other people, who gave what we can call leadership seminars and got well paid

for that. Socrates on the other hand does not make money with his teaching and professes not to possess the kind of worldly wisdom claimed by these men.

What then has made Socrates so unpopular? He must have done something extraordinary to have made himself into such a public nuisance. Interesting is the interpretation Socrates gives of his activities as the fulfillment of a **divine mission**. Long ago, we learn, Chaerophon, a friend of Socrates and a respected Athenian, went to Delphi to ask the oracle whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates. The priestess answered that there was not. In characteristic fashion Socrates now tries to prove the oracle wrong by finding at least one person who is indeed wiser. His whole life of inquiry thus puts the oracle at Delphi, and this is to say the god Apollo, on trial. And there is a sense in which the present trial continues that trial of the god. This is then a third sense in which we can understand the apology as a trial: a trial of the gods. Socrates, to be sure, does not succeed in convicting the oracle of lying. He finds no one wiser. What then is his wisdom? It is **insight into his own ignorance**:

> I do not think that I know what I do not know. (21)

In this respect he is wiser than the self-proclaimed wise men whom he meets and annoys with his testing and questioning. Not surprising then that such trial of the divine utterance makes others mad. Politicians, prophets, and poets were all found lacking. Euthyphro can serve as an example. They all had no good reasons for holding the views they held and resented having this exhibited. Socrates interprets his life of questioning as a life lived in fulfillment of a divine command.

But the oracle had not commanded anything! Its statement becomes a command only in the light of Socrates's central conviction that the unexamined life is not worth living. That is to say, we should not simply accept traditional views, we should not even

simply accept the words of the oracle, without calling them before the court of reason. This faith in reason is itself not reasoned for. It is a faith. In this sense we can say that Apollo, the God of intellectual clarity, presides over the life of Socrates. His life is lived in obedience to the commands of this deity. That is his piety. And such piety demands the pursuit of truth, even if truth proves ever elusive.

That such a life should have annoyed many is to be expected. Of this his accusers take advantage. As already pointed out, three are named, Meletus, a rather mediocre poet, Anytus, a tanner and a leading politician who played a leading part in restoring democracy to Athens after the rule of the Thirty Tyrants, and Lycon, an orator. Following the charge, Socrates engages Meletus in a little dialogue. It centers on the assertion that Socrates had corrupted the youth of Athens. Who, Socrates asks, improves the young? Meletus suggests that it is **the laws**, and when challenged: what persons? Meletus answers: **every Athenian**. The answer is not altogether silly. It suggests that we find ourselves participating in an established way of life. What people say and do tells us what is to be done. Socrates challenges this by asking about the training of horses. Aren't there only a few who know how to do this? And is this not likely to be even more true when we are dealing with human beings? It is a questionable analogy Socrates here advances. The refutation of Meletus here seems too quick, too rhetorical. And that also goes for Socrates' second point: bad citizens will do harm to the society of which they are members; but such harm will mean harm to the individuals themselves. But if so, would anyone willingly make people worse or corrupt them? Is this not always done out of ignorance? We get a hint here of the close tie Socrates sees between rationality and goodness. As the wisest of the Greeks, Socrates is least likely to corrupt them.

Socrates then proceeds to examine the charge that he believes in deities of his own invention, instead of the gods recognized by the State. Socrates pushes Meletus to make the charge more precise, and Meletus charges Socrates with being an **atheist**. Socrates deals with this charge, too, in a way that makes it seem sillier than it is. Like Euthyphro, Meletus knows about Socrates' divine guide, his daimon, a voice that warns him when he is about to do a wrong thing, a kind of messenger from above then. This voice thus mediates between the divine and the human. The tradition had similarly spoken of demons, lesser divinities, who were supposed to be the offspring of human beings or perhaps nymphs and gods. The ordinary Athenian, hearing of Socrates's divine guide, was likely to interpret it as such a demon. Meletus does not deny that Socrates believes in such divinities and Socrates continues:

> Then you admit that I believe in divinities. Now if these divinities are gods, then, as I say, you are joking and asking a riddle, and asserting that I do not believe in the gods, and at the same time that I do, since I believe in divinities. But if these divinities are the illegitimate children of the gods, either by the nymphs or by other mothers, as they are said to be, then I ask, what man would believe in the existence of the children of the gods and not in in the existence of the gods? (27)

Socrates here is being rather facetious. He pokes fun at the traditional religion. There is something right about Meletus' charge: in the sense in which the tradition had believed in gods, Socrates does not believe in them. What then does he believe in? To express what he believes in Socrates continues to use the traditional language, inviting confusion. So he presents himself as the servant of Apollo, the god of the Delphic oracle. But what does he mean by Apollo? And he talks about his divine guide in ways that invite others

to think of this guide as one of those daimonic divinities known to the tradition. But such language is very inadequate to the content it is meant to communicate. That inadequacy expresses itself in Meletus' contradictory way of speaking. With equal justice we can say that Socrates believes and that he does not believe in the gods. What then is the nature of Socrates' belief? The answer is given more by his behavior than by anything he actually says.

And here it is his **attitude to death** that is most illuminating. It is summed up in the following statement:

> For this, Athenians, I believe to be the truth. Wherever a man's station is, whether he has chosen it of his own will, or whether he has been placed at it by his commander, there it is his duty to remain and face the danger without thinking of death or of any other thing except disgrace. (28)

This is to say that there are things more important than death. Our duty is to remain at the place we have chosen or that has been assigned to us. Socrates thinks of the soldier who obeys his commander. We know that Socrates was just such a soldier. But this is only an analogy. The more important order he has received is the order he thinks he has received from his god: the order to spend his life searching for wisdom.

This much in clear: on Socrates' view human beings have been assigned their place by a higher power. It is their duty to remain faithful to that place and to do what it demands, even when that doing will lead to their death. In this connection Socrates compares himself to Achilles. Important in all this is **the courage to face one's death**. Fear of death Socrates maintains is born of ignorance. We do not know whether life is really better than death. What we do know is that the just life is better than the unjust life. But let me draw the general conclusion implicit in all this: **only a life lived in the**

recognition that there are things worth dying for is worth living. Courage is a presupposition of the good life. It is such courage that leads Socrates to his refusal to play on the emotions of his judges, to bring in his weeping wife and children. Socrates refuses to use words that might flatter his judges. Quite the opposite: he attacks them instead. I return to a passage I have already quoted:

> And now, Athenians, I am not arguing in my own defense at all, as you might expect me to do, but rather in yours in order you may not make a mistake about the gift of the god to you by condemning me. (30)

Especially given the charge of impiety this is a remarkable statement. Socrates presents himself to the Athenians as **the gift of Apollo**. He has been sent by the god to awaken the Athenians from their slumber, to a more reasonable life. That self-interpretation makes Socrates into a not quite human figure: himself **a demonic quasi-divinity**, in this respect, too, **like his predecessor Achilles**. To continue with the quote:

> For if you put me to death, you will not easily find another who, if I may use a ludicrous comparison, clings to the state as a kind of gadfly to a horse that is large and well-bred but rather sluggish because of its size, so that it needs to be aroused. It seems to me that the god has attached me like that to the state, for I am constantly alighting upon you at every point to arouse, persuade, and reproach each of you all day long. … And you may easily see that it is the god who has given me to your city; for it is it human the way I have neglected all my own interests and allowed my private affairs to be neglected for so many years, while occupying myself unceasingly with your interests, going to each of you privately, like a

> father or an elder brother, trying to persuade him to care for human exellence. (31)

Important here is the word **privately**. Socrates knows that had he attempted to take part in politics he would have been condemned to death long ago and thus been much less effective:

> He who would really fight for justice must do so as a private citizen, not as a political figure, if he is to preserve his life, even for a short time. (31/32)

Politics corrupts those who can be corrupted and destroys the truly incorruptible. It turns out that Socrates, whose own actions have shown him to be incorruptible, in the end did not live a sufficiently private life. This is a consequence of his conviction that the philosopher has a duty to foster human excellence, in himself and in others, even if this will make him an uncomfortable presence. And not everyone is made uncomfortable! In the court are quite a few committed supporters, including Plato.

Socrates refuses to plead with his judges, refuses rhetorical tricks. He insists on telling the truth, even though he knows that this truth will not be one his accusers will appreciate. They understand him even less than Euthyphro did. Their contributions to this dialogue are mostly incoherent shouts and murmurings, which prompt Socrates repeatedly to ask for quiet.

Not surprisingly Socrates is condemned to death, although the vote is fairly close.

Socrates accepts the verdict calmly. It was customary for the condemned to suggest a penalty other than the penalty requested by his accusers, in this case the death penalty. So, after pointing out that the punishment should fit the deed, he suggests free meals in the prytaneum for himself. A good state should provide for individuals who play the part played by Socrates, the gadfly's or the fool's part. But Socrates knows that

Athens is not ready for this. So he suggest a very modest fine, which some of his friends, including Plato, bid him raise. It has been suggested that this suggestion of a fine is out of character. But Socrates does not care about money and he does not seek death. He knows that his presence helps to make Athens a more humane place. It is not for personal reasons that he suggests the fine. The suggestion must be understood rather as a feeble attempt to prevent the Athenians from committing an unjust act. The final condemnation does not come as a surprise, given his deliberately provocative apology.

The words to his supporters with which the dialogue closes, center on the **meaning of death**. Socrates knows of course that many see in death the greatest evil. The fear of death is an undercurrent of human life, a fear that allows many, who would otherwise be just themselves, to be driven into injustice, and many who might be receptive to the truth, to resort to lies. Only the courage to face death makes the individual truly free to pursue justice and truth. This courage pervades the dialogue; it is its fundamental mood. Socrates reminds his friends that what has befallen him cannot be evil, otherwise his demonic guide would have warned him; it must be a good; and Socrates sketches two interpretations of death: either it is the absence of all consciousness — then it is certainly not an evil, but rather a wonderful gain, or it will allow us to carry our activities into an afterlife, i.e. it will allow Socrates to pursue his life of questioning in the beyond, an afterlife that would mean to him an indescribable happiness.

But more important than such thoughts is the example he sets: that example bids us reflect on the relationship between courage, truth, and the good life.

4. A Dream of Homecoming

In my last lecture I suggested that Socrates is Plato's hero, just as Achilles is Homer's hero of the *Iliad*. In the *Apology* Plato is quite explicit about the analogy, and he returns to it in the dialogue with which we are concerned today, the *Crito*. Near the beginning Socrates, now in prison, tells Crito of a dream he has been having: "a gloriously beautiful woman dressed in white robes, comes up to Socrates and addresses him with these words:

> On the third day shall you fertile Phthia reach (44)

The words are from the *Iliad*. There they are spoken by Achilles, who is thinking of his homeland. Achilles of course never did return home, but died before Troy. Socrates thus dreams of homecoming. **Will death be his homecoming**? This raises the question: just how are we to understand "home" here. Is Socrates thinking of an afterlife? Remember that in the *Apology* Socrates appears not at all sure that there is in fact such an afterlife. And yet Socrates does seem sure that that there is a higher dimension, a dimension beyond this life, a transcendent reality to which we belong and which assigns us our place. It is this sense of belonging to a **reality that transcends our mortal life** that lets him face death with such equanimity.

That equanimity is demonstrated by the sound sleep granted to Socrates. His old friend Crito wonders at that sleep. He has tipped, or rather bribed the prison guard to get into Socrates's cell. As his sleep demonstrates, Socrates is not afraid to die. Notice that Crito **respects that sleep**. Socrates has few hours left and yet Crito does not seem to think that sleeping is a bad way of spending some of these. There is nothing negative about sound sleep. But this is also a comment about death. Sleep has long been thought of as the brother of death, as a metaphor for death. Is there something negative about a good death?

Crito has come with what he takes to be bad news. The sacred ship is finally returning from Delos. Every year the Athenians sent this ship to the sacred island of Delos to thank Apollo for his liberation of the victims of the minotaur, who had once been sent with Theseus to Crete.[1] The court proceedings of the Apology had taken place just when the priest had placed wreaths on the sacred ship that every year sailed from Athens to Delos, in thanksgiving to Apollo, the god of intellectual clarity, who had delivered Athens from the dark, destructive forces associated with the minotaur dwelling in the labyrinth. During the time of the ship's sacred mission no one could be executed. This year it had taken the ship an unusually long time, a whole month to return to Athens. The time between the trial and the execution is thus a time span that is granted to Socrates by the deity presiding over his life, by Apollo. The god grants his servant Socrates the time to reconsider his actions, gives him a chance to once more affirm or perhaps to reject the life he has chosen, a choice for which he now is to pay with his life.

There is a sense in which Crito represents Socrates's **last temptation**, far greater than that represented by his accusers, for now we have an intimate friend pleading with Socrates to flee Athens. He has enough power and friends to arrange everything. Socrates needs to do no more than say: yes, I am willing to go! Crito has a number of reasons for his actions: first of all, he genuinely admires Socrates, he does not want to lose the friend; he is also worried about his own reputation: what will people say about Crito, rich and influential, and yet unable or unwilling to save his friend Socrates. That Socrates' escape would be a rather simple thing to arrange is apparent. Crito can assure Socrates that everything has been prepared. All Socrates needs to do is indicate his willingness to go.

Socrates of course is not likely to be moved by such considerations. Crito then makes the charge that if Socrates does not allow himself to be helped in this way he will

[1] Having slain the Minotaur with the help of Ariadne, Theseus is said to have left her on Naxos, where she became the bride of Dionysus. Naxos is of course the island where Euthyphro's father is said to have murdered his servant.

be doing something unjust. He is **choosing the easy way out**, abandoning his family and his friends. Crito even suggests **cowardice**.

Socrates responds in predictable fashion: he invites Crito to examine the matter with him. And he insists once again that the entire reflection be **free of fear. They should not be like children, scared by bogies.** Nor should they worry about public opinion. The only opinion worth taking seriously is that of truly wise men. Just as an athlete will follow the direction of the trainer, who understands the body and its needs, we should take care of the needs of our souls and listen only to those who understand justice and injustice.

The question is: is it right, is it just for Socrates to escape from prison? Is it right to bribe the jailers, just to escape the consequences of the verdict reached in accord with the laws of Athens.

> .., we can have nothing to consider but the question I asked just now — namely, shall we be acting justly if we give money and thanks to the men who are to aid me in escaping, and if we ourselves take our respective parts in my escape? Or shall we in truth be acting unjustly if we do all this? And if we find that we should be acting unjustly, then we must not take any account either of death, or of any other evil that may be the consequence of remaining here, where we are, but only of acting unjustly. (48c-d)

Socrates and Crito agree that we never ought to act unjustly. But justice, Socrates suggests, demands that we not desert the place we have been assigned by the state. Socrates invites Crito to think of a soldier: under what circumstances might it be right for him to leave his assigned place?

> You must not give way, or retreat, nor desert your station. In war and in the court of justice, and everywhere, you must do whatever your state and

> your country tell you to do, or you must persuade then that their demands are unjust. (51a-b)

Right now Socrates' place is in prison, the place of one about to be executed. The question is: would it be right to leave that place? Two realms collide in this question: the concrete physical reality, which includes the prison cell, the physical danger threatening Socrates and the moral realm with its absolute demands. The dialogue leaves no doubt where Socrates stands: Socrates rejects the suggestion that an unjust act is justified by an injustice one has suffered. According to Socrates it is **never right to repay injustice with injustice**. We must not do wrong, even when wronged (49d-e).

The key question is this: **ought a human being carry out his just agreements**? And has Socrates not entered into just such an agreement with the laws of Athens? Presupposed is a specific understanding of the good life and how it relates to membership in a community. To live the good life the individual must remain true to that ideal image of himself that he bears within himself. In the *Apology* Socrates had made an attempt to articulate this dimension by speaking of the oracle at Delphi and by the command placed on him by Apollo. Socrates understands himself as being in the service of a superhuman power, and when the demands of that power conflict with public opinion, it is clear what has to give way. But despite this commitment to a higher power, every human being can be himself only as member of a community. If Socrates is to affirm himself, he must affirm himself not only as belonging to Apollo, but also as belonging to the city of Athens. It is this second kind of belonging that is the theme of the *Crito*. The commitment to Apollo must be joined to the commitment to the state, notwithstanding the tension between these two commitments.

Socrates puts the case for the latter into the mouth of the Laws and Constitution of Athens. The laws are said to be the parents of Socrates: he is their child and slave. Socrates became Socrates only because he was raised in Athens. If Socrates is to say yes to himself, he must also say yes to Athens, even at this moment when the city has turned

against him. To be sure, there is the possibility of exile: Crito has good friends in Thessaly, who would be glad to receive Socrates. But such a flight to Thessaly, a region notorious for luxury and licentiousness, would alienate Socrates from himself. Behind Socrates words we sense the imperative: be yourself! But don't construe this self as an atomic self; you are not an isolated subject. If Socrates were to leave Athens he would in a significant sense cease to be himself, would die a spiritual death, and this death is far more to be feared than physical death. Socrates would have us recognize that we are parts of something larger. To exist as a moral being is to affirm oneself as such a part.

The question here is not whether Athens is a just community or whether its laws are just. In the *Crito* Plato expresses a great deal of support for these laws, but from the *Apology* we know that Socrates does think that some of these laws could be improved — for instance issues of life and death should not be tried in a single day — and in the *Crito* we hear that Socrates thinks Sparta and Crete well governed. Athens is not the ideal state. The very fact that Socrates is condemned to death shows this, although in the *Crito* Socrates takes care to blame this not on the laws, but on persons. But the fact that Athens is obviously less than perfect does not justify flight. The wholes to which we belong will always be imperfect. We can affirm ourselves only as parts of inevitably imperfect wholes. His recognition of the community's imperfections makes Socrates into its critic. But this criticism remains the criticism of someone profoundly committed to what he is criticizing. The *Crito* articulates that commitment.

There is, however, a further aspect: throughout his life Socrates freely acknowledged this bond to the community. He owned up to it and this gives more weight to it. Thus every Athenian had the right to leave the city with all his property. Socrates did not exercise that right. Indeed, he almost never left Athens, except when called to serve in the army. He had no desire for another environment. In this rootedness, this commitment to a particular place, Socrates is quite unlike the sophists, who travelled from place to place, happy to peddle their wisdom wherever the pay was good. Even at

the time of the trial Socrates might have offered exile as a counter-penalty to the death penalty demanded by his accusers. There is little doubt that the Athenians would have granted him that. But he did not think of proposing exile. Socrates recognized that he could really remain himself, remain true to the vocation he had chosen, only in Athens. Socrates presents himself as someone more satisfied with Athens than most Athenians. And he continues to affirm himself as an Athenian, even as the Athenians prepare to send him to his death.

I began these lectures with what I called the fundamental question of moral philosophy, indeed of philosophy: what is our place? what should it be? Plato's *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito* sketch a first answer to this question: a key to this answer is the idea that human beings have been assigned a place, as a soldier is assigned a place by the commander. What or who does the assigning? We might say the gods, in Socrates' case more especially Apollo, where talk of gods or a particular god is a metaphorical way of articulating this sense of belonging to some higher power. The *Crito* adds to this answer another dimension: we are assigned our place by the community to which we belong. But more than that: it is not so much that there is first of all an individual to which the community then assigns a place, but rather: one is the person one is only because of the community to which one belongs. To genuinely affirm oneself one has to affirm oneself as part of a larger order. This order will continue long after our death. Athens will survive Socrates. The communal whole is worthier, more to be revered, more sacred, Socrates insists, than the individual. And even worthier, even more worthy of reverence is that dimension which the Greeks point to with their talk of the gods. These are the powers that preside over human life, that have a claim on us, and not only on us, but on all human beings. We respond to such a claim when we value truth, when, like Socrates, we insist on living the examined life. We respond to such a claim when we attempt to so what is just. We respond to another such claim when we experience beauty. Both the state and the gods transcend the individual. Both demand of

the individual that he or she value what they command more than his or her own life. Only the individual who in this sense does not take himself too seriously, who finds in himself the strength to sacrifice his life, if necessary, in the service of something higher, who knows that there are things worth dying for, achieves that excellence human beings are capable of. With this we return to the theme of courage.

Let me end this lecture by considering very briefly the very end of the *Crito*. Socrates knows of course that first of all and most of the time we are too concerned with ourselves, too worried about death, to act as he would have us act. Given this perspective of common sense, there is something inhuman about Socrates's equanimity in the face of death, just as there is something inhuman about his lack of concern for the comforts of everyday life, as he says of himself in the *Apology*. Judged by common sense, he is besides himself, a bit crazy. The end of the *Crito* brings this out:

Socrates there presents the discourse of the laws that he has constructed as not so much his own invention, but as a retelling of what a higher power has had to tell him:

> Be sure, my dear friend Crito, that this is what I seem to hear, as the worshippers of Cybele seem, in their passion, to hear the music of flutes; and the sound of these argument rings so loudly in my ears, that I cannot hear any other arguments. And I feel sure that if you try to change my mind you will speak in vain. Nevertheless, if you think that you will succeed, speak. (54d-e)

Crito has nothing more to say.

Socrates here compares himself to a worshipper of Cybele, that is to say, to a participant in a Dionysian festival, **whose passion lets the worshippers be besides themselves**. It is important to recognize the passion that informs everything Socrates has to say. Using the language of traditional religion we can say, Socrates is someone who has been seized, not by Dionysus, but by another divinity, by Apollo, where the meaning of Apollo needs to be unpacked. But this much is clear: when Socrates insists that

existing as a part must be placed above existing as a death-bound individual he articulates something like a faith in the power of reason to open us to what really matters. And what really matters makes absolute demands. The absoluteness of these demands proves stronger than the fear of death. But their absoluteness must be experienced; a disinterested, dispassionate reason cannot itself establish this faith. Only someone who shares in some measure in Socrates's passion can be convinced by what he has to say.

5. Body and Soul

The *Phaedo* is by far the longest, most important, and most difficult of the four Platonic dialogues we are studying. If *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito* are works of the young Plato, the *Phaedo* is a work of Plato's maturity. In it we find most of the fundamentals of Plato's philosophy.

Once again, the literary side of the dialogue is very important. This raises the question: should the literary dimension of Plato's dialogues be considered a mere ornament of the truly philosophical content of the work, perhaps a means of making it more accessible; or is it essential, given Plato's understanding of philosophy and its task.

Let me approach this question by asking another: if I make some moral claim, e.g., that suicide is bad, how can I establish such a claim? In calling suicide bad I suggest that one should take a certain attitude to it, and that means also to life. But can this be established in the way we establish certain facts? In the latter case there are obvious strategies for settling the dispute. But how do we settle moral disagreements? The statement: 'suicide is bad' would remain a mere assertion, perhaps reflecting my personal conviction, unless I can lead you to share that conviction.

Or take Socrates' not altogether unrelated claim that human beings do not belong to themselves, but that we are in some sense the property of the gods. What kind of conviction finds articulation in this claim? What intuition supports it? Without such an intuition, without such an experience of what matters, words remain mere words. But how do we lead someone to share such an experience? Just by the force of our arguments? Something like rhetoric is required. Some philosophers may be content with meta-ethical reflections, say with observations about how human beings actually use terms like right and wrong, good and evil, of the justifications they give to support their judgments. But Plato is not content with this. He wants to establish the place you, the reader, too, ought to occupy in such a way that you recognize the truth of what he is

saying, and that is to say, that you experience the binding force of that higher dimension of which Socrates is speaking. Experience is necessarily concrete. **The literary side of Plato's dialogues is to help make this experiential foundation available**.

But let me return to the *Phaedo*. Already in the way it is told this dialogue differs from the others we have read: the place of the telling is now far removed in place and time from the place and time of Socrates's death. We are in Phlius, a not very important town in the north-eastern Peloponnese, seat of a school of Pythagorean philosophers. The narrator is the beautiful young Phaedo from Elis, who had become a prisoner of war, made a slave by the Athenians, only to be freed by Socrates, whom he then joined as a disciple. He is now on his way back to his hometown, where he will become the founder of a Socratic school of philosophy. The person to whom he is telling the story is Echecrates, a Pythagorean. The frame gives us an impression of the effect that Socrates life and death are beginning to have. The events in Athens become almost a living reality in Phlius and presumably wherever there is a reader of Plato's *Phaedo*. Socrates' fame, which makes the local philosophers eager to hear an eyewitness report of his last hours, demonstrates that he already has achieved a certain kind of immortality. And this testifies to the fact that he lived his life in such a way that it assumed a significance that transcends his death. Plato' **Socrates hovers between being a historical figure and an idea**.

We learn from the introduction that Plato was ill when this conversation took place. This tells us that what we read is definitely not an eyewitness account. It is Plato's idealizing reconstruction of what he heard.

The fact that Phaedo is telling this story to a Pythagorean has some significance. The Pythagoreans were known for their belief in the transmigration of souls and even more for their emphasis on mathematics. The Thebans Simmias and Cebes, the main interlocutors of the dialogue, are also Pythagoreans. We have already heard of them in the *Crito*, where they are named as willing to come up with the money that would allow

Socrates to escape from prison. Significant is that all the persons I just mentioned are **not** Athenians. Although Socrates affirms himself as an Athenian, the significance of what he lived and thought extends much further. Important, too, as already mentioned, is that the interlocutors are Pythagoreans. In the *Phaedo* Plato makes an effort, to both relate his position to, and to distinguish it from that of the Pythagoreans.

In the discussion that frames the dialogue we learn once more of the sacred ship that had been delayed in its return from Delos. Even more than the *Apology* and the *Crito*, this dialogue is filled with the presence of Apollo, the god of music and prophecy who presides over law and order, both in the individual and in the state.

I pointed out last time that the discussion of the *Crito* takes place in a timespan that is granted by the god. In the *Phaedo* this is made quite explicit: the background is furnished by the Athenians celebration of their deliverance from minotaur and labyrinth. The Apollonian theme is suggested also by the fact that Socrates is reported here to have composed a hymn in honor of Apollo and his feast. In a deeper sense Socrates's words in the *Phaedo* are such a hymn and should be understood as such. This Apollonian theme is given moving expression in Socrates's discussion with Simmias:

> Dear me! Simmias; I shall find it hard to convince other people that I do not consider my fate a misfortune when I cannot convince even you of it, and you are afraid that I am more peevish now than I used to be. You seem to think me inferior in prophetic power to the swans, which, when they find that they have to die, sing more loudly than they ever did before, for joy that they are about to depart into the presence of God, whose servants they are. (84e-85b)

The words Socrates speaks to his friends are his **swan son**g. And it is not just Socrates who is speaking to us, but Apollo, where Apollo is a name for that reality which transcends Socrates and assigns to him, and if Plato is right, to all Athenians, and indeed to all human beings, their proper place and lets them find their measure.

What then is that place? A first answer is given by the greeting that Socrates bids Cebes bring to the sophist and poet Evenus, mentioned already in the *Apology*. Socrates bids him farewell and tells him to follow him as quickly as he can. **The true philosopher,** Socrates asserts, **wishes to die**. The dialogue as a whole interprets this assertion for us. Simmias replies that Evenus is not very likely to follow such advice. Socrates' advice expresses a transvaluation of what we normally find valuable. Normally we are centered on our individual selves, pursue individual pleasures, try to avoid pain. Socrates attempts to center the life of his listeners on a different reality; and the meditation on death is to open them to this reality.

Socrates asserts that **the true philosopher will wish to die**, but only to add immediately that **he may not commit suicide**, that this would be wrong. Both claims are indeed strange: the second perhaps even stranger than the first. For if death is indeed a good, why should we not seize that good? Socrates calls the injunction against suicide a law, indeed no just another law, but one that takes precedence over all others.

> But perhaps you will be surprised if I say that this law, unlike every other law to which mankind is subject, is absolute and without exception. (62a)

But why is not legitimate to do violence to oneself? In answer Socrates once again he appeals to the tradition, more precisely to Orphic and Pythagorean teaching:

> The reason which the secret teaching gives, that man is in a kind of prison [the Greek word *phroura* can mean both prison and guard-post] and that he may not set himself free, nor escape from it, seems to me rather profound and not easy to fathom. But I do think, Cebes, that it is true that the gods are our guardians, and that we men are part of their property. Do you not think so? (62b)

Cebes agrees. One thinks of the Christian condemnation of suicide as the most profound sin. But why not suicide?

Let me return to the double meaning of the Greek word *phroura*, which can mean prison or guard-post. The former suggests Socrates, who has decided it would be unjust to escape rom prison. The latter suggest the military metaphor Socrates is fond of: we are like soldiers charged with keeping our assigned post. We belong to the gods, are not our own property and therefore have no right to dispose of our lives as we see fit.

We have to hold that place which has been assigned to us, even if it is a place in prison.

Note the analogy between the prison in which Socrates finds himself, the labyrinth from which Apollo, through Theseus ,delivered the Athenians, and our own life, which is thus likened to a prison: in the *Republic* this prison becomes a cave. But in just what sense is life like a prison? A first answer is of course: the soul is imprisoned in the body. We are reminded of this prison by the example of Socrates, whose fetters have been removed and who is now rubbing his leg to restore circulation and thus to remove the pain. But can we generalize: in what sense do we experience our body as a prison and a burden? This much at least is clear: **Socrates's celebration of death is inseparable from his understanding of the body as a burden to the spirit**.

But in what sense is death good? If death is equated with total annihilation, could it be considered a good, unless life were taken to have a negative value? But Socrates does not seem to consider life as having a negative value. The life of a person who tries to live up to his vocation, like that of a soldier who does his duty, is clearly given a positive value; so is a life lived in philosophical conversation. This then suggests that in some way death is understood by Socrates as a gate to a better reality. In the *Phaedo* more obviously than in the *Apology*, Socrates expresses belief in the immortality of the soul:

> Well then, he replied, let me try to make a more successful defense to you than I did to the judges at my trial. I should be wrong, Cebes and Simmias, he went on, not to grieve at death, if I did not think that I was going to live both with other gods who are good and wise, and with men

> who have died and who are better than the men of this world. But you must know that I hope that I am going to live among good men, though I am not quite sure of that. But I am as sure as I can be in such matters that I am going lo live with gods who are very good masters. And therefore I am not so much grieved at death; I am confident that the dead have some kind of existence and as has been said of old, an existence that is far better for the good than for the wicked. (63b-c)

But how literally are we to take Socrates? In the beginning I suggested that, if what Plato has to say is to convince us, we must give it some foundation in our own experience. Where do we find that support? We are given a clue by Socrates' suggestion that those, who rightly engage in philosophy, study only death and dying. Philosophy so understood teaches the **art of dying**, more precisely the art of dying in the right way. Simmias laughs. But what does Socrates mean by these words? Socrates appeals to the traditional understanding of death as a **separation of body and soul**. After death both exist by themselves. The real philosopher, Socrates suggests, is someone who, even while still alive, releases his soul from the body as much as possible.

What sense can we make of this? First of all and most of the time we find ourselves in some particular place, at a particular time. That place is assigned to us by the body. Take the example of seeing: what we see presents itself to us as it does because of the particular place we happen to occupy. That is to say, what we see is always only appearance of the things themselves. But is the philosopher interested in mere appearances? Does he not want to learn the truth about things? In this sense it is easy to understand what Socrates means when he says that truth will only become manifest when we overcome the hindrance presented by the body and the access that it lets us have to reality. That is to say, truth is not given to the senses, but only to reason, not to the body, but to the soul. To penetrate beyond appearances, to gain access to reality, we have to free ourselves from the limits imposed on all perspectival knowing,

but this is to say also, must free ourselves from the prison of the body and the senses. Our soul gives us the ability to challenge the tyranny of time and place and the prison this implies. Reason transcends the senses and in just this transcendence what Socrates here calls the soul manifests itself. What Plato calls the soul names then that in us which allows us to transcend ourselves, if only in thought, as beings tied to a particular time and place. To say that the philosopher wishes to die is to say first of all that he wants to free himself from the tyranny of the body as much as possible, for the sake of reality, for the sake of truth. A corollary of what has just been said is that **the truly real is invisible**. Given what you learned in physics this should hardly seem unreasonable: our natural science has taught us to dissociate reality and visibility. What we see is never more than appearance of something that remains invisible.

Plato now suggests that the same thing must be true of absolute justice, absolute beauty, absolute good. We shall never see these with our eyes. They have to be grasped by reason.

I have contrasted two kinds of access to what is: that granted by the eye, or more generally by the senses, and that granted by reason. The former is perspectival, the latter aperspectival. Plato makes an analogous distinction in the moral sphere: here what corresponds to the point of view assigned to us by our body and its self-centered interests, including a desire to avoid pain, to secure life as much as possible, is contrasted with our true vocation. The former, ruled by self-interest and centered in the body, Plato tells us, causes wars, factions and battles; it lets us pursue wealth and blinds us to the truth. Here, too, the body appears as an obstacle. It deflects human beings from their true vocation. The philosopher's love of death, that is to say of the soul separated from the body, is thus just another expression for his love of wisdom, and this is what the word "philosophy" means. The pursuit of philosophy is thus a kind of purification, which implies the increasing submission to what reason, what the soul demands.

To be a philosopher then is **to forsake the embodied self and its narrow interests for the sake of truth**. It is this that allows Socrates to say that all human beings who have not become philosophers do not possess genuine courage. They submit to death only out of fear of some greater evil.

Nothing I have just said need imply a belief in personal immortality, that is to say in the immortality of the individual self, granted that something like such personal immortality is suggested by Socrates' invocation of the orphic myth, his professed confidence that in an afterlife he will find himself in the company of good men, conversing with them, and if not that, at least in the company of gods. But how literally are we to understand him here? Indeed, how can the philosopher, who has learned not to be concerned about his particular self and its survival, how can he be concerned about his individual immortality. Should this not be a matter of indifference to him? Certainly, Socrates thinks that in so far as we are beings of reason, we transcend ourselves as individual embodied selves. As beings of reason human beings are linked in a community that transcends death. In that sense Socrates remains linked to us. He remains alive. There is then a sense in which he is immortal. Such immortality is suggested already by the narrative frame of this dialogue, as I pointed out in the beginning of this lecture. And in this sense we can understand also that there is a sense in which Socrates can say of himself that he will live with the gods.

But this may seem a very pale and unsatisfactory sense of immortality. We understand why Cebes does not simply accept Socrates's speech. He remains to be convinced that the soul exists after death and continues to possess any power of wisdom. We will thus have to return to the question of immortality next time.

6. Morality and Mortality

Last time I focused on Socrates' claim that the real philosopher wishes to die. He does so because he wishes to free his soul from its bondage to the body as much as possible. On Socrates' view, what matters is first of all the spiritual dimension of our being, what he calls the soul. This soul is said to be imprisoned in the body. Death is interpreted as a release from this prison. This, however, is not to say that the philosophers is free to open the doors of this prison as he chooses. Indeed, Socrates claims, there is an absolute command placed on human beings that they may not commit suicide. We should remain in the place assigned to us by the gods, who, so to speak, own us: we are their property, their slaves.

Although Socrates' own behavior in these last hours of his life gives special weight to what he has to say, his listeners remain unconvinced. It is Cebes who states the objection, which we as readers, too, are likely to have:

> But men are very incredulous of what you have said of the soul. They fear that she will no longer exist anywhere when she has left the body, but that she will be destroyed and perish on the very day of death. They think that the moment that she is released and leaves the body, she will be dissolved and vanish away like breath or smoke, and thenceforward cease to exist at all. If she were to exist somewhere as a whole, released from the evils which you enumerated just now, we should have good reason to hope, Socrates, that what you say is true. But it will need no little persuasion and assurance to show that the soul exists after death, and continues to possess any power or wisdom. (69e-70b)

Let me interject here a question: why is the issue of immortality important for moral philosophy? How are the two linked? The answer is perhaps obvious: If I am convinced that my death is an absolute end, why should I worry about what comes after

me, what will happen to others, to the world. I after all shall be no longer. Nothing then will concern me. Does the finality of death not mean that I have only this one life to live and should do whatever is in my power to make it as pleasant as possible? Will death not take away everything that could possibly happen to me? Why should I not think: After me the deluge! **Belief in the finality of death and selfishness seem to go together**.

It is of course possible to develop a self-centered morality on that basis, but it is clear that Socrates considers such selfishness immoral. Morality, I suggested, for him is inseparable from an overcoming of such selfishness. It is inseparable from finding the courage to face death, if necessary, as Socrates faces it. But how will we find such courage unless we are convinced that our death does not have the last word. It is this, a spiritual dimension of human being that reaches beyond death, that Plato hopes to show us in the *Phaedo*. How this spiritual dimension is to be thought remains a question. But I trust that this has given you at least a first idea of how the themes of morality and mortality are linked. Nothing that has been said so far, to be sure, does anything to establish the immortality of the soul. So we return to Cebes' challenge.

Socrates's approaches the question in a way quite characteristic for him: he takes the point of view of those whom he is addressing into account. And, as already mentioned, Simmias and Cebes are two young Pythagoreans. So he turns to a narrative with which they can be expected to be quite familiar:

> Let us consider whether or not the souls of men exist in the next world after death, thus. There is an ancient belief, which we remember, that on leaving this world they exist there, and that they return hither and are born again from the dead. But if it be true that the living are born from the dead, our souls must exist in the other world; otherwise they could not be born again. It will be a sufficient proof that this is so if we can really prove that the living are born only from the dead. But if this is not so, we shall have to find some other argument. (70c-d)

The ancient belief cited is the Orphic-Pythagorean belief in transmigration, where this was also believed to involve a process of purification: when souls have become pure enough they are allowed to dwell with the gods. If that story is accepted it is clear that birth and death have only an episodic significance. They are episodes in the soul's progress towards its final end, the blessedness that comes when the soul is permitted to join the gods.

But how seriously can this be taken? It is after all only an old tale, although we may note that similar tales exist in many cultures. And what about the following discussion? The tone for this whole discussion was set by Socrates' question:

> Do you wish to converse about these matters and see if what I say is probable? (70 b)

Socrates is speculating; he is not claiming to establish something that is clearly true, but exploring what he takes to be likely. What we are presented with then does not claim to be the truth; we hear a **likely story**, a conjecture. The form that this particular conjecture takes reflects the audience. To a different audience Socrates would have spoken differently. Socrates speaks in metaphors. Their real meaning remains unsaid, remains to be recollected by those whom he addresses and of course by us.

The Orphic-Pythagorean view of transmigration is interpreted by being placed in the context of a view of nature as a cyclical movement between opposites.

> Well, said he, the easiest way of answering the question will be to consider it not in relation to men only, but also in relation to all animals and plants, and in short to all things that are generated.
>
> Is it the case that everything, which has an opposite, is generated only from its opposite? By opposites I mean the honorable and the base, the just and the unjust, and so on in a thousand other instances. Let us consider then whether it is necessary for everything that has an opposite to be generated only from its own opposite. For instance when anything

> becomes greater, I suppose it must first have been less and then become greater? (70d-e)

From such considerations Socrates arrives at something like a law of nature:

> Then it is sufficiently clear to us that all things are generated in this way, opposites from opposites. (71b)

Human beings have their place in that order. There is thus the perennial cycle of birth and death. Again we have an expression of the view that human beings exist as parts of something larger. That larger whole is here thought of as nature. Heraclitus held some such view, as did Empedocles.

Socrates proceeds with a number of examples. But how convincing is what Socrates has to say here? Consider once more:

> When anything becomes greater, I suppose it must first have been less and then become greater?

This suggests some thing that underlies the change, but yet remains the same thing. The suggestion is that similarly the soul underlies the change from death to life and back to death again. But what does "soul" name here? Socrates draws an analogy between falling asleep and dying; and death has often been said to be the brother of sleep. But is it a convincing analogy? The same person falls asleep and wakes up again. But does something analogous hold for the person who dies? Is it the same person who dies and is born again?

Consider the following example, which I take from Schopenhauer: Think of a leaf that a fall storm is threatening to tear off its branch. This leaf may be likened to the individual. The tree keeps living and in the spring there will be new leaves. In this sense life may be said to come from death, as spring follows winter. Life returns. Or take an animal killing another to feed its young. What of course is not proved by such examples is anything like personal immortality.

To be sure, if life were not to be generated out of death, all things would finally die, as Socrates points out, and so he concludes:

> Then we are agreed on this point: namely, that the living are generated from the dead no less than the dead from the living. But we agreed that if this be so, it is a sufficient proof that the souls of the dead must exist somewhere, whence they come into being again. (72a)

But what has been said hardly amounts to such a proof. In what sense does insight into the natural cycle of birth and death allow us to say that **our souls exist in some other world** after our death?

Cebes is not altogether convinced. He answers with a hesitant

> I think, Socrates, that this is the necessary result of our premises (72b)

And he is right to hesitate. Socrates' explanations certainly do not add up to a proof of personal immortality. Cebes and Socrates should not have agreed so readily. The first argument, in subordinating human beings to nature, **loses sight of the special nature of the soul**. It substitutes for a personal and spiritual an impersonal and natural immortality. And **in this sense immortality cannot be denied**. But this is not much consolation: suppose you were to know that someone will plant on your grave some wonderful tree and that your decaying body will help it grow: would this offer you some consolation? If so, why?

The inadequacy of this first argument leads to the second:

> And besides, Socrates, rejoined Cebes, if the doctrine which you are fond of stating, that our learning is only a process of recollection, be true, then I suppose we must have learnt at some former time what we recollect now. And that would be impossible unless our souls had existed somewhere before they came into this human form. So that is another reason for believing the soul immortal. (72e-73a)

With this second consideration we do justice to **the special nature of the human soul**, which the first had led us to overlook. Man has long been defined as the thinking animal, the animal that possesses reason: ***zoon logon echon***, said the Greeks, ***animal rationale*** said the Latins. It is to this dimension that Socrates gestures when he speaks of the soul. As beings possessing a soul we transcend our body and its limitations. Our **reason testifies to such self-transcendence**. Whenever I claim truth for a proposition, I claim it not just for the particular time and place my body assigns to me. Out reason allows us to transcend the place assigned us by our body. If our body belongs to time, there is a sense in which our reason has its home in eternity.

This is the consideration at the heart of Socrates' second argument. It is based on the familiar theory of **recollection**. Plato's view about the immortality of the soul and his theory of knowledge are thus intimately linked.

Simmias asks that the argument be explained once more: **he wants to recollect the argument from recollection**. Socrates begins with a familiar example: something reminds us of some other thing, perhaps because of its proximity to the thing or because of resemblance. Take a picture of someone you know. Part of the recognition of similarity is also a recognition of difference or defect. But similarity already presupposes that we know something of **equality**. The idea of equality is presupposed by all talk about similarity. It is in this sense prior to such talk. Our understanding of abstract equality is offered as an example of such ***a priori*** **knowledge**. Where did we gain such knowledge? Certainly not from experience, since all **experience already presupposes such *a priori* knowledge**, even if we may not be aware of this.

> Then we must have had knowledge of equality before we first saw equal things, and perceived that they all strive to be like equality, and all come short of it. (75a)

Socrates goes on:

> Now if we received this knowledge before our birth, and were born

> with it, we knew, both before, and at the moment of our birth, not only the equal, and the greater, and the less, but also everything of the same kind, did we not? Our present reasoning does not refer only to equality. It refers just as much to absolute good, and absolute beauty, and absolute justice, and absolute holiness: in short, I repeat, to everything which we mark with the name of the real, in the questions and answers of our dialectic. So we must have received our knowledge of all realities before we were born. (75c)

In the *Meno* Plato had shown that there is such an *a priori* knowledge similarly by leading the slave-boy to the insight that the area of a square with sides twice as long as some other square is not twice that of the first square, as the slave boy had first thought, but four times. The slave boy is led by Socrates to recollect the truth. Similarly Socrates now suggests that to see things as equal or unequal we must already have "a knowledge of abstract and real equality" (75b). Such a knowledge cannot be derived from experience, say the experience of equal things. To experience two things as equal we must already be in possession of a knowledge of equality. Must this *a priori* knowledge then not have been given to us before we were born?

But we have to wonder about the word "**before.**" How is it to be understood? What has to be granted is that insight into equality or mathematical truths, while it is awakened by experience, is not based on experience. There is no experience that warrants that 2 + 2 = 4. The insight is not based on an induction. The argument that **the soul or reason in some sense transcends experience** and that means also the body is thus plausible enough. But **does such transcendence mean pre-existence**? Does the prior in *a priori* mean temporal priority? Or is the metaphor about pre-existence just a metaphor for something else, perhaps a metaphor suitable for these particular interlocutors?

If Plato is right, we possess such *a priori* knowledge, not only in mathematics, but also in the moral sphere:

> Our present reasoning does not refer only to equality. It refers just as much to absolute good, and absolute beauty, and absolute justice, and absolute holiness; in short, I repeat, to everything which we mark with the name of the real, in the questions and answers of our dialectic. So we must have received our knowledge of all realities before we were born. (75c)

Just as we have an innate idea of equality, so we innate ideas of beauty, goodness, and uprightness. If that is right, moral philosophy must base itself on these ideas. It has to begin with an attempt to recollect what they are. Note that the word recollection suggests that we are not in command of such knowledge at birth. We have to recollect something that we have forgotten. It is this that lets Socrates say that we must have had a previous experience of it. This then is the crucial point:

> Then, Simmias, he said, is not this the truth? If, as we are forever repeating, beauty, and good, and the other ideas really exist, and if we refer all the objects of sensible perception to these ideas which were formerly ours, and which we find to be ours still, and compare sensible objects with them, then, just as they exist, our souls must have existed before ever we were born. (76d)

Simmias agrees.

Let me reiterate the central claim: it is **just as certain that our souls exist before our birth as it is that these realities exist.** And presumably they exist in the same manner. The soul's proper being is just like the being of these timeless forms. But what sort of being is this? In what sense do beauty and goodness exist, indeed are said by Socrates to be more real than temporal phenomena? Does it allow for the sort of individual immortality that concerns Simmias and Cebes?

Be this as it may, the **pre-existence** of the soul is not what really concerns Cebes or Simmias. They are interested in **its existence after death**. And this, they think, has not been shown. Socrates answers that it has.

> That has been shown already, Simmias and Cebes, said Socrates, if you will combine this reasoning with our previous conclusion, that all life is generated from death. For if the soul exists in a previous state, and if, when she comes into life and is born, she can only be born from death, and from a state of death, must she not exist after death too, since she has to be born again? So the point which you speak of has been already proved.
>
> Still I think you and Simmias would be glad to discuss this question further. Like children, you are afraid the wind will really blow the soul away and disperse her when she leaves the body, especially when a man happens to die in a storm and not in a calm. (77d-e)

What is really being proven here? Suppose there were a world soul that splits into individuals, which rejoin it at death? Is this not compatible with the argument that has been presented? But such an impersonal immortality would no satisfy Simmias and Cebes. Socrates knows that he has not taken care of their fears.

> Cebes laughed and said, Try and convince us as if we were afraid, Socrates; or rather, do not think that we are afraid ourselves. Perhaps there is a child within us who has these fears. Let us try and persuade him not to be afraid of death, as if it were a bugbear.
>
> You must charm him every day, until you have charmed him away, said Socrates.
>
> And where shall we find a good charmer, Socrates, he asked, now that you are leaving us? (77e)

Note the materialism present in the view of the Thebans; the soul is like a very airy substance that is in danger of being blown away by the first storm.

When the discussion returns to this theme, Socrates asks whether the soul is the sort of thing that can be blown apart in this sense. Socrates goes on to point out that equality, beauty, and other essences of that sort do not change; they are absolute. This of course is not true of material hings, say things that are beautiful: these do of course change. We must therefore draw a distinction between two kinds of things, or two types of being: one changeable, and therefore subject to time, the other unchangeable, invisible, eternal, simple. As beings possessing reason, we belong to both realms. We are in this sense amphibians.

The question we may well want to ask here is: what do we mean here by "things"? What sort of a thing is absolute beauty? This much is clear: if we think of a thing as an object that presents itself to our senses, then these things do not exist at all, but Socrates would of course question such an understandjng.

One thing that we mean when we speak of, say, beauty as a thing or as having being is at least this: we have not invented it; we encounter or discover it. Having drawn this distinction Socrates appeals to the understanding of human beings as possessing both body and soul, goes on to ask where the body belongs. The answer is of course that it belongs with sensible, more especially visible, and therefore temporal things. The soul on the other hand is invisible. And the soul finds its proper home only when it deals with or contemplates what is timeless and invisible, such as truth, goodness, beauty. The absolute or ideal existences, what Plato calls the forms or ideas, are the soul's real home. To be sure, the body, pleasure and pain, draws it into the realm of the variable, lets it lose its way, but within itself it finds the key to the timeless realm of the forms. **Soul is related to body as divine is to mortal** and it is clear that the divine should rule. The soul should rule the body. Can that soul die? Its very being, argues Socrates, makes this impossible:

> And shall we believe that the soul, which is invisible, and which goes hence to a place that is like herself, glorious, and pure, and invisible, to

> Hades, which is rightly called the unseen world, to dwell with the good and wise God, whither, if it be the will of God, my soul too must shortly go; — shall we believe that the soul, whose nature is so glorious, and pure, and invisible, is blown away by the winds and perishes as soon as she leaves the body, as the world says? Nay, dear Cebes and Simmias, it is not so. I will tell you what happens to a soul which is pure at her departure, and which in her life has had no intercourse that she could avoid with the body, and so draws after her, when she dies, no taint of the body, but has shunned it, and gathered herself into herself,
> for such has been her constant study; — and that only means that she has loved wisdom rightly, and has truly practised how to die. Is
> not this the practice of death? (80e-81a)

With this we have returned to a main theme of the *Phaedo*: that philosophy is really the **art of dying**, the art that teaches us the right way of being unto death, and that includes not taking it too seriously.

Again we should ask what has been proved here, even if the proof is accepted? Anything like **personal immortality**? Indeed, does it even make sense for a philosopher to insist on such immortality? What Plato has tried to show is that human beings belong to two domains, that we participate in both, the temporal and sensible, and the eternal and ideal. And Plato also insists that the former ought to have its measure in the latter. The good life is a continuous **homecoming**, a continuous **purification**, which means also a progressive **subjection of the body to the soul**. To the extent that we accept the timeless measure of the ideal, we participate in a realm that is not subject to time and therefore not subject to death. But is there any reason to think of the soul that is said to be immortal as an individual soul? Does individuality not belong with time and space? Has Socrates, in his devaluation of the body and temporality, not shortchanged human individuality?

Must a proper understanding of the soul not do greater justice to what I called the amphibian character of human being?

An individual immortality, to be sure, is suggested by the myth of transmigration to which Socrates now returns. He suggests that those who have chosen a life of injustice and tyranny will be reborn as beasts or birds of prey, the more sociable, milder, will be reborn as more sociable beings, as bees, or wasps, or ants, perhaps even as decent citizens, but only the philosophers will be allowed to rejoin the race of the gods:

> The soul of a philosopher will consider that it is the office of philosophy to set her free. She will know that she must not give herself up once more to the bondage of pleasure and pain, and, like Penelope, do a work, only to undo it continually, weaving instead of unweaving her web. She gains for herself peace from these things, and follows reason and ever abides in it, contemplating what is true and divine and real, and fostered up by them. So she thinks that she should live in this life, and when she dies she believes that she will go to what is akin to and like herself, and be released from human ills. A soul, Simmias and Cebes, that has been so nurtured and so trained will never fear lest she should be torn in pieces at her departure from the body, and blown away by the winds, and vanish, and utterly cease to exist. (84a-b)

A long silence follows, but, as we shall see next time, Simmias and Cebes remain unconvinced.

7. Transcendent Measures

I would like to begin with a question: why read Plato's *Phaedo* in a course called *Introduction to Ethics?* In that dialogue there is of course a great deal of talk about the **immortality of the soul**. The central argument offered for this immortality turns on the theory of **recollection**, i. e. on Plato's theory of knowledge. This may suggest that this dialogue has its more obvious place in an *Introduction to Epistemology* or perhaps an *Introduction to Metaphysics*. And indeed, the dialogue would have a place in such courses. But on the most basic level, what is at issue in the *Phaedo* is the nature and good of human being. Plato's determination of this nature sees our temporal existence as having **its ground and measure in an atemporal beyond**.

There is an analogy between this determination of human being and that found in the Bible: according to the Biblical creation account, **God created man in His own image**. Here, too, human being is given its ground and measure in the divine. The way in which this transcendent reality is thought, however, is different. Plato relies on his theory of forms to give content to this higher domain. Human reason is given priority over the stories told by poets and prophets, although Plato does not hesitate to rely on these stories and to draw from them metaphors to help the reader. It should be evident that if one denies all meaning to Plato's forms, if one insists that only this temporal, sensible reality deserves to be called real, one will arrive at a very different moral philosophy. The discussion of immortality in the *Phaedo* is designed to establish that there is indeed a transcendent beyond, and to establish it as the **ground and measure** of human being; also as the **source of a demand, even a command**. Socrates' death is the end and culmination of a life lived in obedience to this divine command, a life that comes to its fitting end in just this death.

But how convincing have the considerations advanced by Socrates really been? They certainly did not really satisfy Simmias and Cebes. It is easy to understand why

the questions the two now pose are found so disturbing by the participants in the conversation. But let us look at the way these questions are introduced:

> Good, said Simmias; I will tell you my difficulty, and Cebes will tell you why he is dissatisfied with your statement. I think, Socrates, and I daresay you think so too, that it is very difficult, and perhaps impossible, to obtain clear knowledge about these matters in this life. Yet I should hold him to be a very poor creature, who did not test what is said about them in every way, and persevere until he had examined the question from every side, and could do no more. (85b-c)

Simmias here insists that human beings have a duty to test the conceptions by which they live, including of course especially their views about immortality. Does this strike you as obvious: take a believer firm in his faith in an afterlife— does he have a duty to question that faith? Or suppose that all moral precepts are just conventional: would such questioning then not have to be considered disruptive of the social fabric? Socrates might then be seen as just such a disruptive individual. The command, **pursue the truth**, is not at all an obvious one. Where does it come from? Is it not possible that such a pursuit might show life to be **without a higher significance**? Plato, or rather his Socrates, interprets this commandment as issuing from the transcendent, from Apollo, if you wish, and understands it as witness to that reality for which the god is a metaphor. Socrates is convinced of the **dignity of the searching spirit**. That is an essential part of his faith. And Simmias agrees:

> It is our duty to do one of two things. We must learn, or we must discover for ourselves, the truth of these matters; or, if that be impossible, we must take the best and most irrefragable of human doctrines, and embarking on that, as on a raft, risk the voyage of life, unless a stronger vessel, some divine word, could be found, on which we might take our journey more safely and more securely. (85c-d)

In the absence of divine revelation, we must either seize the truth and make it the measure of our lives, or we must construct such a measure, which should be the best conjecture we can obtain. Presupposed is that there is indeed a truth, regardless of whether we are able to seize it or only circle around it with our conjectures. The final qualification, "unless a stronger vessel, some divine word, could be found, on which we might take our journey more safely and more securely" is of course just the sort of statement to which Christian readers of the *Phaedo* could turn. I also want to call your attention to the metaphor of the raft. Life is like a sea voyage. Theory offers those on this voyage a raft of sorts.

But just why was the preceding discussion insufficient Socrates asks and Simmias answers:

> To me it is insufficient, he replied, because the very-same argument might be used of a harmony, and a lyre, and its strings. It might be said that the harmony in a tuned lyre is something unseen, and incorporeal, and perfectly beautiful, and divine, while the lyre and its strings are corporeal, and with the nature of bodies, and compounded, and earthly, and akin to the mortal. Now suppose that, when the lyre is broken and the strings are cut or snapped, a man were to press the same argument that you have used, and were to say that the harmony cannot have perished, and that it must still exist: for it cannot possibly be that the lyre and the strings, with their mortal nature, continue to exist, though those strings have been broken, while the harmony, which is of the same nature as the divine and the immortal, and akin to them, has perished, and perished before the mortal lyre. He would say that the harmony itself must still exist somewhere, and that the wood and the strings will rot away before anything happens to it. (85e-86b)
>
> (139)

The soul does appear here as something invisible, incorporeal, splendid, and divine. Still, it is given its foundation in the material, being the result of a particular ordering of the material. The Pythagoreans had thus understood the world soul as the harmony of all that is. And does something similar not hold for human beings? Many of us are likely to have a view not too different from that here advanced by Simmias. Note that Simmias here goes far beyond the earlier conception of the soul as a kind of ethereal, but nevertheless very much material substance. In that sense the soul is not a substance at all. Simmias ' view recalls Nietzsche's statement in *Zarathustra* that **"soul" is only a word for something about the body**. This would seem to deny reality to the transcendent realm. The soul would be no more than an **epiphenomenon of the material**. And the same would presumably hold for Plato's realm of the forms. The appearance of such a realm would be the result of a particular attunement of corporeal things. Beings happen to be such that they invite us to group them into certain species and genera. We thus call some of these beings elephants and others human beings. But does the fact that nature exhibits a certain order that allows us to group things, that it presents itself to us in this sense as tuned in a certain way, does this justify talk of time-transcendent forms, say the form of an elephant or a human being? Simmias does indeed present a serious challenge.

Cebes's objection would seem to be less radical: He thinks that the pre-existence of the soul has been shown quite conclusively by Socrates, but he also thinks that its immortality has not thereby been assured. He, too, relies on a metaphor to make his point:

> It seems to me that a man might use an argument similar to yours, to prove that a weaver, who had died in old age, had not in fact perished, but was still alive somewhere; on the ground that the garment, which the weaver had woven for himself and used to wear, had not perished or been destroyed. And if any one were incredulous, he might ask whether a human being, or a garment constantly in use and wear, lasts the longer;

> and on being told that a human being lasts much the longer, he might think that he had shown beyond all doubt that the man was safe, because what lasts a shorter time than the man had not perished. But that, I suppose, is not so, Simmias; for you too must examine what I say. Every one would understand that such an argument was simple nonsense. This weaver wove himself many such garments and wore them out; he outlived them all but the last, but he perished before that one. (87c-d)

In a sense Cebes is closer to Socrates than Simmias. He grants the difference between soul and body as separate entities, which the first view does not. The body is related to the soul as a coat is to the wearer of the coat. But the figure Cebes here offers has the soul, too, be subject to time. But if so, it, too, will be corruptible and capable of death. There will always be that last coat that outlasts its owner, who himself may have outlasted many coats. The question, to be sure, is whether Cebes has not failed to pay sufficient attention to the being of the soul as already determined.

How seriously Plato takes these objections is shown by the fact that he lets the consternationthat results spill into the frame narrative. As a Pythagorean Echecrates, to whom Phaedio is relationg his account of the death of Socrates, is familiar with the view that the soul is a certain harmony of the body. Simmias' objection as narrated by Phaedo shatters the confidence he had had in Socrates's argument.

> And now I must begin again and find some other reasoning which shall convince me that a man’s soul does not die with him at his death. (88d)

The passage that follows gives us special insight into Socrates and his art of teaching:

> I have often, Echecrates, wondered at Socrates; but I never admired him more than I admired him then. There was nothing very strange in his having an answer: what I chiefly wondered at was, first, the kindness and good nature and respect with which he listened to the young men's

> objections; and, secondly, the quickness with which he perceived their effect upon us; and, lastly, how well he healed our wounds, and rallied us as if we were beaten and flying troops, and encouraged us to follow him, and to examine the reasoning with him.
>
> *Ech*. How?
>
> *Phcedo*. I will tell you. I was sitting by the bed on a stool at his right hand, and his seat was a good deal higher than mine. He stroked my head and gathered up the hair on my neck in his hand, you know he used often to play with my hair, and said, To-morrow, Phaedo, I daresay you will cut off these beautiful locks.
>
> I suppose so, Socrates, I replied.
>
> You will not, if you take my advice.
>
> Why not? I asked.
>
> You and I will cut off our hair today, he said, if our argument be dead indeed, and we cannot bring it to life again. And I, if I were you, and the argument were to escape me, would swear an oath, as the Argives did, not to wear my hair long again, until I "had renewed the fight and conquered the argument of Simmias and Cebes. (89a-c)

Once again Plato relies on the metaphor of the hero. This time, first Phaedo, and then Socrates, are likened to Heracles who summoned his companion Iolaus for help when attacked simultaneously by the hydra and an enormous crab.

The part of the dialogue that follows has a special significance. By now we have encountered a number of arguments for the immortality of the soul, some more plausible than others, but not one totally convincing. And the more philosophy you read, the more you may wonder whether philosophers ever offer more than opinions, tell likely stories. This may turn us into **misologists** or haters of reasoning and this, Socrates tells us, is the worst that can happen to us. Once again there is the presupposition that **what gives**

human life its worth and dignity is reason. Where does this presupposition come from? Can the materialist explain it? Does the very fact that there is this presupposition offer some support for the position Socrates is arguing here?

Socrates compares the **misologist** to someone **,** who, because he has been disappointed by some human being turns into a hater of all human beings. We all know that there are better and worse human beings. Similarly there are better and worse arguments. But even to draw a distinction between better and worse, must we not presuppose a measure of good reasoning?

> And, Phaedo, he said, if there be a system of reasoning which is true, and certain, and which our minds can grasp, it would be very lamentable that a man, who has met with some of these arguments which at one time seem true and at another false, should at last, in the bitterness of his heart gladly put all the blame on the reasoning, instead of on himself and his own unskilfulness, and spend the rest of his life in hating and reviling reasoning, and lose the truth and knowledge of reality. (90c-d)

Socrates adds a further comment worth noting: is he, condemned to die, really in a position to think philosophically about death? Is he not likely to convince himself that there is a life after death, now that death is so imminent? And are we not in a similar position? Again we meet with the insistence on truth. Our views of an after-life should not be a false solace that helps us to hide from ourselves **the real nature and significance of death**.

Only after this interlude does Socrates return to the twofold challenge presented by the two Thebans. First he takes up the challenge of Simmias: that the soul is a harmony of material elements. In meeting it Socrates invokes once more the theory of **recollection**. Those present agree on that theory and Socrates has an easy time pointing out that that theory is not compatible with the proposed view that the soul is just a harmony of the body. Indeed the metaphor of the soul as a harmony does not allow for

anything like recollection. Recollection suggests being in touch with something not belonging to the here and now, it attributes to the soul the power of transcending the limits imposed by the here and now, and thus the body: harmony does not suggest any of this. It fails to do justice to what I have called the human being's **power of self-transcendence**.

Harmony also does not capture the tension that governs the relationship of soul and body. Human beings are capable of struggling with bodily desires, of opposing the passions. A harmony, however, cannot lead the elements of which it is composed. The metaphor then fails to do justice to the soul's **autonomy**, or, we might, say, to the **phenomenon of freedom**. This is to say also that the metaphor leaves no room for something like **responsibility**.

Yet another consideration advanced against Simmias' understanding of the soul is that there are degrees of harmony and disharmony, whereas, Socrates insists, a soul cannot be more or less of a soul. Harmony is indeed a goal for the soul: But how can we understand this if the soul, in its very essence, is already understood as a harmony?

> What then will those who assert that the soul is a harmony say that the virtue and the vice which are in our souls are? Another harmony and another discord? Will they say that the good soul is in tune, and that, herself a harmony, she has within herself another harmony, and that the bad soul is out of tune with herself, and has no other harmony within her? (93c)

In the *Republic* Plato describes justice as such a harmony between the three parts of the soul: desire, passion or spirit, and reason. You may well want to ask whether in the *Phaedo* Socrates is not unjust to desire and spirit, by giving reason more than its due. Does the understanding of the soul developed in the *Phaedo*, which strongly suggests its simplicity — one soul cannot be more of a soul than another— even leave room for the tripartite soul of the *Republic*?

Note the little word play on *Harmonia,* who was the wife of the founder of Thebes, Cadmus. Socrates suggests that having taken care of the wife, he will now take care of her husband: again overtones of heroes battling.

Socrates' way of dealing with the objection of Cebes is curiously indirect. He begins by telling **the story of his own progress as a philosopher**, where this story is also **a story of the progress of Greek philosophy**.

> Listen, then, and I will tell you, Cebes, he replied. When I was a young man, I had a passionate desire for the wisdom which is called Physical Science. I thought it a splendid thing to know the causes of everything; why a thing comes into being, and why it perishes, and why it exists. I was always worrying myself with such questions as, Do living creatures take a definite form, as some persons say, from the fermentation of heat and cold ? Is it the blood, or the air, or fire by which we think? Or is it none of these, but the brain which gives the senses of hearing and sight and smell, and do memory and opinion come from these, and knowledge from memory and opinion when in a state of quiescence? (96a-b)

Note how familiar this still sounds. Socrates is here concerned to characterize a materialistic science or philosophy of nature that tries to explain everything by natural causes and to oppose to it his own theory of the forms. By this time Cebes' objection appears to have been forgotten. Is this forgetting justified? Had it rested on premises that the present narrative will undermine?

The result of these excursions into natural philosophy, Socrates tells us, was confusion. And confusion was compounded when Socrates turned to mathematics. When we add eight to two we get ten. Is the addition of the two numbers the cause of ten? The point is that we don't invoke **causes** when justifying propositions in

mathematics. We give **reasons**. Numbers are not generated the way natural things are, as some Pythagoreans appear to have thought.

This insight that what is needed is something that cannot be reduced to the realm of causes led the young Socrates to turn enthusiastically to Anaxagoras, who taught that **Mind** orders and is the cause of everything. Mind is here conceived of rather like a god, a divine being, who orders everything for the best. But Socrates was disappointed to discover that Anaxagoras, too, was relying on material causes. He likens Anaxagoras to someone who says that Socrates does what he does by Mind and then goes on to explain why Socrates is sitting in prison by speaking of muscles and bones. Socrates makes the obvious point that to inquire why Socrates is sitting here in prison, we have to inquire also into his motives, we have to recognize that he is in prison because he thought it better and more honorable not to run away. But to call this a cause in the sense in which natural science invokes causes would be absurd. We have to recognize that Socrates' being in prison has its foundation in his choice, i.e. in **freedom**. He might have chosen to run away. Socrates jokes that his body would have run away long ago to Megara or Boeotia. But what commands or binds human freedom? Whatever it is, it cannot be explained as a natural cause or in terms of causes. Besides things in time, inviting us to understand them in terms of cause and effect, there must be **time-transcendent meanings**. Nature manifests this realm. And human beings have the ability to draw from this realm the measure of their actions.

That the eye will not give us access to this realm is evident. So Socrates describes himself as turning away from what the eye can see. Instead of relying on the senses, he relies on conceptions, where he declares himself unwilling to admit that these conceptions are only pale reflections of the sensible. Socrates goes in to express the Platonic belief that there is an absolute beauty, an absolute good, and absolute greatness and that things are more or less beautiful, more or less good, more or less great, by participation in these forms to which only reason has access. Again it is important that

Socrates does not think that these derive from the senses. They cannot be given an empirical basis. They are grasped only by what we can call an **intellectual intuition**.

The question is of course whether we do indeed possess such an intuition. And, if we do, whether it pertains equally to the good, the beautiful, and the true, as Socrates suggests. The forms Plato here invokes may not be understood as simply universals. For instance, you may want to argue that the idea of the good is simply the result of an attempt to generalize from actions that for whatever reason we find admirable or approve of. The good would then have its foundation in personal attitudes. Or we may want to generalize to a community or to all human beings. For Plato this betrays a confusion: the good must be distinguished from what the individual or even everyone prefers. We should prefer the good and follow its commands because it is precisely the good, because we recognize it as presenting us with a claim. Plato's forms present claims. They have a normative significance. Think of words like justice or courage. According to Plato they name realities, where again the word "reality" is not meant to suggest that what they name is in any way like the things we experience, but it is to insist that they are discovered rather than invented, that in this sense they transcend our thinking. Truth is a value in this sense: it demands our truthfulness, towards others and even more to ourselves. We have repeatedly encountered such demands: justice is a value in this sense, justice to others, justice also to the different parts of our own selves. These forms, Plato's Socrates insists, cannot be explained by a genetic analysis. A sharp distinction has to be drawn between those entities natural science with its causal explanations can fruitfully investigate and the realm of values. To explain the latter in terms of the former is to be confused: in this connection we can speak of a naturalistic fallacy.

But with this part of the discussion we seem to have lost sight not only of Cebes' objection, but also of the issue of the soul's immortality. But only seemingly, it turns out. I shall return to it next time, in my concluding lecture on Plato.

8. The Good Life

In the *Phaedo* Plato tries to show that human existence has its measure in a transcendent beyond. To speak of this transcendent beyond as measuring human existence is to claim that in some sense we experience it, and experience it as the source of claims or demands, that it commands us to do certain things. It assigns us a place. And the good life is lived in obedience to this demand. It is a courageous holding of one's place. As we have seen, the metaphor of the soldier suggests itself, who stays at the place assigned to him by his commander, even unto death.

Note that this talk of a transcendent reality making demands of us, commanding us to do certain things, is no more than idle talk unless we can in some sense **experience** these demands and commands. That this experience cannot be like seeing things is evident. But nonetheless, it must have something of the immediacy of such seeing. Take once more the command to be truthful, to others and even more to oneself. If Plato is right, this command has a claim on us that we experience quite immediately. You may of course try to account for this command by arguing that it is in your own best interest to be truthful. But that is not at all clear. Let us suppose that there is no personal immortality. In that case, might we not still feel that a person who believes in an after life might be happier in this life, that belief in an afterlife has certain positive consequences in this life? In this sense deception or self-deception would lead to greater happiness.

It is easy to come up with other examples: someone suspects that the person he or she loves has betrayed him or her in some way, but the lover does not want to know the truth. Can we not imagine countless situations where such a refusal to know the truth would lead to greater happiness? Here the question poses itself: Why is bad faith bad? Could it be that bad faith is better than no faith at all? Why is self-deception bad? The Socratic imperative: know thyself! would seem impossible to justify by prudential

considerations. And does not the same hold for the command: do not commit suicide! To explain this by saying that human beings are the property of the gods and do not belong to themselves is not to offer a good reason, but only to articulate a deeply rooted intuition that the person who thinks that he belongs to himself, that is to say, that his life is his to dispose of as he or she sees fit, even to do away with it, if pain were to outweigh pleasure, is violating an irreducible, absolute command.

I have suggested that according to Plato human beings have their measure in a transcendent beyond. Plato, as we have seen, interprets this beyond as a realm of being, as opposed to becoming, which characterizes what we usually consider reality. Socrates tries to explain this difference to Cebes with a number of examples: heat and cold are thus contrasted with snow and fire. The snow is cold and at the approach of heat will melt. It will cease to be snow. But the idea or form of cold, Socrates maintains, is not subject to such change. It is what it is for all times. And for all times, too, snow, wherever it exists, will be cold and fire warm. Socrates thus concludes the following:

> Then, it is true of some of these things, that not only the idea itself has a right to its name for all time, but that something else too, which is not the idea, but which has the form of the idea wherever it exists, shares the name. Perhaps my meaning will be clearer by an example. (103d)

To return first to snow and fire: the ideas or forms of heat and cold transcend time, the fire whose heat we feel, the snow that feels cold, are things that participate in these forms, but come and go. You may not feel convinced by this consideration. You may feel that a word like "cold" and what it names, a certain essence, are human creations. We group things in certain ways, recognize a certain family resemblance, and try to capture it with a word. But what is it to recognize a certain family resemblance? It is to recognize what lets certain particulars belong together. They strike us as being somewhat like variations on the same theme. Plato calls this theme a form. Can we make sense of

seeing something like a family resemblance without invoking something like Plato's forms?

The example to which Plato turns next is, however, of a rather different sort: he is speaking here of numbers. We will always have to call the number 3 odd; it could not ever be even, just as snow could never be hot. Similarly the number 2 will always be even. But while the number 3 is not the opposite of the number 2, the ideas in which they participate, odd and even, are opposites. Once we have recognized that what is meant by 3 and 2, we will also recognize that the one will always be odd, the other always even. Similarly red will always be a color, not a sound. In this way we can subordinate ideas to ideas. We can attempt to map the realm of forms.

Socrates now suggests the following analogy: just as the number 3 must be odd to be what it is, so every body must have a soul to be alive. Soul is here understood as what brings life to whatever possesses a soul. (105b-d) suggests that soul is the form of life, just as the odd is the form of all odd numbers. And just as the odd has its opposite in the even, can never be even, so the soul has its opposite in death. To think of a dead soul is thus to think something impossible – the title of Nikolai Gogol's novel *Dead Souls* notwithstanding. The soul is here discussed as the idea that grants life to material substances.

But once again it is difficult to get from this analysis an argument for individual immortality. Take two persons. Both live. Do they live by virtue of numerically different souls? Are 3 and 5 odd by virtue of numerically different oddnesses. Is it not only when the soul animates a particular body that talk of an individual soul even suggests itself? Cebes and the others profess to be satisfied by Socrates' considerations, but it should be clear that he has not provided anything resembling a proof of individual immortality. And that a feeling of doubt remains, that this is not to be taken as a proof in the ordinary sense, should be evident. It appeals to an intuition that there is something in me, Socrates calls it the soul, that transcends my mortal body.

Cebes is convinced.

> I, Socrates, he replied, have no more objections to urge; your reasoning has quite satisfied me. If Simmias, or any one else, has anything to say, it would be well for him to say it now: for I know not to what other reason he can defer the discussion, if he wants to say or to hear anything touching this matter.
>
> No, indeed, said Simmias; neither have I any further ground for doubt after what you have said. Yet I cannot help feeling some doubts still in my mind; for the subject of our conversation is a vast one, and I distrust the feebleness of man.
>
> You are right, Simmias, said Socrates, and more than that, you must re-examine our original assumptions, however certain they seem to you; and when you have analyzed them sufficiently, you will, I think, follow the argument, as far as man can follow it; and when that becomes clear to you, you will seek for nothing more. (106e-107b)

The investigation should continue. It has not come to a real conclusion. What then has been accomplished? Remember that the discussion was meant to answer Cebes' objection, which relied on the figure of the person wearing a coat, who having outlasted many coats, is yet being outlasted by the last of his coats. Wearer of coat : coat = soul : body — a metaphor that has returned again and again. The argument is designed to show that there is something inappropriate not only about this particular metaphor, but about all metaphors that suggest that the soul is a thing like the things that we can see. **In that sense** it would seem **the soul is not a particular thing at all**. The soul is not a living thing that somehow enters or wears a body. It is rather like the form of life. And this **kinship with the forms** lets it belong with being rather than with becoming. By its very nature then the soul is immortal and imperishable. That had indeed been Socrates' conclusion:

> Then, Cebes, said he, beyond all question the soul is immortal and imperishable; and our souls will indeed exist in the other world. (107a)

But here Socrates surely suggests individual immortality: "our souls will really exist in the next world." But what sense can we make of the plural here? We therefore have to modify what has just been said: **the soul names that in the individual which is the principle of life. It also names what lets the individual be conscious of the forms, what opens him to the transcendent realm in which we have our measure**. It names the *logos* (reason) dwelling in the *zoon* (animal): names what makes the individual immortal and imperishable.

If soul meant simply the form of life it would be difficult to understand what is meant by the command that we take care of the soul. But that is what Socrates would have us do:

> But then, my friends, said he, we must think of this. If it be true that the soul is immortal, we have to take care of her, not merely on account of the time which we call life, but also on account of all time. Now we can see how terrible is the danger of neglect. For if death had been a release from all things, it would have been a godsend to the wicked ; for when they died they would have been released with their souls from the body and from their own wickedness. But now we have found that the soul is immortal; and so her only refuge and salvation from evil is to become as perfect and wise as possible. For she takes nothing with her to the other world but her education and culture; and these, it is said, are of the greatest service or of the greatest injury to the dead man, at the very beginning of his journey thither. (107b-d)

The tension between individual and universal characterizes Plato's discussion of the soul. Does he mean by soul an individual soul in the Christian sense? Does he not considers this a childish view? The same childish view that finds expression in many of the

objections and questions raised by Simmias and Cebes? But the opposite view, which makes the soul simply into the form of life seems similarly inadequate, for it makes the soul into something quite other than the individual. But the soul of Socrates is not to be identified with that of Simmias or Cebes. Soul, I suggested, names that in the individual, which lets that individual not just live, but participate in the realm of the forms, in a timeless beyond. To take care or neglect the soul is to cultivate or neglect the claims issuing from that realm. To neglect the soul is to cease to be open to these claims. But what prevents us from being open in this way is body-centered selfishness.

Socrates' discussion culminates in the myth he tells of the soul's journeyings. The appearance of myth in the dialogue may seem surprising, given Socrates' professed inability to take seriously the old myths. Is the great myth of the *Phaedo* to be taken any more seriously by us? In what sense? Socrates answers the question for us:

> A man of sense will not insist that these things are exactly as I have described them. But I think that he will believe that something of the kind is true of the soul and her habitations, seeing that she is shown to be immortal, and that it is worth his while to stake everything on this belief. The venture is a fair one, and he must charm his doubts with spells like these. That is why I have been prolonging the fable all this time. (114c-d)

Socrates' myth is not to be take literally. It is a likely story, expressing a faith that if Socrates is right a person of sense will accept. It does not give certainty, but demands of us that we take a risk, that we wager on its truth. And when doubts arise, such doubts need to be charmed away by stories of this sort. **Socrates calls us to a faith that cannot finally be secured by reason**. That faith is the ground of Plato's philosophizing. The many references to Apollo are expressions of this faith. But it is a faith, not the result of sober reason. One lesson of the *Phaedo* is then that reason alone is not sufficient to ground an ethics. That ground can only be provided by some sort of faith. If what Socrates has to say were not based on faith, there would be no venture, no risk. This,

however, is not to say that it is not to be tested by reason. **But our reason finally does not reach far enough.**

What is the content of Socrates' great myth? The world is described as being rather like a gigantic golf ball. We dwell in the hollows of the ball.

> We are just like a man dwelling in the depths of the ocean, who thought that he was dwelling on its surface, and believed that the sea was the heaven, because he saw the sun and the stars through the water; but who was too weak and slow ever to have reached the water's surface, and to have lifted his head from the sea, and come out from his depths to our world, and seen, or heard from one who had seen, how much purer and fairer our world was than the place wherein he dwelt. We are just in that state; we dwell in a hollow of the earth, and think that we are dwelling on its surface; and we call the air heaven, and think it to be the heaven wherein the stars run their courses. But the truth is that we are too weak and slow to pass through to the surface of the air. For if any man could reach the surface, or take wings and fly upward, he would look up and see a world beyond, just as the fishes look forth from the sea, and behold our world. (109c-d)

There is then the real earth, the real surface. This real earth is described buy Socrates like a version of paradise:

> Many creatures live upon it; and there are men, some dwelling inland, and others round the air, as we dwell round the sea, and others in islands encircled by the air, which lie near the continent. In a word, they use the air as we use water and the sea, and the ether as we use the air. The temperature of their seasons is such that they are free from disease, and live much longer than we do; and in sight, and hearing, and smell, and the other senses, they are as much more perfect than we, as air is purer than

> water, and ether than air. Moreover they have sanctuaries and temples of the gods, in which the gods dwell in very truth; they hear the voices and oracles of the gods, and see them in visions, and have intercourse with them face to face : and they see the sun and moon and stars as they really are; and in other matters their happiness is of a piece with this. (111a-c)

At first it might seem that we have here another myth about the nature of the cosmos. But it is too incoherent to be taken seriously as such. The fantastic world that is described here offers not a topography of our world, but a topography of our soul. The four great rivers of which Plato then speaks carry the souls to places fitting with how they lived. I will just call the end of the myth to your attention: those who have just died are conducted by their guardian spirit to a place of judgment,

> There they dwell, and are punished for the crimes which they have committed, and are purified and absolved; and for their good deeds they are rewarded, each according to his deserts. But all who appear to be incurable from the enormity of their sins — those who have committed many and great sacrileges, and foul and lawless murders, or other crimes like these — are hurled down to Tartarus by the fate which is their due, whence they never come forth again. (113d)

The great myth of the *Phaedo* thus provides for a realm very much like hell. Ordinary mortals have to undergo a process of purification, rather like the Christian purgatory, while the best are allowed to ascend to Plato's version of heaven:

> But such as have been pre-eminent for holiness in their lives are set free and released from this world, as from a prison: they ascend to their pure habitation, and dwell on the earth's surface. And those of them who have sufficiently purified themselves with philosophy, live thenceforth without bodies, and proceed to dwellings still fairer than these, which are not

> easily described, and of which I have not time to speak now. But for all these reasons, Simmias, we must leave nothing undone that we may obtain virtue and wisdom in this life. Noble is the prize, and great the hope. (114b-c)

The myth does suggest a personal immortality, suggests indeed that for all but the philosopher after-life will mean life in a body. Only the philosopher will live without one.

How are we to understand this myth? What is it to tell those present? First of all it is meant to give them what Socrates takes to be **reasonable hope** that our death does not mean that everything ends for us with our death. How we live our lives has consequences for what transcends that life, which the myth describes as life after death. Everyone will get the kind of after-life he deserves, although in the case of the philosopher it is no longer an after-life in any recognizable sense.

But we misunderstand the myth if we understand it first of all as an attempt to conjecture about what will happen to us after death. For that is it much too fantastic. In an important sense the myth is not so much about what will happen to us after death as it is about this life, about how we should live. As he remarks, Socrates quite literally does not have time to prove to Simmias that of which the myth speaks. What the myth does is re-enforce the call to virtue, to courage, to a communal existence. In particular the myth affirms the kind of life Socrates lived in such exemplary fashion. It reaffirms that the fear of death is born of ignorance concerning the true significance of death, and that means also about the true significance of life and of what gives life meaning and dignity.

The myth of the different kinds of after-life gives us something like a symbolic ladder that culminates in the recognition that what Socrates or the philosopher means when he speaks of the soul's immortality is nothing other than the participation of the individual in this life in a realm that transcends time. The task of philosophy is to awaken human beings to this participation, which finds expression in a kind of faith.

Following this myth, the dialogue concludes with a brief description of the last moments of h life. Socrates wants to have a bath so that the women won't have the trouble of bathing his dead body. It is an interesting detail. Socrates wants to purify himself while still alive. The living have to purify themselves, they should not wait until after they are dead to let others do the job. Such purification, to be sure, is not bathing. But bathing here functions as its figure. The decision also speaks of Socrates' continuing willingness to submit to the customs of the city. He then tells Crito and the others that they should live what he has taught them. Crito wants to know how Socrates is to be buried, and Socrates jokes that Crito still has not understood that the Athenians cannot bury Socrates. They can bury his body, but Socrates will enter a timeless realm. He bathes, takes leave from his children and the women of the family. We gather that he spends quite some time with them, although we do not learn what he had to tell them. The prison warden comes with the poison, and although Crito once again suggests that **there still is time**, Socrates now sees no point to further delay. It would grant time an importance that it does not possess and thus call into question the central message: what makes life worth living, what gives dignity and value to human life, must be sought beyond time.

There is one last detail to which I would like to call your attention: Socrates asks the man administering the hemlock whether he could make a libation from his draught, to ask the gods for a prosperous voyage. This is in keeping with his last words:

> Crito, he said, I owe a cock to Asclepius; do not forget to pay it. (118)

Asclepius of course is the god of healing. The point is unmistakable. Death is the cure for the disease that is life. We ought to be grateful to the god for the gift of death.

But the idea of pouring the gods a libation of poison also suggests something else: is what brings death to Socrates perhaps also poison to the gods? I remind you of the way the trial of Socrates can also be construed as a trial of the old gods. Are they here put to death, only to be reborn in purer form? Socrates has interpreted the significance of

that death of the old gods for us: the faith in a life of reason for which Socrates dies does indeed signify the death of the old gods.

Socrates' faith provides the basis for his commitment to a life of reason. The reasonable life is also the good life and Socrates adds, the happy life. For what is happiness? Socrates might answer that happiness has its measure in the coincidence of what we are and what we should be. But what should we be? The answer is provided by the place we have been provided by the community to which we belong and, more importantly, by the gods, that is to say, by that divine measure each human being bears within her- or himself. In this sense the true philosopher is also the happiest person. And precisely the account of the death of Socrates gives us a hint of the nature of that happiness.

9. Goodness and Pleasure

The step from Plato's *Phaedo* to Jeremy Bentham's *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* is a step into a different world, a world that in many ways is very much already our own world, the modern world. Those of you who found Plato's talk about man being the property of the gods, or of a timeless realm of forms that is supposed to give human beings their measure, annoyingly vague, may find the rather pedestrian, but seemingly commonsensical way in which Bentham goes about developing his principles refreshingly straightforward. Bentham means his moral philosophy to address itself to contemporary problems. He understood himself as a reformer and was interested in the emancipation of the oppressed. His own notes to the work bristle with references to government abuses and make often very specific suggestions as to just how government is to be reformed in light of the to him so evident principles he has set up.

Perhaps the difference between Bentham and Plato is most easily approached by considering the famous concluding words of David Hume's *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Hume was among the small number of philosophers who did have a profound impact on Bentham. Here are his words:

> When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc we must make? If we take in our hand any volume — of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance — let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity and numbers? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

Hume here leaves no room for the claim that human beings possess something like an intuition or experience of the forms, some sort of immediate insight into a higher realm that issues demands or commands. You will have to ask yourself whether you should

agree with Plato that there is something like such an experience or with Hume and dismiss all talk of it as just this: mere talk, sophistry.

Bentham's *Principles* make a similar point. Of his key notion, **the principle of utility**, he has his to say:

> II. **The principle of utility is the foundation of the present work**: it will be proper therefore at the outset to give an explicit and determinate account of what is meant by it. By the principle of utility is meant **that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the interest of the party whose interest is in question**; or, what is the same thing, in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness. I say of every action whatsoever; and therefore not only of every action of a private individual, but of every measure of government. (2)

Too often philosophy has been no more than idle talk. We have to test it by bringing it back to its base, and in the case of moral philosophy this base is, if we follow Bentham, precisely the principle of utility, announced on the very first page of the work:

> I. Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, **pain** and **pleasure**. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The principle of utility recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the

> foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and law. (1-2)

Whatever we ought to do has its ground in what will bring us pleasure and help us to avoid pain.

Note that the principle of utility can be given a **private and a public form**: the **party whose interest is in question** may be an **individual** or it may be some **community**. The former is clearly the more basic, for, as Bentham's fourth principle states:

> IV. The community is a fictitious *body*, composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its *members*. The interest of the community then is, what? — the sum of interests of the several members who compose it. (3)

The community is only a fictitious, an artificial body (cf. Hobbes, *Leviathan*). Its interest is only the aggregate of the interests of the individuals that constitute it. The basis for all judgments of right and wrong would thus appear to be finally the self-interest of the individual faced with a certain decision. I shall have to return to this point, which threatens to make utilitarianism into a kind of egoism, an understanding of utilitarianism utilitarians will reject, insisting, as Bentham hints in the footnote, that we need to consider the "number, of interests affected." But why should we, if this is not in our personal interest? First of all pain and pleasure are experienced by individuals. So first of all Bentham's fundamental principle suggests self-interest. Utilitarianism thus threatens to reduce to a form of **egoism**. Consider

> V. It is in vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is in the interests of the individual. A thing is said to promote the interest, or to be for the interest, of an individual, when it tends to add to the sum total of his pleasures: or what comes to the same thing, to diminish the sum total of his pains. (3)

Would Plato necessarily have disagreed with Bentham? Two kinds of considerations occur:

1) On one hand Socrates teaches us not to take the self too seriously. We should recognize that we are part of a larger whole or perhaps wholes. Bentham, on the other hand, begins with atomic individuals whose natural goal is to maximize pleasure and to minimize pain in this life. If the sum total of pleasures and pains were to be negative there would be no reason to go on with life. The individual on this view belongs to himself. Every person is his own property, as Locke pointed out, in direct opposition to Plato. What then about **suicide**? It is interesting that Bentham has very little to say about it: in the notes he considers it an **offense against population**, to be classed together with abortion. The individual is here considered a national asset: the public welfare might be diminished by my taking my life. This to be sure does not provide a reason *never* to commit it: I may be a burden on my community and in that case, who not suicide? And even suppose I am an unquestionable asset to my community: why should I care if I find my life intolerable? Why should I care about the welfare of the whole?

Bentham has of course an answer to the general question: why should I be concerned with the welfare of my fellow human beings? My own interests are so bound up with the community in which I exist that I have to take its interests into account. It is, in other words, in my self-interest to heed the general interest. There is a harmony between the two. But suppose the two clash: Suppose what I consider my self-interest is at odds with the public interest. Can this in principle be ruled out? On what grounds? But if not, can Bentham give us anything like an argument against my heeding only my self-interest in such circumstances. Take my would-be suicide: can Bentham provide him with considerations likely to carry any weight with anyone contemplating suicide?

If just on this question Plato and Bentham appear far removed from one another, a different consideration tends to bring them closer together: Could one not argue that Socrates does what he does because he is convinced that it is only in this way that his life

is truly worth living. Does he not tend to equate the rational with the good and the happy life? But is this not to say that he considers such a life to give him greater benefits, greater pleasure than some other life? Recall in this connection how much Plato makes of the happy serenity of Socrates. Is he then not living his life in accord with the principle of utility as Bentham defines it? Note that Bentham keeps it on purpose very formal and abstract.

> By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness, (all of this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered: if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community: if a particular individual, then the happiness of the individual. (2)

If we consider Socrates' interests, his view of happiness and unhappiness, must we not say that he lived his life quite in accord with the principle of utility? And indeed, if Bentham is right, there can be no argument against his principle. All such supposed arguments are said to already presuppose it.

> XIII. When a man attempts to combat the principle of utility, it is with reasons drawn, without his being aware of it, from that very principle itself. His arguments, if they prove any thing, prove not that the principle of utility is wrong, but that, according to the applications he supposes to be made of it, it is misapplied. Is it possible for a man to move the earth? Yes; but he must first find out another earth to stand upon. (4-5)

The *Phaedo* invites us to understand Socrates as someone who claims to have found another earth. But this does not subvert the principle of utility, Bentham would insist.

For Bentham it is clear that our self-interest is determined by what we are, by our corporeal, material being. Bodily desires thus play a large part in defining our interest.

When a philosopher or theologian refuses to admit these then he is likely to do so because he claims to have found that other earth. The theologian may do so by pointing to the after-life, be it in heaven or in hell. Plato could point to the realm of forms. This lets him be at times rather hard on the pleasures of the body, which are said to be like tacks binding the immortal soul to the body. But are the body's pleasures not criticized here in the name of supposedly more genuine or greater pleasures? Is it not the principle, of utility in one form that here is turned against the principle of utility in another? Bentham, to be sure, would be very suspicious of this application of his principle. He would suggest that what we have here is indeed a **principle adverse to that of *genuine* utility.** Among these adverse principles he discusses what he terms the **principle of asceticism**:

> III By the principle of asceticism I mean that principle, which like the principle of utility, approves or disapproves of any action, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question; but in an inverse manner: approving of actions in so far as they tend to diminish his happiness; disapproving of them in so far they tend to augment it. (9)

What we have here is of course only a perverted principle of utility.

The only argument against pleasure, no matter how low, how despicable we think it, it that it produces pain in some way or prevents someone else from the pursuit of his pleasures. According to Bentham, you may get your private pleasures in what others may consider the most perverse ways — if they are genuinely private and do not lead to some future pain that will outweigh the present pleasure, they are your business. You may even be the sort of person who gets pleasure from what ordinarily is considered pain.

> IV It is evident that any one who reprobates any the least particle of pleasure as such, from whatever source derived, is *pro tanto* a partizan of the principle of asceticism. It is only upon that principle, and not from the principle of utility, that the most abominable pleasure which the vilest of

> malefactors ever reaped from his crime would be reprobated, if it stood alone. The case is, that it never does stand alone;... (9)

That such a principle has immediate practical application is evident. Consider, e.g. sexual activity and the law. As long as the interested parties derive pleasure from what they are doing and harm no one else, there is nothing that can be said against it and certainly there should be no legislation trying to enforce some supposed morality.

Given the to Bentham unreasonable nature of the principle of asceticism, one may well wonder why it should ever have gained such a powerful hold on so many people. According to Bentham its main support comes from fear of what will happen after this life, fear of hell. But Bentham has no place for hell. An interesting question is: what was it that let mankind ever invent such future tortures, which to be avoided demand of the individual that he turn this life into a kind of torture. We need something like a **genealogy of hell**. Indeed we will be furnished with something of the sort in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*.

Bentham is much easier on the philosophers, among whom he also finds quite a few partisans of the principle of asceticism. But here, he suggests, it is often a matter of distinguishing some pleasures, say the so called gross pleasures, which are tied to the body, from pleasures that the philosopher considers honorable, glorious, reputable, etc. These philosophers want to draw qualitative distinctions between pleasures and pains. This raises an important issue that John Stuart Mill was to take up and use against Bentham: is it not in fact important to draw such distinctions? Is the pleasure we take, say in philosophical conversation, not qualitatively better than the pleasure we take in, say, an X-rated movie? According to Bentham the attempt to draw such a qualitative distinction between pleasures betrays something of the principle of asceticism. It is a bit as if someone were to tell you that you should like a certain fancy food, that liking it is the sort of thing to do, and yet you know that you prefer Kentucky fried chicken. Could you be said to be wrong? Bentham at any rate would speak up on your behalf. There is a

traditional saying: there is no disputing about taste, and according to Bentham there is no disputing about pleasures. What one person enjoys another may well find odious. There is of course the problem that some pleasures indulged in lead to future pain: think of overeating. Here we have one obvious reason in favor of something like the principle of asceticism. There are circumstances when we should abstain from something we ordinarily find pleasurable. But the principle of asceticism overshoots the mark:

> X. The principle of utility is capable of being consistently pursued; and it is but tautology to say, that the more consistently it is pursued, the better it must be for humankind. The principle of asceticism never was, nor ever can be consistently pursued by any living creature. Let but one tenth of the inhabitants of this earth pursue it consistently, and in a day's time they will have turned it into a hell.

What Bentham all too readily assumes here is that a society, where individuals allow their lives to be ruled by his principle of utility, will result in the greatest happiness of the greatest number. His tautology is anything but a tautology.

A second principle Bentham discusses, adverse to that of utility is that of **Antipathy and Sympathy**. Here an action is praised or condemned just because some individual or group of individuals feels disposed to do so. All those who insist on a private moral sense and on judging others by it fall under that principle. It is easy to accuse Socrates or Plato of this. Bentham does not allow the claim that an individual has a special intuition that allows him or her to determine not only what is good for this individual, but also what is good for others. I am indeed in a privileged position to judge what I find pleasurable or painful. But there is no argument here that others should find the same things pleasurable and painful. The democratic nature of Bentham's approach is apparent.

But let me return to a distinction I drew earlier: the principle of utility is defined by Bentham in such a way that it leaves open who the party is whose interests are at

issue. I pointed out that it could be the **individual** or some **community.** In its first version the principle is an egoistic one. Consider once more:

> It is in vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is in the interests of the individual. (3)

But Bentham quickly insists on the second, communal reading of his principle:

> IX. A man may be said to be a partizan of the principle of utility, when the approbation or disapprobation he annexes to any action, or to any measure, is determined by and proportioned to the tendency which he conceives it to have to augment or to diminish the happiness of the community: or in other words to the laws and dictates of utility. (4 - 5)

How do these two formulations hang together? Might the principle in its first formulation not argue against the second? Might someone who upholds the second not even be charged with holding to some version of the principle of asceticism? Is it clear that the happiness of the community is in my self-interest? Bentham's utilitarianism has its foundation in his egoism. It can have no other foundation, for pleasure and pain are always a particular individual's pleasure and pain. To argue, as Kant will, that we have some kind of duty to respect other persons and to treat them as such can make no sense given Bentham's formulation of the principle of utility. We should treat them as persons when this is in our self-interest and otherwise forget it. If Bentham, or any utilitarian, is unwilling to accept that conclusion, he needs to give another account of what is meant by words such as "ought" and "right."

One might reply that **for Bentham there is really no such thing as a genuinely private morality**. **Morality on his view has to do with the mores of some community**. The answer to the question: why should I be moral? on this account finally has to be: because it is in my self-interest as a social being. When we call behavior “moral,” our own or that of another, we do so with reference to social sanctions attached to such actions.

Sanctions, Bentham defines as "a source of obligatory powers or motives. (25 fn) Obligatory powers are powers that oblige, that is to say bind. Sanctions have binding power. They have that power because they are a source of pains and pleasures. Bentham distinguishes four such sanctions, the **physical**, the **political**, the **moral**, and the **religious**.

The **physical** is the basis for all the others. Its meaning is simple, enough. You overeat and you get a stomachache. You are careless and fall. You smoke in bed and burn down your house.

But suppose you live in Maine and forbid snowmobiles to cut across your property and someone in the community tells you that your barn might just happen to burn down. That is an example of what Bentham calls a **moral** sanction. Consider

> V. If at the hand of such chance persons in the community, as the party in question may happen in the course of his life to have concerns with, according to each man's spontaneous disposition, and not according to any settled or concerned rule, it may be said to issue from the **moral** or **popular** sanction.

The variety of such sanctions is endless. Think of a liar no longer trusted by anyone in the community.

Political sanctions are administered by particular persons in the community charged with their administration. The exercise of such sanctions is **in accord with the will of the sovereign**, which in a democracy would be the **people**. This will should be expressed in **public laws**.

The **religious** sanction gets whatever binding power it has from pleasures or pains expected not in this, but in the after-life. Thus the fear of hell or damnation may function as a very effective sanction. You may of course also fear God's punishment or expect his reward in this life. Bentham takes the religious sanction to be based on **superstition**.

How then are we to act? The only answer can be: in accord with our enlightened self-interest. How do we determine that interest? I shall turn to this question next time.

10. A Questionable Calculus

I concluded my last lecture with the question: How are we to act? Bentham's answer: in accord with our enlightened self-interest! How do we determine that interest? To make it easier for us to remember the principles that should guide such action he added the following footnote to the discussion of chapter IV:

> Not long after the publication of the first edition, the following memoriter verses were framed, in the view of lodging more effectually, in the memory, these points, on which the whole fabric of morals and legislation may be seen to rest:
>
> *Intense, long, certain, speedy, fruitful, pure —*
> Such marks in *pleasures* and in *pains* endure.
> Such pleasures seek if *private* be thy end:
> If it be *public*, wide let them *extend.*
> Such *pains* avoid, whichever be thy view:
> If pains must come, let them *extend* to few. (29)

These verses do indeed give you the heart of Bentham's moral philosophy. They suggest the possibility of a calculus that will allow us to tell which of two possible courses of action is to be preferred, a possibility that must seem attractive to a society bent on rationalizing moral and legal decision making.

> Sum up all the values of all the *pleasures* on the one side, and those of all the pains on the other. The balance, if it be on the side of pleasure, will give the *good* tendency of the act upon the whole, with respect to the interests of that *individual* person; if on the side of pain, the *bad* tendency of it upon the whole. (31)

As Bentham recognizes, our concern for individual pleasures and pains we should not lose sight of the whole, of the relevant **community**:

> Take an account of the number of persons whose interests appear to be concerned; and repeat the above process with respect to each. Sum up the numbers expressive of the degrees of *good* tendency, which the act has, with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is *good* upon the whole: do this again with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is bad upon the whole. Take the balance; which if on the side of pleasure, will give the general good tendency of the act, with respect to the total number or community of individuals concerned; if on the side of pain, the general evil tendency with respect to the same community. (31)

Bentham knows how difficult it is to carry out such a calculus in practice. But he thinks it is useful as a regulative idea. It should always be kept in view. Moral calculation takes the form of calculating the pains and pleasures expected to result from a certain course of action for the relevant community.

But let us consider once more Bentham's statements of the kind of considerations required. The value of a pleasure or pain will be determined first of all by the four characteristic outlined in par. II:

> Intensity
>
> Duration
>
> Certainty or uncertainty
>
> Propinquity of remoteness (29)

These do indeed speak for themselves: a bird in the hand is better than two in the bush. Equally evident are the two characteristic that pertain not to the quality of the prospective pleasures, but to their likelihood of giving rise to other pleasures or pains. And finally Bentham bids us consider the possible consequences of our planned action for other persons involved. Let me consider this seventh and last consideration first:

Take the case of Socrates: let us assume that Socrates was not unhappy to die and that the majority of Athenians were made happy by the action taken. Does that make it right? Would it become less right if Socrates had been unhappier? Is his happiness or unhappiness at all a relevant consideration when assessing the justice of the Athenians' action?

Let us take a case where the happiness of a great many people is slightly increased by putting someone, of whose beliefs they don't approve, to death. A question this raises is how we are to calculate the importance of life. What kind of a pain is death? Is it comparable to other pleasures and pains? Does a person have a dignity and right to life that makes such calculations odious? What value are we to give to death in our calculus? It seems to be incommensurable. But if so, this calls the very foundation of Bentham's calculus into question.

Take another example: imagine a society in which part of the population suppresses and exploits another part; it does not matter for the purpose of this example whether we have a minority suppressing a majority or the reverse. It is easy to imagine a situation where the exploiters take exploitation to be in their best interest: exploitation is what they think will give them the greatest happiness. Would they be wrong? On what grounds?

It is clear from much that is said in the *Principles* that Bentham would have sided with the exploited. He was usually on the side of reform and emancipation. Consider, e.g. his remarks on the oppression of women:

> In certain nations, women, whether married or not, have been placed in a state of perpetual wardship; this has been evidently founded on the notion of a decided inferiority in point of intellects on the part of the female sex, analogous to that which is the result of infancy or insanity on the part of the male. This is not the only instance in which tyranny has taken advantage of its own wrong, alleging as a reason for the domination it

> exercises, an imbecility, which, as far as it has been real, has been produced by the abuse of that very power which it is brought to justify. Aristotle, fascinated by the prejudice of the times, divides mankind into two distinct species, that of freemen, and that of slaves. Certain men were born to be slaves, and ought to be slaves.— Why? Because they are so. (268 fn)

Tyranny is here said to have "taken advantage of its own wrong." But in what sense is the word "wrong" used here? If one were able to argue that all human beings, as such, have certain rights there would be no problem. But Bentham, by his principles, must give all talk about rights a basis in enlightened self-interest. Operative in the *Principles* is indeed a strong presupposition of the essential equality of all human beings, but how, given the principle of utility, is it possible to claim that human beings have certain rights simply by virtue of being human beings. *Given these principles*, must this claim not be dismissed as another superstition? Consider in this connection Bentham's long footnote on slavery on pp. 310 and 311:

> The day has been, I grieve to say in many places it is not yet past, where the greater part of the species, under the denomination of slaves, have been treated by the law exactly upon the same footing as, in England for example, the inferior races of animals are still. The day may come, when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may come one day to be recognized, that the number of the legs, the vilosity of the skin, or the termination of the *os sacrum*, are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty

> of reason, or perhaps the facility of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month old. But suppose the case were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they *reason*? Nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*? (311, fn)

A number of things are interesting about this footnote. That Bentham is against the oppression of any human being is clear enough. But he himself had insisted that antipathy is never a right ground of action. To convince someone who does not share with him the same antipathy against such oppression, he has to be able to show that what has been proposed is in in the fnal analysis in that person's self-interest.

Something else deserves our attention: Bentham's eagerness to **blur the boundary supposedly separating human beings and animals**. There is the suggestion that in our calculations of the greatest happiness of the greatest number we should not only consider the welfare of human beings, but also that of animals. Animals, too, are capable of suffering. But again the question is: given his own principles, how can he justify this extension of his calculus to animals? The only argument Bentham could finally allow is that once we have become more enlightened we will discover it to be in our self-interest not to inflict such suffering: that the person who now enjoys his steaks will really get more pleasure out of life once he becomes a vegetarian. Operative here would seem to be the unstated presupposition that the enlightened self-interest of an individual or a group of individuals will recognize that the principle of utility should be applied not only to all human beings, but to all beings capable of suffering. That assumption seems impossible to justify on Bentham's own principles. Yet something like it is needed if we are to appeal to the principle of utility in its general, i.e. non-egoistic form.

But let me return to Chapter Four and to the list of factors to be considered when evaluating a proposed course of action. I have raised some questions about 7, What about the other 6? They seem so obvious.

But difficulties appear as soon as we try to weigh specific pleasures and pains. Pleasures and pains form a rather **heterogeneous** set. The kind of quantification proposed by Bentham proposes their **homogeneity**.

The list of pleasures Bentham gives us at the beginning of the chapter gives us an idea of their variety: Pleasures of sense, of wealth, of skill, of amity, of a good name, of power, of piety, of benevolence, of malevolence, of imagination, of expectation, pleasures dependent on association, and pleasures of relief. (33) The list of pains is similar. Pains of benevolence, for example, are pains endured from seeing or considering the pains of another person, pains of malevolence pains endured on seeing the good fortune of another human being.

Is one sort of pain qualitatively different from the other? Bentham claims that looked at in isolation they are not: consider the footnote on p. 102:

> Let a man's motive be ill-will; call it even malice, envy, cruelty; it is still a kind of pleasure that is his motive; the pleasure he takes at the thought of the pain which he sees, or expects to see, his adversary undergo. Now even this wretched pleasure, taken by itself, is good: it may be faint; it may be short: it must at any rate be impure: yet while it lasts, and before any bad consequences arise, it is as good as any other that is not more intense. (102 fn)

Consider once more the trial of Socrates. There is at least one person, Crito, in the court room, who is terribly upset by what is happening, sufficiently outraged that he tries to do something about it, as it turns out unsuccessfully, thus augmenting his own pain. **Is his pain at watching the spectacle less good than the joy of the unjust?** They at least are having fun while they are watching? Would one not want to say that the pains of

benevolence are better than the joys of malevolence? Bentham might very well agree and point out that in the long run such benevolence is more likely to lead to greater happiness for the individual and for the community, even if in this particular case Crito's pain does not help Socrates or the Athenians. But we may want to shift our attention away from the **particular act** to the **general rule**. If there were more Critos this would be a happier world.

There are other examples that invite such a shift. Take the case of the occasional lie or a theft from a man so rich that he does not notice the theft. Is there anything wrong with such actions? Given Bentham's considerations it is easy to construct scenarios where such actions would have to be considered right in that they lead to greater happiness. Against such examples one may want to urge that what should be considered here is not just the particular act, but the general rule. If lying and stealing were to become general practices they would not lead to greater happiness. Here we have an argument for so-called **rule utilitarianism** as opposed to the **act utilitarianism** of someone like Bentham. But in the end I find Bentham's position more consistent. He would have answered that whether to follow a certain rule or not would itself have to be decided in each case by the individual's understanding of the likely consequences. Take a little white lie. Don't we all tell such lies fairly often, for example when we report on the fun we have been having this weekend. Is there anything wrong with such little lies? Or think of white lies in job interviews. Or in politics. And where are we to draw the line between white and not so white, say grey or even black lies? Doesn't the principle of utility once again provide the right answer? The argument for a rule utilitarianism that does not finally ground itself in an act utilitarianism has to invoke more than the principle of utility as stated by Bentham. To put this in Bentham's terms: it has to invoke some form of the principle of sympathy and antipathy, perhaps in the form of the claim that what gives dignity to human beings is inseparably bound up with their ability to follow rules. Bentham no doubt would have scoffed.

One might try to justify rule utilitarianism by invoking the greatest happiness of the greatest number. But this will not work here: it is fairly easy to show that there are cases where a lie or a breach of promise augments total happiness.

But there is a more basic problem: we have to question Bentham's own rather too easy move from the principle of utility in its egoistic form to its extension to the greatest happiness of the greatest number, where one question is how to determine the **scope** of the relevant community. As I have already pointed out, that extension can finally be defended on Bentham's grounds only **if the greatest happiness of the greatest number is in the long run also in my own best interest**, if there is something like a pre-established harmony between the two. If not, the general statement of the principle of utility is based on a version of **the principle of sympathy and antipathy**. As I have already suggested, Bentham's own work is very much subject to such a bias. We may well applaud that **bias in favor of egalitarian and democratic ideas**. It may have our own sympathy. But especially if this is the case, we will be forced to admit that his utilitarianism is seriously flawed, that his work is as adequate as it is precisely because he does not adhere to the principle he has announced at the beginning of his book, because he, too, like Plato, relies on fundamental intuitions concerning the worth and dignity of human existence that will not be reduced to what his principle of utility demands.

But let me return once more to the example with which I began. Is the pain of the person witnessing the misfortune of another not **better** than the joy of another witnessing the same misfortune? But how are we to understand "better" here? We might point that the former's pain betrays a character more likely to increase the happiness of others and thus justify it in terms of Bentham's utility principle. But the example also calls attention to the need to draw qualitative distinctions between pleasures and pain. Take the pleasure we take in a good conversation compared to the pleasure we take in good food. Are they comparable? Let me give you a third example: I generally prefer piano sonatas by

Beethoven to those by Clementi, but after listening to a great deal of music by Beethoven, I may want to listen to Clementi, **for a change**. The **novelty** of the Clementi here becomes part of the reason for choosing it.

All these examples suggest a need to make distinctions between pleasures. There are what we may want to call **first order pleasures**, but our estimation of these pleasures may increase or diminish these pleasures, or even make them entirely distasteful. And this estimation is not adequately accounted for by appealing once again to Bentham's calculus. This can be shown by asking: what kind of account can Bentham give of my third example, my desire to listen to the Clementi for a change**:** We are given a few pointers. In his list of the pleasures of sense you will find listed at the very end:

> 9. The pleasures of novelty: or the pleasures derived from the gratification of the appetite of curiosity, by the application of new objects to any of the senses. (3)

The footnote adds that

> There are also pleasures of novelty, excited by the appearance of some ideas: these are pleasures of the imagination (35 fn)

A somewhat more complete analysis is given in a later footnote:

> The pleasures of novelty have no positive pains corresponding to them. The pain which a man experiences when he is in the condition of not knowing what to do with himself, that pain, which in French is expressed by a single word, *ennui*, is a pain of privation: a pain resulting not only from the absence of all the pleasures of novelty, but of all pleasures whatsoever.
>
> (39, fn)

That this is an altogether unsatisfactory analysis of what we generally call boredom should be evident. Boredom hardly implies that there are no pleasures available, but that these pleasures are found meaningless, empty. Boredom is precisely boredom with what

in one sense are no doubt positive pleasures. The appetite for novelty, for the interesting, is of a higher order than simple hunger. It has its origin in reflection. The bored person is at a distance from himself, has become his own spectator and as long as he remains at such a distance, boredom will never be cured. Boredom is cured only when the bored person finds something or someone make a genuine claim on him. It is not the inability to find pleasures that explains boredom, but the inability to experience genuine **claims**. This presupposes a difference between what I have called claims and pains and pleasures. I am using the word claim here in a way that is not unrelated to what Socrates means when he calls himself the child of the laws and the slave of the gods. He here points to two kinds of reality that claim him in such a way that he cannot consider himself his own property. Bentham's fundamentally atomistic conception of the individual does not allow him to recognize this. On his analysis what I have just called claims would have to be reduced to pleasures. But such an analysis has to distort the meaning of what I have called claims.

What I have suggested amounts to an insistence on qualitative differences Bentham has no room for. More especially it amounts to insisting that a difference be drawn **between notions such a right and wrong, on the one hand, pleasure and pain, on the other**. We can thus speak of pleasures that are wrong and evil and ought to be resisted, and not just because they somehow interfere with future pleasures or the pleasures of others. Our duty to care for other human beings and the pleasure we take in food are incommensurable. Is that duty to be reduced to a prudential strategy designed to maximize our own pleasure? Bentham's follower Mill tried to deal with this challenge by making out of the sense of duty a particular feeling:

> The internal sanction of duty, whatever our standard of duty may be, is one and the same — a feeling in our own mind: a pain, more or less intense, attendant on violation of duty, which **in properly cultivated moral natures** rises, in the more serious cases, in shrinking from it as an

> impossibility. This feeling, when **disinterested** ... is the essence of conscience.[2]

We may want to say that we are still presented here with a properly utilitarian position: just like hunger a violation of our sense of duty leaves us dissatisfied. But are they in fact commensurable? Mill also says that our sense of duty should be cultivated and suggests that it should be disinterested. This is to say, that human beings should be taught and should teach themselves to becomes less self-centered. But with this consideration we have discarded the so evidently self-centered starting point of Bentham 's utilitarianism and have quite blatantly invoked what Bentham called the principle of sympathy and antipathy. I do not want to criticize such apparent inconsistency. Quite the opposite: Mill's waffling makes his position more adequate to our intuitions about what constitutes the good life. But if we have to muddle a position in this way for the sake of greater adequacy to our intuitions, this has to suggest that the position was quite inadequate to begin with. The fact that many ethicists today take different versions of Bentham's position pretty much for granted and busy themselves with applications of his calculus seems thus a sad comment on the current state of philosophy.

[2] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays*, Digireads.com Publishing, 2010, p. 91,

11. Crime and Punishment

Let me begin by recalling once more Bentham's statement of the principle of utility. By it Bentham understands "that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party in question." As I pointed out, that party is first of all the individual concerned. The principle of utility thus becomes in the first instance the principle that **every person should act in his or her enlightened self-interest**, where the "**should**" is not really a moral "**ought**": if Bentham is right, who would not want to act in what he takes to be his or her enlightened self-interest? Why would we want to do anything else? The discrepancy between "should" and "will" is to be explained in terms of ignorance. To speak here of an enlightened self-interest is to do no more than to insist that prospects of immediate pleasures should not lead us to overlook the long term consequences of such pleasures. Similarly an immediate pain, say from a vaccination or connected with a visit to the dentist, often leads to a more pleasurable life in the future.

But if in the first instance the principle of utility is the principle that every person should act in his or her enlightened self-interest, much more often Bentham uses the principle in a sense where the interested party is the community. This is indeed how the principle of utility is generally understood. Now it becomes the principle that an action should be such that it is likely to augment the happiness of the community in question rather than diminish it. The question is of course: which community? What is its scope. We may be thinking of the community of all human beings, or of even a larger community, including some or even all animals. More often, however, the community in question will be a community gathered together in a state. Here the principle of utility becomes just a version of the of the old *salus populi suprema lex esto*, **the welfare of the people is to be the highest law**. All legislation should serve this highest law.

The question here is, as pointed out last time, how to reconcile these two versions of the principle of utility, the individual and the communal one. The answer has to be, given that the personal version is rightly taken to be more fundamental by Bentham, that the greatest happiness of the greatest number is in the individual's enlightened self-interest. What allows us to claim this? In this connection Bentham points to three kinds of pleasure that tend to bring enlightened self-interest and the principle of utility, now understood as the greatest happiness of the greatest number, into line: the first and most important of these is the **pleasure of benevolence.** In ch. 5 the pleasure of benevolence is discussed as the pleasure we take in the pleasures of others, be they animals, persons, or even God. In chapter 10 Bentham returns to this pleasure:

> Of all these sorts of motives, good-will is that of which the dictates, taken in a general view, are the surest of coinciding with those of the principle of utility. For the dictates of utility are neither more nor less than the most extensive and enlightened (that is well-advised) benevolence. The dictates of the other motives may be conformable to those of utility or repugnant, as it may happen. (121)

Unfortunately, as this quote suggests, benevolence is only one of many pleasures. We may easily subordinate it to these other pleasures. Even more unfortunate: quite a few of us are malevolent. By itself the pleasure of benevolence is hardly strong enough to bring the two versions of the principle of utility into line.

A second pleasure that tends to bring the two into line is the **pleasure of reputation**. We like others to think well of us. If we were not concerned about public opinion we would in all probability behave less well than we do.

Bentham adds as a third pleasure the pleasure we take in **amity**. Here it is not so much reputation that is in question, as close personal relationships, which might be ruptured if we acted too selfishly. The last two are aspects of what I discussed in my first lecture on Bentham as the **moral sanction**, although they do not exhaust it. Bentham

also discusses the **dictates of religion** as possibly tending towards an interest in the pleasures of others, as a force that in many ways makes us less self-centered, but Bentham, a product of the Enlightenment, does not think much of the religious sanction. He knows and cites countless cases where people have killed one another in the name of religion and he expresses the conviction that the more enlightened we become the more the **dictates of religion** will collapse into the **dictates of morality**, and that is to say for him also into his principle of utility. There is a great deal that supports his claim: how many ministers today, uncomfortable with talk of immaculate conception, or the resurrection, or the mysteries of the Trinity, retreat into the field of morality, eager to talk about justice and the like? Obviously there are vast differences from church to church -- but how many sermons offer something like popular ethics, slightly ornamented with references to Scripture, without such ornament adding anything essential.

But let me return to the pleasures of benevolence, reputation, and amity. They are no doubt motives tending towards compliance with the principle of utility, but they are scarcely sufficient to ensure that such fundamentally selfish and pleasure-seeking beings as we human beings are would heed the greatest happiness of the greatest number. This is precisely why the **political sanction** is needed. And as Hobbes already showed so convincingly, **it is in our self-interest that there be such a sanction**. It is in the self-interest of everyone of us that our respective self-interests be curbed. **The need for governments is a function of the fundamental selfishness of human beings**. Here Bentham finds himself in agreement with Hobbes and Locke, and looking back further, with Luther and St. Augustine. The latter two interpret the need for government as a consequence of the fall, that is to say of the basic selfishness of human beings in their present fallen state. As long as this selfishness rules, all hopes for a withering away of the state remain utopian, hopes that cannot be realized. And if, as Bentham claims, such selfishness is part of the human condition, such hopes will never be realized, are precisely utopian in the bad sense. That there be a government strong enough to ensure that I be

able to pursue my self-interests in peace and security is in the self-interest of every similarly self-interested member of the community. It is also evident that a government can be effective only as long as it can count on the support of the great majority of the people, that is to say as long as they take it to be in their best interest. It is in my best interest to have a government that acts in such a way as to make the happiness of all the individuals who are members of the state its highest law, a government that is impartial in this sense.

In very sketchy form I have given you what we can call **the liberal conception of the state.** That it has its foundation in enlightened egoism is evident. That this is not a weakness, but a strength of the liberal conception should also be apparent. It may well be that a good many human beings are benevolent enough to make a state unnecessary for them. But not only may there be foreigners who covet what they possess and threaten to take it by force, but at least as importantly, as long as there are a few malevolent human beings around the state is needed.

What then is the point of government? At the very beginning of chapter VII Bentham gives the following answer:

> The business of government is to promote the happiness of the society, by punishing and rewarding. That part of its business which consists in punishing, is more particularly the subject of penal law. In proportion as an act tends to disturb that happiness, in proportion as the tendency of it is pernicious, will be the demand it creates for punishment. What happiness consists of we have already seen: enjoyment of pleasure, security from pains. (70)

We may feel that this is an unduly restrictive statement. Do governments not in fact have many other tasks than punishing and rewarding: defense, education, commerce — the list is easily extended. Yet if human behavior is finally governed by pain and pleasure, the government can finally motivate us to act in ways that best serve the public interest by

promising rewards or **threatening punishments**. What then is the point of punishment? As with every action, in this case, too, the principle of utility is to be observed. Punishment **should not be backward- but forward-looking**, should not be for the sake of revenge, but to maximize pleasure and to minimize pain in the future. This is not to say that revenge is not itself a pleasure and as such legitimate. But we have to keep in mind that all punishment is evil, according to Bentham. It should be administered only **to prevent a greater evil**. The point of the penal law is to modify human conduct. It is of course not the only way to accomplish this. **Education** is an obvious alternative and in those cases where education would modify behavior equally effectively and more cheaply than punishment it is obviously to be preferred.

When we try to modify human conduct we have to ask first: why do people act the way we do. We need a **theory of action**. Bentham provides such a theory in chapters VII through XI. In considering whether an act should be punished we have to consider first of all the **nature** of the **act**, the **circumstances** in which it was done, the **intentionality** of the actor, the **awareness of the actor** of what he was doing, the particular **motive** on which he acted, and the **disposition**. By far the greatest emphasis is placed on the **motive**. The main point of the penal law is to modify human conduct by modifying the motives by which human beings act. And given the assumption that human beings, including criminals, are fundamentally reasonable, the likelihood **of swift and certain** punishment is designed to make the contemplated criminal act appear unprofitable. That the fact that our punishment is all too often anything but swift and certain would be judged harshly by Bentham requires no comment.

As is to be expected, given his principle of utility, Bentham insists that

> The value of the punishment must not be less in any case than what is sufficient to outweigh that of the profit of the offence.

Note that the language here suggest that the criminal is very much like a businessman who contemplates an illegal action, figures the probable gain and loss, and then makes his

decision. Human beings calculate expected profit and loss and because of this punishment is an effective deterrent:

> I would not say that even a madman does not calculate. Passion calculates, more or less, in every man: in different men according to the warmth or coolness of their dispositions: according to the firmness or irritability of their minds: according to the nature of the motives by which they are acted upon. Happily, of all passions, that is the most given to calculation, from the excesses of which, by reason of its strength, constancy, and universality, society has most to apprehend: I mean that which corresponds to the motive of pecuniary interest: so that these niceties, if such they are to be called, have the best chance of being efficacious, where efficacy is of the most importance. (188)

A question this raises is whether people are as calculating as Bentham thinks they are. What about acts of violence, murder, rape. A certain naiveté is apparent in Bentham's discussion of the last:

> 1. A man ravishes a virgin. In this case the motive is, without scruple, termed by the name of lust, lasciviousness, and so forth; and is universally looked upon as a bad one. 2. The same man, at another time, exercises the rights of marriage with his wife. In this case the motive is accounted, perhaps, a good one, or at least indifferent: and here people would scruple to call it by any of those names. In both cases, however, the motive may be precisely the same. In both cases it may be neither more nor else than sexual desire. (106 -107)

But in what sense can the motive be called the same? Why does sexual desire become in one person a motive to rape, and in some other case to court the virgin in question until she agrees to marry her suitor? Are they both acting from the same motive? One person,

we may wan to say, has a bad character, or a nasty disposition. Bentham defines **disposition** as "**what is supposed to be permanent in a man's frame of mind**," (130) and term it a "**fictitious entity**." A man is said to be of a mischievous disposition if he tends to act in ways that produce more pain than happiness. When the pain in question is pain the actor inflicts on himself, than the business of reforming the individual belongs to the **moralist**, not to the **legislator**, who should be concerned only with actions that have painful consequences for others: his task is to counteract the motives that seduce us to bad actions, Bentham speaks of **seducing motives**, with others that safeguard the public interest, Bentham speaks of **tutelary motives**. In this connection is revealing that Bentham is especially fond of fines. Indeed: **If his pleasure calculus is to make any sense then everything must have its price**. The probable cost of contemplated bad actions must be made such that it outweighs the probable gain.

Punishment ought to augment the total happiness of the community. Where it fails to do this it ought to be excluded. In itself punishment is always bad. Punishment should therefore not be exacted for the sake of justice alone, unless justice translates into utility. There ought to be no punishment where it is **groundless**, **inefficacious**, **unprofitable**, **expensive**, or **needless**. A great deal of what Bentham has to tell us here may seem all too obvious, but we should not underestimate the importance of what he has to say about legislation:

Consider the first claim that there ought to be no punishment where punishment is groundless. This certainly sounds like a platitude. But what is understood here by "**groundless**"? Punishment is said to be groundless where no mischief has been done, that is to say where the act had no undesirable consequences. There is thus no mischief where the other party involved gave his or her consent to the action and was in sound mind. When a sane, but ill person, asks someone to help him or her commit suicide then to render such assistance could not be considered a crime on Bentham's principles it would seem. Or when two consenting adults engage in the privacy of their home in

activities most other people would consider vile and disgusting, this is no matter that should concern the legislator.

There also is no crime when someone forces another person to do something for the sake of the welfare of the community. Say someone has contracted a highly contagious disease and, perhaps for religious reasons, refuses medical treatment. Unable to wait for a court order, the doctor treats the person anyway, against the sick person's wishes. According to Bentham there is no crime in such cases. Or say a mountain village is cut off by a snowstorm from the larger world and runs out of food. One peasant has hoarded a lot. The other villagers confiscate his food and distribute it. After the spring thaw they are taken to court by the hoarder. Again, according to Bentham there was no crime.

A third situation is where there is a certainty of **adequate compensation**. Someone desperately needs a car, say to take his sick wife to the hospital, takes the neighbor's, leaving a note promising to return it. This would not seem to be a crime either. A difficulty to which Bentham points is that we often won't be in a position to be absolutely certain that we will be able to offer adequate compensation.

Other situations where there should be no punishment is where it is **inefficacious**. *Ex post facto* laws are thus ruled out. The very point of legislation is to give the potential evil-doer a motive not to do what he considers doing. But to function as such the law must be known to him beforehand. This is to say, laws must be public and well publicized.

Similarly laws cannot be applied to those who are not rational agents. Thus infants and insane people are exempt from the law, although because of this they are subject to special supervision. Similarly intoxication may cloud a person's mind and render him irresponsible, although such a person will have to assume responsibility for having gotten drunk in the first place.

Similar considerations apply in cases where an act was committed unintentionally or with an inadequate understanding of the circumstances or when an individual was threatened and thus made to do something he would not ordinarily do, e.g. when someone threatens murder unless the individual commit some crime. The law thus knows no absolute imperatives, not even; do not kill1 There may be situations where what would usually be considered murder can be justified as being for a greater good, for example when a secret service agent kills a scientist on the threshold of making a discovery that would be immensely useful to the enemy and detrimental to the state the agent is serving. It would be easy to think of other such cases. Indeed, on Bentham's view there are **no absolute imperatives of any kind**. Certainly the principle of utility, in its private or public form, is not an imperative. Bentham does not say, you **ought** to obey the principle of utility in the sense that you might, given proper reflection, not wish to do so. Indeed, the word "ought," given his principle, cannot mean more than, "it is in your best interest." If Bentham is right, the principle of utility is one that guides all human beings. Some persons are less aware of what is in their true self-interest than others. For Bentham, too, and here he would seem to agree with Plato, the real evil would seem to be ignorance concerning what best serves our interests, although "evil" seems too strong a term here: Bentham's *Principles* do not seem to have room for real evil.

Bentham is nothing if not pragmatic. Take a case where the contribution of a person, say an eminent scientist or doctor, is such that the welfare of the state would be significantly affected if he were to stop his work. Say this scientist commits a crime of passion. Should he be imprisoned? Or say some foreign government takes a particular interest in him and threatens to impose trade sanctions if he is imprisoned. In such cases a government may well decide to let the criminal go unpunished.

And there are cases where education may meet the purposes punishment is meant to serve more effectively. The pen is often a more effective way of combatting wrong than the sword. And often the moral sanction is more effective than the political. Look

at countries with low crime statistics. They suggest that in preventing crime the moral sanction has been at least as effective as the political.

This, however, presents a challenge to Bentham and more generally to the liberal conception of the state. Both presuppose that individuals are governed by enlightened self-interest. And indeed, if all human beings were so governed, the system should work perefectly: crimes, on that model, would always be the result of a willingness to take a certain risk and could be effectively fought by raising the punishment, by insisting on swift punishment, and by assuring its certainty. Statistics would seem to show that this is often not the case. The conclusion to be drawn from this is obvious: **human beings are in fact less reasonable, less calculating, than Bentham takes them to be**. Human behavior is guided less by enlightened self-interest than we would wish. Bentham's psychology gives us less a description of how human beings in fact behave, as a model of how a human being, enlightened, as Bentham understands enlightenment, would behave. The most effective crime prevention would seem to be provided by what we can call community spirit, but centered on the atomic self as it is, Bentham's principle of utility is not likely to furnish that at all; quite the contrary, it is likely to erode it by teaching that what really matters are finally our own private pleasures and pains.

12. The Ends of Government

Bentham defines ethics as

> the art of directing men's actions to the production of the greatest possible quantity of happiness, on the part of those whose interest is in view.

What then are the actions we can direct? For Bentham, first of all our own. In so far as ethics is concerned with the art of directing the individual's own actions, it is termed the art of **self-government**, or **private ethics**. In so far as it is concerned with the art of directing the actions of the community it is the **art of government** or **the art of legislation**.

Underlying this view of ethics and government, one **private**, the other **public**, is what has been called a **liberal psychology**. According to one critic of that psychology, Roberto Mangabeira Unger[3], fundamental to this liberal psychology is the bifurcation of the self into desire, feelings, sentiments, on the one hand, reasons, thought, reflection, on the other. Reason is opposed to desire. The fact that we desire certain things is accepted as a given. For Bentham there are no unreasonable as opposed to reasonable pleasures or pains. From the perspective of reason desires are like facts: they are just what they are. Reason on this view can only have an instrumental function. It is a tool to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, but it does not have the ability to generate imperatives of its own. Its imperatives then are always **instrumental** or **hypothetical**: if you want to maximize what is important to you, do this. Reason does not attempt to tell you what should be important to you. The next philosopher we will be studying, Kant, will maintain that reason can generate an imperative, that reason can be, in this sense, practical.

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[3] See my "The Contradiction of Liberal Thought," review of Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Knowledge and Politics*, *The Yale Law Journal*, vol. 85, no. 6, 1976, pp. 847-854.

Bentham's morality is a **morality of desire**. Note that this morality does not deny the importance of reason. Quite the opposite: in Bentham there is a recurrent theme of enlightenment. Reason has the function of calculating pleasures and pain, of fashioning out of changing appetites and desires a coherent life plan that will not sacrifice future happiness to present pleasures, but will maximize pleasure in the long run. That is the task of **private ethics**. And the art of legislation will similarly fashion out of often diverging individual interests a social order. This will not work if the pleasures of individuals should be so incommensurable that they do not permit such an ordering, or if their desires should be so divergent that they make it pointless to even attempt to develop sanctions that will bind the community together. The art of government envisioned by Bentham will work the better the more persons approximate Bentham's idea of **the calculating, pleasure-seeking and pain-avoiding atomic subject**, for whom everything finally has a price.

The need for government and legislation arises from the unavoidable tensions that exist whenever self-centered individuals pursue their own ends. The inevitable collision of interests, the inevitable conflict between subjective values, of our different private moralities, necessitates the establishment of a public, artificial, and formal order, which bridles the egoism of individuals even as it is supported by that very egoism. The institution of **government**, often thought of in terms of the institution of a social contract, is **both the instrument of man's self-love and its remedy**. That legislation and adjudication be free from personal bias is just a corollary of the formality of the law. Ideally those who fram e and administer the law should not themselves act as self-interested individuals who inevitably intrude some of their own prejudices and interests into the decision. Ideally the sphere of law should be separated from the inevitably subjective realm of private values. On this understanding of human being, **values** inevitably **have their ground in desires**, are **objectifications of desires**. But desires are always desires of particular individuals. The foundation of values is thus thoroughly

subjective. This is not to deny the obvious fact that human beings are alike in many ways and can be expected to agree often about what they consider pleasant and unpleasant. But the law also has to protect those whose pleasures are different, let us say those who do not share the sexual preferences of the majority. It is clear that if human beings had totally different ideas of what gave them pleasure, communities and states could never have arisen. For example, almost all human beings want to pursue their pleasures without having to worry constantly about others threatening that pursuit. Almost all individuals seek to avoid death, imprisonment, pain. But these are facts about human beings. They are not forms inscribed in some timeless Platonic heaven. In that sense what here has been called liberal psychology rests on a denial of essences inscribed in some Platonic heaven, from which claims and demands are supposed to issue. Given that denial all moral and legal codes have to be understood as **human artifacts**. To the liberal, so understood, it is thus the artificial order of convention, language, and theory that becomes all important. He will be suspicious to all appeals to supposed essences.

The art of government, as Bentham understands it, and it can stand for the liberal conception of government in general, is based on what I have termed **liberal psychology**, which stands in sharp contrast to a Platonic psychology, which ties the soul to a realm of supersensible eternal essences.

But **how closely are this liberal psychology and the liberal theory of government really linked**? Could one not be a Platonist, that is to say, reject the liberal psychology, and yet defend the liberal conception of the state? Could one, to rephrase and generalize the question, believe that human beings experience claims that demand of them actions not compatible with Bentham's self-centered principle of utility and yet endorse the liberal conception of the state? Could one's private morality be Platonic and one's political views liberal? Against this it has been argued that if there were indeed such absolute essences or forms as Plato insists there are, then, once they were recognized, they would have to become also the principles of government and legislation. Plato

argues that way in the *Republic*. But this does not follow: it is indeed possible to insist that there are indeed claims of the sort presented by Plato's forms, but that these are not easily recognized, as Plato of course knew, and that that natural self-centeredness that finds expression in what the Biblical tradition called the **sin of pride**, a sin that also finds expression in that fear of death discussed in the *Phaedo*, often **prevents these higher principles from becoming effective**. But if this is right, we cannot count on their perception to provide the foundation for an enduring social order. To try to found a government on this basis, as Socrates appears to do in the *Republic*, would then be folly. We should not confuse people with angels. Selfishness, as Plato reminds us in the *Phaedo*, is very much part of the way people are, which is not to say that this is the way they ought to be. A philosopher may thus, in so far as he is speaking as a moral philosopher, side with Plato against Bentham and criticize the self-centered atomic conception of human being that underlies the latter's *Principles of Morals.* But he may nevertheless side with much of what Bentham has to say about *legislation* and government. At issue here is **the relationship between the individual, society, and the state.** We often meet with suggestions that the three should be brought into an intimate union, that the state should be like an organism in which the individual finds his proper place. Ethics and politics tend to collapse for such thinkers. When we attempt to translate such ideas into practice we tend to end up with **totalitarian** forms of government, where I would call a form of government "totalitarian" precisely to the extent that it wants to collapse the distinction between the private and public, while Bentham's liberal conception of the state insists on keeping them far apart, insists on separating **private ethics** and the **public art of legislation**. On the totalitarian view the state is seen as a moral institution that will not allow the individual to go to his own heaven or hell, even if this is what the individual chooses and this pursuit does not interfere with others. Government here has a **maximal** function. All aspects of life are to be brought into the orbit of government. So, e.g., the sexual sphere.

The liberal conception of the state, on the other hand, insists on the distinction between private and public. It insists that the state has no business involving itself in my private affairs as long as they do not interfere with others. In its pure form it is a **minimalist** conception of government.

To bring these issues into a still sharper focus let me distinguish (following Alexander Passerin d'Entrèves, whose T.A. I was, quite a few hears ago) between **might, power**, and **authority**. I admit that the distinction is a bit artificial and not to be read off any dictionary. By "**might**" I understand here something like brute force. A government rules by might when it simply forces its subjects to do whatever it decrees. By "**power**" I understand here **might expressed in laws**. A government rules by "power", in this sense, when it expresses itself in public and well publicized laws. There is nothing about the idea of , so understood, that suggests that these laws may not be arbitrarily imposed.

But what then is it that gives not just power, but **authority** to a government and how far does that authority extend? The answers that have been given to these questions are of course various. We can argue that the authority of the ruler and of his laws and actions rests on a relationship that resembles that of parents to their children. On this view it is a natural relationship. We find more than a trace of this conception in Plato — consider once more the *Crito*. Here authority does not rest just on the consent of the governed. The medieval conception of the state was of this sort: God, on that view, assigned everyone of us our proper place and it is our duty to keep that place. Some people God has set to rule over others. The distinction between rulers and ruled, on this view, has its origin in the divine order. Kings rule by divine right. This view presupposes the idea of a divine or natural order that defines the place or status of the individual. This status brings with it certain obligations. Law here is fundamentally a **law of status**. **Human law** is **given its measure in divine or natural law**. On this conception it makes perfect sense to speak of an **illegal law**: a law is illegal when it goes against some divine or natural law.

With the beginning of the modern period such ideas came under increasingly vigorous attack. As individuals came to understand themselves more and more as atomic, autonomous selves, the idea of a higher order to which the individual belongs seemed more and more unbelievable, a fiction that served the interests of those in power. The authority of government thus had to be given a different foundation. A new conception of the state emerged that understood it first of all as an artificial construct, a humanly created fiction, supported however, by the consent of the governed, a consent that finds expression in the idea of a **social contract**. The authority of the state is authority precisely because it rests on the consent of the governed. Seen in this light the importance of Bentham's disagreement with Plato should be apparent, although it is not so much Bentham or a particular book that I am interested in here, but a way of thinking: the way most of us think about the state and its function is bound to a tradition that includes Hobbes, Locke, Bentham, and Mill.

But that other, older tradition, which has its first great philosophical representative in Plato, also continues to have a hold on us, continues to shape our common sense. There is of course tension between these two traditions and, if what I have just said is anywhere near the mark, this means that there is tension in our common sense, in the ways we understand human nature and what human beings ought to do and in the ways we understand the function of government.

On the one hand, many of us will not want to go all the way with Bentham's conception of the enlightened, but self-centered person, who uses his reason to calculate probable pleasures and pains. Most of us know situations where we recognize claims on us that are incommensurable with pleasures and pains, situations where we glimpse that there is something right about Plato's understanding of the human being as not his own property, but as belonging to something larger, call it divine if you like, that only that human life is really worth living that can imagine some situations where, to defend what matters most, we should be willing to risk our own life.

On the other hand we all know about the **selfishness** of human beings, including our own selfishness. We may deplore it, wish that persons were less selfish, even think it a duty to be less selfish. But many of us also have some sense of the **autonomy or dignity of the individual person** that would admit the right of the individual to go to hell, as long as he or she does not take others with him or her. I am prepared to argue against all attempts to eliminate this tension. This is to say, in the context of the material covered so far in this course: I respond very differently to Bentham's **Principles of Morals** and his **Principles of Legislation.** The former seem to me to be much too reductive to be acceptable. Plato helps us to see this. That is to say, I reject what I called earlier a liberal psychology. Bentham's **Principles of Legislation**, on the other hand, regardless of many specific points where I would want to raise questions, provide legislation with a continuing challenge. That is to say**, utilitarianism has far more to contribute to politics than to ethics**. As a moral philosophy it proves patently inadequate, as I tried to show in the preceding lectures on Bentham.

13. Duty and Inclination

Let me start by reading you once more the very beginning of Bentham's *Principles of Morals and Legislation.*

> I. Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, **pain** and **pleasure**. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne.

From this it follows that **what we ought to do** is at bottom **what we would really like to to do**. I am using the word **really** here to point out that the prospect of some pleasure may blind us to what would really be in our best interest, that is to say, to what in the long run would lead to the greatest pleasure and to the least pain. But, as we become more enlightened about what is in our best interest **what we want to do and what we ought to do will be brought into line**. In a truly enlightened person there would be no tension. And what we would like to do will also be what **we will do**, provided that some unforeseen accident does not prevent us from realizing our preference; will do, since what determines how human beings are going to behave is on Bentham's view nothing other than the anticipation of pain and pleasure. This lets Bentham say that both, *the standard of right and wrong*, and *the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne*.

If Kant, the philosopher to whom we now turn, is right, this account does not at all agree with our intuitions, with our moral intuitions or with what Kant calls **common human reason**. If Kant is right, the profound tension between inclination and duty,

between what we would **like** to do because it promises to maximize pleasure and minimize pain and what we **ought** to do, is part of the human situation. Kant does of course admit that prospects of pleasure and pain offer powerful motives for action. But Kant would insist, they need not **determine** action. According to Kant, the dignity of a human being is inseparable from his or her **freedom**. And we are free to act in ways that are not determined by prospects of pain and pleasure. Kant could accuse Bentham of having offered a picture of human existence that fails to take into account what makes human beings essentially different from animals. That difference is inseparable from freedom.

With such insistence on freedom Kant returns to Plato and to his conviction that human beings are not adequately understood as purely natural beings, subject to the order of causes and effects. If man were only a sensuous being, if he were governed by natural desires, he would know nothing of duty, he **could make no sense of a genuine ought**. Bentham, to be sure, also makes use of that term. But, if Kant is right, his is really a misuse. If Kant is right, whenever we use a world like "ought" we recognize a tension between what we ought to do and what we would like to do, between duty and inclination. For Bentham such tensions would always be a mark of insufficient enlightenment. The person who really knows what is in his best interest will experience no such tension. But the tension between duty and inclination does not appear to be eliminable in that way: it testifies to what we can call our amphibian being: we belong to nature; but as beings of reason we also belong to reason or spirit, and as Plato recognized, from this realm issue claims that cannot at all be reduced to natural claims. Both Plato and Kant force us to question the one-dimensionality of Bentham's understanding of human beings.

Bentham, as I pointed out, grants reason only an instrumental or strategic function; it can generate only technical or pragmatic imperatives. It can only suggest means, while it must serve the ends established by our inclinations and desires. Kant challenges this: the end of human beings is not just happiness:

> Now if its preservation, its welfare, in a word its happiness, were the real end of nature in a being having reason and will, then nature would have hit upon a very poor arrangement in appointing the reason of the creature to be the executor of this purpose. For all the actions which the creature has to perform with this intention of nature, and the entire rule of his conduct, would be dictated much more exactly by instinct, and the end would be far more certainly attained by instinct than it ever could be by reason. (11)

Reason, as a matter of fact, does not obviously serve the pursuit of happiness. It is simply not true that the more reasonable human beings are the happier, as Bentham would lead us to expect. Reason rather often interferes with the happiness human beings long for in so far as they are beings of nature. Socrates thus points out that he has neglected what most people would call happiness in his pursuit of reason. As Kant points out:

> nature would have taken care that reason did not break forth into practical use nor have the presumption, with its weak insight, to think out for itself the plan of happiness and the means of attaining it. Nature would have taken over the choice not only of the ends but also of the means, and with wise foresight would have entrusted both to instinct alone. (11)

There are indeed persons, who try to place reason at the service of the pursuit of pleasure and happiness. This is what Bentham would have us do. And Kierkegaard describes

such a person in *Either/Or*, especially in the *Diary of the Seducer*. But Kierkegaard also makes the point Kant makes: the more a person uses reason to find happiness the less likely he is to find genuine happiness.

> And, in fact, we find that the more a cultivated reason deliberately devotes itself to the enjoyment of life and happiness, the more the man falls short of true contentment. From this fact there arises in many persons, if only they are candid enough to admit it, a certain degree of misology, hatred of reason. This is particularly the case with those who are most experienced in its use. After counting all the advantages which they draw — I will not say from the invention of the arts of common luxury — from the sciences (which in the end seem to them to be also a luxury of the understanding), they nevertheless find that they have actually brought more trouble on their shoulders, instead of gaining in happiness; they finally envy, rather than despise, the common run of men who are better guided by merely natural instinct and who do not permit their reason much influence on their conduct. (11-12)

Any reflective age, devoted to the enjoyment of life, to the pursuit of happiness, will generate this misology, which will express itself in attempts or at least dreams of a return to more natural modes of existence, a less complicated lifestyle, less burdened by reflection, closer to the earth, more integrated into the rhythms of nature. (Cf. e.g, Gauguin)

Fundamental to Kant's position is his claim that human existence is marked by our ability to subject the faculty of desire to the guidance of reason. That ability, if Kant is right, is inseparable from human freedom, which is to say that, as Kant understands it,

Bentham finally cannot make sense of freedom. On Bentham's view, **what appears to promise the greatest happiness, the least pain, will win out**. To challenge such a view, Kant points to the **phenomenon of freedom**. Kant takes what we can call the experience of freedom as a given. This then raises the question: **how is freedom possible?**

I hinted at the answer in my very first lecture. One presupposition of freedom is the **temporality** of human existence. A free being faces its own future being as something for which it bears **responsibility**. Our sense of **duty** is inseparably tied to that responsibility we bear for ourselves. The latter suggests that part of the meaning of duty is a certain **reflexivity**: duty refers to **what we owe ourselves in so far as we are free agents**. This formulation is related to Socrates' suggestion that as beings possessing reason or spirit we belong to a higher realm, the realm of ideas or forms, to the gods. This belonging brings with it certain duties or obligations, Plato thus speaks metaphorically of the gods binding us to our place. Kant would insist that the suggestion that it is the gods that bind us is misleading in that it suggests that duty has its foundation in something other than the human being him- or herself, in some higher power or realm. But duty, Kant insists, is not a demand laid on us by some reality beyond the self, be it God, be it the forms, be it other persons. The demand laid on the subject is reflexive in character: it is placed on the subject by the subject him- or herself. This is the meaning of **autonomy**. Instead of speaking of a demand, Kant speaks of a **law**: the moral person is himself the **author of the law that binds him**. This formulation of course leaves the nature of the law in question.

Kant distinguishes between two kinds of law: there are laws of nature, laws according to which things happen. But whatever happens is not therefore necessarily what ought to happen: by an appeal to what is you cannot decide what ought to be. This

insistence on the distinction between the order of nature and morality implies that the fundamental principles of the latter cannot be said to be such that the chain of causes and effects is fastened to their throne, as Bentham would say of his principle of utility. The effectiveness of moral principles is always problematic. Precisely because of this we bear responsibility for trying to let them become effective in the world.

I have suggested that duty refers to what we ourselves, in so far as we are free moral agents, demand of ourselves. A good will is a will that submits to that duty. Such a good will, Kant insists, is the only thing that can be called good without qualifications. Everything else, including intelligence, happiness, contentment, cannot be called unconditionally good. There is indeed, Kant suggests, something revolting about a person who appears contented and is yet without a good will. It is not necessary that such a good will be effective. What makes it good is alone the quality of the willing.

> Even if it should happen that, by a particularly unfortunate fate or by the niggardly provision of a stepmotherly nature, this will should be wholly lacking in power to accomplish its purpose, and if even the greatest effort should not avail it to achieve anything of its end, and if there remained only the good will — not as a mere wish, but as the summoning of all the means in our power — it would sparkle like a jewel all by itself, as something that had its full worth in itself. (10)

If Kant is right, at bottom we all know this: the notion

> dwells already in the natural and sound understanding, and does not need so much to be taught as only to be brought to light. In the estimation of the total worth of our actions it always takes first place and is the condition of everything else. (12-13)

Note that Kant, too, here appeals to something like a theory of recollection: the moral philosopher clears up and brings to light what already exists in the sound natural understanding. He recalls us to a vocation that has its ground in our own being. In this sense he recalls us to our true selves.

In order to show that what makes our willing good is alone the quality of the willing Kant takes up the concept of duty.

> It contains the concept of a good will, though with certain subjective restrictions and hindrances, but these are far from concealing it and making it unrecognizable, for they rather bring it out by contrast and make it shine forth all the more brightly. (13)

Kant goes on to distinguish an action done in accord with duty from one performed for selfish purposes. Note that our duty is thus a duty not to let our natural selfishness determine our actions. And yet the call of duty is also a call to our true self. We can thus say that like Plato, Kant, too, thinks that we can become truly ourselves only by becoming less selfish. This may sound paradoxical. To remove the paradox we have to ask how the word "self" is used in each case. In the first case it is tied to reason, in the second to nature. The human being is truly him- or herself , not in so far as he or she exists as a selfish being concerned first of all with self-preservation and personal happiness, but in so far as he or she exists as a being of reason, capable of giving him- or herself the law.

Note that according to Kant, to have moral worth an action must not only be **in accord with duty**, but **from duty**, that is to say our sense of duty must be the determining motive. Kant gives the example of the person who refuses to commit **s**uicide as one example of such morally worthy behavior:

> On the other hand, it is a duty to preserve one's life; and, moreover, everyone has a direct inclination to do so. But for that reason, the often anxious care which most men take of it has no intrinsic moral worth, and the maxim of doing so has no moral import. They preserve their lives according to duty, but not from duty. But if adversities and hopeless sorrow completely take away the relish for life; if an unfortunate man, strong in soul, is indignant rather than despondent or dejected over his fate and wishes for death, and yet preserves his life without loving it and from neither inclination nor fear but from duty — then his maxim has a moral merit. (13-14)

This leaves open the question why we should have a duty to preserve our life. But assuming that it is indeed a duty, the distinction Kant here would have us drawn is clear enough. A person always inclined to be nice to and to love other human beings would have little moral worth, because the actions of such a person, although in accord with what duty demands, would not be done from a sense of duty, but from love, would in this sense be naturally conditioned. Kant calls such love pathological. Love ceases to be pathological only to the extent it is from a sense of duty.

At this point we may begin to have some difficulties with what Kant has to say. Take a person, whose inclinations coincide with his duties, that is to say, a person of a truly angelic disposition, say a Mother Theresa. Is there not a sense in which we might call such a person better than one who struggled to do his duty, who did the right things, in spite of the fact that all his inclinations pulled him in a different direction? Kant would question this. To be sure, he would admit, we may want to call such a person saintly, angelic, good in that sense. But "good" here cannot mean possessing moral worth:

> To be kind where one can is a duty: and there are, moreover, many persons so sympathetically constituted that without any motive of vanity or selfishness they find an inner satisfaction in spreading joy and rejoice in the contentment of others which they have made possible. But I say that, however dutiful and however amiable it may be, that kind of action has no true moral worth. It is on a level with [actions done from] other inclinations, such as the inclination to honor which, if fortunately directed to what in fact accords with duty and is generally useful and thus honorable, deserves praise and encouragement, but no esteem. (14)

Because done from inclination, not from duty, the action, though deserving praise and encouragement, lacks moral import, Kant insists.

> But assume that the mind of that friend of mankind was clouded by a sorrow of his own which extinguished all sympathy with the lot of others, and though he still had the power to benefit others in distress their need left him untouched because he was preoccupied with his own. Now suppose him to tear himself, unsolicited by inclination, out of this dead insensibility and to do this action only from duty and without any inclination — then for the first time his action has genuine moral worth. (14)

Or imagine someone whose stern disposition lets him have little patience with the weaknesses of others, who rather dislikes his fellow human beings — if such a stern individual acted beneficently towards others, just because he recognized this to be his duty, such a person would have moral worth.

That, **to have moral worth, an action must be done from duty**, Kant calls **the first proposition of morality**. Duty as Kant understands it does not look so much to the anticipated results, as to the motivation. Decisive is that it is not only in accord with, but motivated by what the moral law demands. The **second proposition of morality** thus states that:

> An action done from duty does not have its moral worth in the purpose which is to be achieved through it but in the maxim whereby it is determined. Its moral value, therefore, does not depend on the realization of the object of the action, but merely on the principle of the volition by which the action is done irrespective of the objects of the faculty of desire. (16)

The principle is what matters, not the result. One can imagine how Bentham would have scoffed. He would have us act much more pragmatically. Kant would have us act out of respect for the moral law, which is in a profound sense our own law, the law we have given ourselves. Thus **the third principle of morality** reads:

> Duty is the necessity to do an action from respect for law. I can certainly have an inclination to an object as an effect of the proposed action, but I can never have respect for it, precisely because it is a mere effect and not an activity of a will. (25)

This law is universal, it suffers no exceptions. Take the case of promising. May I make a promise with the intention not to keep it? I may of course, using reasons such as Bentham might offer, convince myself that it is in my best interest not to break a promise, but if Kant is right, there is no moral worth in such a self-interested keeping of promises:

> The shortest but most infallible way to find the answer to the question as to whether a deceitful promise is consistent with duty, is to ask myself: Would I be content that my maxim to extricate myself from difficulty by a false promise should hold as a universal law for myself as well as for others? And could I say to myself that everyone may make a false promise when he is in a difficulty from which he otherwise cannot escape? Immediately I see that I could will the lie but not a universal law to lie. For with such a law there would be no promises at all, inasmuch as it would be futile to make a pretense of my intention in regard to my future actions to those who would not believe this pretense or — if they overhastily did so — would pay me back in my own coin. Hence my maxim would necessarily destroy itself, as soon as it was made a universal law. (19)

Is it ever moral to lie or to make a deceitful promise? According to Kant no appeal to my personal advantage or disadvantage is permitted and the same goes for the well being of others. Take the example of a doctor giving his patient a placebo. Research has shown the effectiveness of placebos, has demonstrated that a patient standing under the false impression that he has been given a pain-reducing drug, actually produces a pain-inhibiting substance in the brain. So placebos have been demonstrated effective in certain circumstances. Their use involves lying. If Kant is right this is enough to make the doctor's action morally indefensible. He fails to respect his patient as a person, fails to respect the dignity of the person, that dignity that belongs to us in so far as we are free moral agents.

> ... the necessity that I act from pure respect for the practical law constitutes my duty. To duty every other motive must give place, because duty is the condition of a will good in itself, whose worth transcends everything. (20)

Kant has thus arrived at the fundamental principle he was seeking: in order to decide whether an action is morally good you do not invoke anything like a pleasure calculus. You only ask yourself this simple question: **can I will that my maxim become a universal law**?

Kant believes that this principle has long been implicit in the moral intuitions people have had. But our selfishness tends to pull us in the opposite direction and obscures that principle. The philosopher brings it out into the open, states it, and thus helps the individual to be more truly himself.

Note how Kant's discussion links the themes of autonomy and universality and you should ask yourself whether you find this convincing.

14. The Categorical Imperative

As I pointed out last time, Kant believes himself to be articulating what is implicit in our common sense. He claims to have stated the principle of the moral knowledge of common human reason, **bringing only to light what dwells in the natural sound understanding**. This may suggest that we could try to support or test Kant's principle of morality by examining what are commonly taken to be examples of moral behavior. Socrates' behavior might serve as such an example; or the life of Christ. But such an undertaking would inevitably be circular: **to pick examples of moral behavior we must already know what constitutes such behavior**. Must I then not already possess the very principle of morality that I am trying to justify?

> Nor could one give poorer counsel to morality than to attempt to derive it from examples. For each example of morality that is exhibited must itself have been previously judged according to principles of morality to see whether it is worthy to serve as an original example or model. By no means could it authoritatively furnish the concept of morality. Even the Holy One of the Gospels must be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before He is recognized as such; even He says of Himself, “Why call ye Me (Whom you see) good; none is good (the archetype of the good) except God (Whom ye do not see).” But whence have we have the concept of God as the highest good? Solely from the Idea of moral perfection which reason formulates a priori and which it inseparably connects with the concept of a free will. (24-25)

Kant here suggests that "the concept of God as the highest good" is one that reason frames *a priori*, a concept inseparably bound up with the notion of a free will. More generally this holds for our conception of the morally good. The standard by which we judge something moral is given to us by our own rational being; more precisely, it is

inextricably bound up with the concept of a truly free will. What is morally right is so not because anyone has said that it is right. That holds not only for human beings; it holds even for God. To the extent that we recognize in the Ten Commandments genuine moral imperatives, they, too, have to be justified in terms of that moral law we bear within ourselves. What is right is not right because God has so ordained it. **Moral imperatives do not require divine sanction.**

I have suggested that it would be wrongheaded to try to establish Kant's principle of morality by something like an induction based on what are taken to be examples of moral behavior. Indeed, if Kant is right, it is impossible for some observer to tell for sure whether a certain action is done out of a sense of duty or from self-love. There was a once popular baroque play about Cenodoxus, the famous doctor of Paris, whom all the world praised for his wisdom, goodness, and saintliness, and who yet ends up in hell, because what all the world praised was born of self-love. Kant is all too aware of possibilities of deception and self-deception.

> It sometimes happens that in the most searching self-examination we can find nothing except the moral ground of duty which could have been powerful enough to move us to this or that good action and to such great sacrifice. But from this we cannot by any means conclude with certainty that a secret impulse of self-love, falsely appearing as the Idea of duty, was not actually the true determining cause of the will. For we like to flatter ourselves with a pretended nobler motive, while in fact even the strictest examination can never lead us entirely behind the secret incentives, for when moral worth is in question it is not a matter of actions which one sees but of their inner principles which one does not see. (23)

This presupposes that the depth of our own being is hidden from us. According to Kant we are not so transparent to ourselves that we can state with confidence the true motives

of our actions, more especially, cannot be confident that the principle by which we acted was indeed a moral one.

> Out of love for humanity I am willing to admit that most of our actions are in accord with duty; but if we look more closely at our thoughts and aspirations, we come everywhere upon the dear self, which is always turning up, and it is this instead of the strict command of duty (which would often require self-denial) which supports our plans. (23)

This is to say, true autonomy often requires self-denial. But does **autonomy** not mean: to be subject only to a law of which we ourselves are the authors? Note once more the apparent paradox: to be truly ourselves often requires self-denial. The question is of course: how is "self" used here. Recall Plato's *Phaedo*! Once again we return to a view that ties morality to a certain selflessness that Plato linked to a readiness to die. Kant, too, insists that it is only when we are in this sense selfless that we are truly at one with ourselves, are who we ought to be. In all other cases the self is in a sense alienated from itself, the slave of something other than itself e.g. its bodily desires. To put this point differently: only the moral person is truly free because only such a person gives him- or herself the law by which she acts, because she is **autonomous** and thus transcends nature, including her own animal nature.

Here we should keep in mind the distinction Kant draws between the realm of nature, on the one hand, and the realm of freedom, on the other.

> Everything in nature works according to laws. Only a rational being has the capacity of acting according to the *conception* of laws (i.e. according to principles). This capacity is the will. Since reason is required for the derivation of actions from laws, the will is nothing less than practical reason. (29)

The will is said to be **nothing but practical reason**. That is to say, to understand the human being as the being who wills is to understand him as a being who acts according

to principles. Recalling Aristotle's understanding of a practical syllogism, Kant speaks of a **deduction** of actions from principles: Suppose someone tells you that to get a good grade you have to do more work. Assuming you want a good grade, you decide to do more work. Willing is always according to some principle or other. Where there is an act of will we can always ask: why did you do this? Just this distinguishes genuine freedom from simple spontaneity. Suppose my arm suddenly shoots up. You ask me, why did you do that and I have no answer. The arm just went up, spontaneously. This would mean that I did not act in accord with any principle. In that case we cannot call it a free act. As it happens, when my arm just went up, I raised it to make a point. It was a willed, i.e. intentional act. This is to say, not that human beings should be, but that they are moral beings. What makes us that is our freedom, which, if Kant is right, demands of us autonomy, demands that we place ourselves under the law that our own reason provides. By their very nature, Kant insists, human beings stand under the moral imperative.

That of course does not mean that they will necessarily do what that imperative demands. They may choose to allow the pursuit of pleasure to rule their lives. To speak here of the **will** is then not yet to imply that it is a **good will**. By a good will Kant understands one that follows principles to which pure practical reason bids us be obedient, that is to say, to which our own reason bids us be obedient. But that is to say, obedient to such principles, the self is **obedient only to itself**.

Now principles yield commands or imperatives. As Kant puts it:

> The conception of an objective principle, so far as it constrains a will, is a command (of reason), and the formula of the command is called an *imperative*. (29)

Note the phrase, " so far as it constrains a will." "Constrains " suggests that there must be a tendency to do something different. Otherwise there would be no need to speak of the moral law constraining a will.. We can imagine a perfectly good will, which does not

experience the constraint of the moral law, because it cannot help but choose to do what is good.

> A perfectly good will, therefore, would be equally subject to objective laws of the good, but it could not be conceived as constrained by them to accord with them, because it can be determined to act by its own subjective constitution only through the conception of the good. Thus no imperatives hold for the divine will, or more generally, for a holy will. The "ought" is here out of place, for the volition of itself is already in unison with the law. Therefore imperatives are only formulas expressing the relation of objective laws of volition in general to the subjective imperfection of the will of this or that rational being, for example, the human will. (30)

Realization of what the moral law commands is a duty only because of the imperfection of human being, because we are torn between reason and inclination, because of what last time I called our **amphibian nature**. It is this amphibian nature that lets us experience something like moral imperatives. But we can imagine a saint for whom what the moral law commands has become second nature, who has extinguished that natural selfishness that first of all and most of the time tends to shape our actions.

Kant draws a crucial distinction between **categorical** and **hypothetical imperatives**.

> All imperatives command either *hypothetically* or *categorically*. The former represent the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to achieving something else which one desires (or which one may possibly desire). The categorical imperative would be one which presented an action as itself objectively necessary, without regard to any other end. (30)

The hypothetical imperative says, "do X, if your purpose is Y." It commands conditionally. All the imperatives Bentham can come up with will always be hypothetical imperatives. Different purposes will generate different hypothetical imperatives. Kant does grant that happiness is one end that we can presuppose in all human beings. To this extent he, too, recognizes the force of Bentham's fundamental principle.

> There is one end, however, which we may presuppose as actual in all rational beings so far as imperatives apply to them, that is, so far as they are dependent beings. There is one purpose which they not only *can* have, but which we can presuppose that they all *do* have by a necessity of nature. This purpose is happiness. The hypothetical imperative which represents the practical necessity of an action as means to the promotion of happiness is an assertorical imperative. (32)

It is called **assertorical** because the purpose that is served is one that we can assume to hold for everyone. It is part of the essence of human being, precisely in so far as human beings are not just rational, but also dependent on nature, in so far as they have a body, which implies certain needs.

From all such hypothetical imperatives we must distinguish the **categorical imperative**.

> Finally, there is an imperative which directly commands certain conduct without making its condition some purpose to be reached by it. This imperative is categorical. It concerns not the material of the action and its intended result, but the form and principle from which it originates. What it essentially good in it consists in the mental disposition, the result being what it may. This imperative may be called the imperative of morality. (32-33)

It alone deserves to be called a moral imperative. Kant now claims that only if there is such an imperative is there such a thing as duty. If there is no such imperative, duty is an illusion and all imperatives become hypothetical: do X if you want Y! What must be shown of course is that there really is such an imperative. But before turning to this a bit more needs to be said about just what it is that we are looking for.

I suggested above that moral behavior, on Kant's view, attunes us to our essence as free rational agents; that autonomy may thus be understood a something like submission to our own essence as not just animals, but beings of reason. Reason by its very nature is not tied to a particular perspective or point of view. It heeds not the particular, but the universal. Note the extremely formal nature of the categorical imperative:

> There is, therefore, only one categorical imperative. It is: Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law. (38)

Kant thinks that all imperatives of duty, and that is to say, all moral imperatives, can be derived from this one. Kant gives four examples to show how such derivations might be achieved. But before turning to these examples, we should note the restatement of the categorical imperative that immediately follows:

> The universality of the law according to which effects are produced constitutes what is properly called nature in the most general sense (as to form), (i. e., the existence of things so far as it is determined by universal laws). [By analogy], then, the universal imperative of duty can be expressed as follows: Act as though the maxim of your action were by your will to become a universal law of nature. (38)

Note that the second formulation differs form the first. The first speaks only of a universal law," the second of "a universal law of nature." The first states a formal condition that any maxim must meet if it is to be considered moral: you have to be able to

will that everyone should consider such a maxim obligatory, should consider what the maxim commands his or her duty. And duty remains duty, even if no one should live up to is. The moral law, while universal, is thus hardly a law of nature, is indeed thought in opposition to laws of nature.

The second formulation invites us to bring the moral law down to earth, to imagine a world in which people actually acted in accord with the maxim in question, to think it as if it had actually become a law of nature.

That the categorical imperative is far from unquestionable becomes clear as we turn to the first example Kant gives us: once again it concerns the problem of suicide.

> 1. A man who is reduced to despair by a series of evils feels a weariness with life but is still in possession of his reason sufficiently to ask whether it would not be contrary to his duty to himself to take his own life. Now he asks whether the maxim of his action could become a universal law of nature. His maxim, however is: For love of myself, I make it my principle to shorten my life when by a longer duration it threatens more evil than satisfaction. But it is questionable whether this principle of self-love could become a universal law of nature. One immediately sees a contradiction in a system of nature whose law would be to destroy life by the feeling whose special office it is to impel the improvement of life. In this case it would not exist as nature; hence that maxim cannot obtain as a law of nature, and thus it wholly contradicts the supreme principle of all duty. (38-39)

Is that argument at all convincing? Is the Stoic who holds out suicide as a last way out unreasonable? The example brings out how difficult it is to descend from the universality of the categorical imperative to particular applications. Why should I not be able to will as "a universal law of nature" that anyone in similar circumstances should take his life?

Nor are the other examples quite as convincing as Kant takes them to be. Take the second example of the needy man who considers making a false promise to repay a loan he needs to make to alleviate his need. Make this person a starving artist, say a young Beethoven, who, convinced by Kant's third example of his duty to develop his great talent, which would benefit the whole world, makes a false promise. This suggests the possibility of a conflict between maxims, where each maxim, considered by itself would be in agreement with the categorical imperative. What are we to do in such cases where there is what we can call a tragic conflict between maxims? The extreme formality of the categorical imperative would seem to provide only very uncertain guidance given the complexity of the situations we actually find ourselves in. Kant has difficulty bridging the gap between the universality of the moral law and the particularity of situations.

15. Autonomy

In my last lecture on Bentham I raised the question: what it is that gives **authority** to the state and its laws? I distinguished two quite different answers to this question: on one hand the authority of a sovereign and of his laws and actions may be justified by maintaining that we have here a relationship that parallels that of a father to his children. We find more than a trace of this **parental** conception of authority in Plato's *Crito*. On the other hand the authority of a sovereign and of his laws and actions can be founded on the **free assent** of the citizens of the state. In the second case the authority of the laws is an authority with which we ourselves have invested them.

Let me begin this lecture by asking: what is the source of the **authority of the moral law**? Once again one might give a **patrental** account. One could maintain that we are God's children. Just as a parent provides children with rules by which they are to act, so God has given us his laws. The Ten Commandments Moses brought down from Mount Sinai have brought this law to human beings. It is evident that Kant would have to consider this a totally inadequate account, for here we place ourselves under laws of which we are not the author. For Kant, too, **if a law is to have authority, we ourselves must be its author**. This is part of the meaning of **autonomy**. The moral law is not imposed on a human being from without, but is his or her own law. Only this, that it is his or her own, gives it moral authority. No imposed law can have moral authority.

Autonomy means that the autonomous person gives him- or herself the law. But how can we do so? Bentham would have appealed to human nature, to the fact, a fact Kant acknowledges, that we are all by nature beings who search for happiness, try to maximize happiness, try to minimize pain. Kant objects, however:

> Empirical principles are not at all suited to serve as the basis of moral laws. For if the basis of the universality by which they should be valid for all rational beings without distinction (the unconditional practical

> necessity which is thereby imposed upon them) is derived from a particular tendency of human nature or the accidental circumstances in which it is found, that universality is lost. But the principle of one's own happiness is the most objectionable of the empirical principles. This is not merely because it is false and experience contradicts the supposition that prosperity is always proportional to good conduct, nor yet because this principle contributes nothing to the establishment of morality inasmuch as it is a very different thing to make a man happy from making him good, and to make him prudent and far-sighted for his own advantage is far from making him virtuous. Rather, it is because this principle supports morality with incentives which undermine it and destroy all its sublimity, for it puts the motives to virtue and those to vice in the same class, teaching us only to make a better calculation while obliterating the specific difference between them. (59-60)

Of special interest is the word "**sublimity**" in this context. The word has its home in discussions of art and, even more, in aesthetic experiences of a certain kind of landscape. In Kant's day the Alps had become the paradigmatically sublime landscape. Kant was not the only one who in the closing years of the eighteenth century saw a connection between the discovery of sublime nature and moral awakening, enlightenment, i.e. humanity's coming of age. Here is a characteristic description, taken from a diary of the period, describing a walk in the Alps:

> Here is the eternal home of horror. I have not seen anything more terrifying... We heard the thunder of the stream. Astonished we looked at it, cascading in the depth below us, breaking its way through the rocks. We rolled large stones into the roaring abyss that were soon crushed by the stream and colored the foam red. With every step the spectacle became more awe-inspiring. One is unable to speak: the shouts of joy are

> submerged in this thousand-voiced thunder... Sensible nature shudders in its nothingness, but the free spirit rejoices.[4]

The free spirit transcends sensible nature. It rejoices at sublime sights. Without using the term sublime, Addison had given a first interpretation of experiences such as these in the *Spectator*:

> The Mind of man naturally hates everything that looks like a Restraint upon it and is apt to fancy itself under a sort of Confinement, when the Sight is pent up in a narrow Compass, and shortened on every side by the Neighborhood of Walls or Mountains. On the contrary, a spacious Horizon is the image of Liberty.[5]

This can serve a first definition of the sublime: **the sublime is an image of Liberty**. A sublime landscape is one in which man does not find himself at home. But this homelessness awakens us to something within ourselves that transcends the sensible, that transcends nature: to our freedom. We are recalled to that which makes us most truly human. The behavior of a moral person may be said to be in this sense sublime. The dignity of one so acting recalls us to the dignity that is inseparable from being a moral agent:

> Morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in himself, because only through it is it possible to be a lawgiving member in the realm of ends. Thus morality, and humanity so far as it is capable morality, alone have dignity. Skill and diligence in work have a market value; wit, lively imagination, and humor have a fancy price; but fidelity to promises and benevolence on principle (not benevolence from instinct), have an intrinsic worth. (52)

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[4] Carl Ludwig Fernow, Diary Entry of March 29, 1794, quoted by Rudof Zeitler in *Kassizismus und Utopia*. Studies ed. by the Institute of Art History, University of Uppsala (Uppsala, 1954), p. 35.
[5] Spectator, No. 412.

Only the moral law can give man dignity. And it is this dignity that makes a human being sublime.

In this connection I would like to call your attention to a play by a younger contemporary of Kant's that wrestles with just this theme: Heinrich von Kleist's *The Prince of Homburg*. Kleist was enormously influenced by Kant, yet committed suicide. The play, his last and best, tells the story of a young cavalry general, who, in love with Natalie, the niece of the Prussian elector and as a result absent-minded, fails to obey his battle order and to hold his assigned place, charges the enemy before he is supposed to, and is condemned to death for defying orders, although, as the result of his impulsive action, his rule-breaking, the battle is won and the victor honored; still, the Elector insists that the law which demands that a soldier's disobedience be punished with death be carried out, for the state cannot tolerate disobedience which more often than not does not end with such happy results. The Elector's niece pleads with her uncle, challenges him. First you crown him, now you want to execute him in the name of duty.

> This history does not demand of you;
> That would be so **sublime**, dear uncle,
> That one could almost call it: lacking in humanity.

The Elector insists that feelings, his or hers, are not the issue. What matters is not her love, his affection for her and the prince, but the rule of law and duty. His niece answers that there are moments where we should break the rule of law, where feelings should be allowed to reign supreme. Only this, she insists, would result in the most **beautiful** order. Natalie and the elector are as sublimity is to beauty. Not unmoved by her words, the Elector ends up by making the young general the judge of his own case.

> If he can call the judgment made unjust
> I take it back and he is free

But as you may expect — think of Socrates – thus made responsible, the Prince of Homburg finds it impossible to consider the judgment unjust. Once again Natalie pleads:

> If, noble as you are, you can't resist the judgment
> Can't annul it
> Then, I assure you, the Elector, will
> present himself to you **sublime**
> And as the matter stands, quite without pity
> He will give orders that the judgment
> be carried out tomorrow.

But the Prince is unwilling to contest the judgment's legitimacy. Made judge in his own case he himself decides to uphold the law, even though he is to die by it, and is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of the law.

Beauty here struggles with sublimity, love with duty. But if the Elector represents sublime duty in the play, Kleist also shows that there is something inhuman about such duty. Natalie thus pleads for a beauty higher than the Elector's sublimity. Does Natalie then represent a higher humanity, a beauty more profound than the sublime? It should be clear that if we side here with Natalie, against the Elector, against duty, and insist on the rights of the heart, of feeling, we also testify to a deep uneasiness with Kant's position.

The play by the way concludes on a happy note. Awaiting the fatal bullet, the prince's blindfold is suddenly taken away, his beloved princess places a chain around his neck and his hand on her heart. Is it a dream? He wonders. And one of the prince's faithful officers answers: A dream, what else. The reconciliation of love and duty, of beauty and sublimity, is said to be a dream.

But let me return to the problem of the authority of the moral law: I suggested that we ourselves are the authors of such authority. But when this is said, it is important to keep in mind that we are not authors of that law in so far as we are natural beings, but in so far as we are free rational agents. The moral law has its foundation in human freedom. Indeed, Kant suggests, if we grant the fact of freedom, a rather curious fact, as I

shall show next time, really not a fact at all, then we have, at least implicitly, also granted the authority of the moral law.

> Thus if freedom of the will is presuposed, morality together with its principle follows from it by the mere analysis of its concepts. (64)

How then does Kant understand freedom?

> As will is a kind of causality of living beings so far as they are rational, freedom would be that property of this causality by which it can be effective independent of foreign causes determining it, just as natural necessity is the property of the causality of all irrational beings by which they are determined to activity by the influence of foreign causes. (63)

Kant points out the negative character of that conception. It gives us no insight into the nature of the moral imperative. Here we should keep in mind the distinction I drew last time between spontaneity and a free act. Free will always requires principles. But where is it to find these principles? Take someone who freely submits to a law of which he is not the author. Consider once more the case of a divine law. Or the case of the law of some society. Or the case of choosing to follow one's own inclinations and desires. In all these cases, Kant suggests, the will binds itself to a rule that is not really its own. It becomes heteronomous. We can speak of autonomy only where the will is a law unto itself:

> What else, then, can the freedom of the will be but autonomy (i.e. the property of the will to be law to itself)? The proposition that the will is a law to itself in all its actions, however, only expresses the principle that we should act according to no other maxim than that which can also have itself as a universal law for its object. And this is just the formula of the categorical imperative and the principle of morality. Therefore a free will and a will under moral law are identical. (64)

Note the emphasis on the universal. Freedom according to Kant is really freedom only where it places itself under the categorical imperative, that is to say, we must be capable of willing the maxim of our action to become a moral law. Only the moral person is truly free.

The categorical imperative then says in a sense nothing other than: affirm yourself as the human being you are, become who you are, where the essence of what distinguishes human beings from animals is sought in reason. Don't betray reason to the animal in you. It is this affirmation of our humanity that gives human existence its dignity, its worth. Our existence does not need to be justified with reference to something else. We do not act morally for the sake of something else. Moral behavior is its own justification.

> Now, I say, man and, in general, every rational being exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will. In all his actions, whether they are directed toward himself or toward other rational beings, he must always be regarded at the same time as an end. All objects of inclinations have only a conditional worth, for if the inclinations and needs founded on them did not exist, their object would be worthless. (45)

This consideration leads Kant to the following restatement of the categorical imperative:

> The practical imperative, therefore, is the following: Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only. (46)

If Kant is right, we recognize that what gives dignity and meaning to our lives cannot be distinguished from what gives dignity and meaning to the life of every human being. In so far as we are beings of reason we are joined as members, as fellow citizens, of a **kingdom of ends**. If Kant is right, I cannot affirm myself in my own humanity without at the same time acknowledging the humanity of every other human being. Unlike

Bentham, Kant thus draws a radical distinction between rational beings and all other things. Animals would be included in the latter group. What defines a person is not his capacity for suffering, but the fact that he is a rational agent, that is to say, his freedom.

> Beings whose existence does not depend on our will, but on nature, if they are not rational beings, have only a relative worth as means, and are therefore called "things"; rational beings, on the other hand, are designated "persons", because their nature indicates that they are ends-in-themselves (i.e. things which may not be used merely as means). Such a being is thus an object of respect, and as such restricts all [arbitrary] choice. Such beings are not merely subjective ends whose existence as a result of our action has a worth for us, but are objective ends (i.e. beings whose existence is an end in itself). (45)

Only when we recognize ourselves as persons, and this for Kant has to mean also acknowledge other persons as persons, does our life gain an absolute worth. Note that Kant here gives an answer to the problem of nihilism. The nihilist demands a justification of human existence. He asks for the point of this fleeting and seemingly so accidental human life. Is all of human existence not an episode that plays itself out in a small timespan, on a small planet, in some corner of the universe? Schopenhauer was to describe human existence in such terms to underscore its fundamental meaninglessness, and Nietzsche was to repeat it after him. Kant would agree that if you insist on viewing human beings as just beings of nature then there will be no justification of life. They will then have be to be viewed like other animals, beings that seek pleasure, seek to avoid pain, only more problematic than these other animals because of that strange brain function called reason, as a result of which we bear within ourselves a knowledge of our mortality and are capable of asking the question: why are we here? What is the point of our existence? The appeal to pleasure holds no answer to this question.

Kant answers this question in a sense by dismissing it. The person who demands a justification of human existence has already viewed human existence as a means to something else. If life is such a means, then it must serve some end and that end must have absolute worth. God may be appealed to as such an end. But Schopenhauer and Nietzsche can no longer make such an appeal, nor is there another reality that can take God's place. The place that God once occupied as the ground of all meaning has become empty. That makes both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche nihilists.

But the very starting point is misguided, Kant insists. Rational nature, as he points out repeatedly, exists as an end in itself. But this is to say that it is misunderstood if an attempt is made to justify it in terms of something higher. It has an absolute worth that rules out and makes odious all attempts to give such justification.

In this context Kant returns for a third time to the example of suicide:

> First, according to the concept of necessary duty to oneself, he who contemplates suicide will ask himself whether his action can be consistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself. If in order to escape from burdensome circumstances he destroys himself, he uses a person merely as a means to maintain a tolerable condition up to the end of life. Man, however, is not a thing, and thus not something to be used merely as a means; he must always be regarded in all his actions as an end in himself. Therefore I cannot dispose of man in my own person so as to mutilate, corrupt, or kill him. (46)

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Albert Camus begins his meditation on the absurd with a consideration of the question: why not suicide? Kant would argue that the very question presupposes a **misunderstanding of the meaning of humanity**. Someone who has been awakened to that humanity will not look for a justification of it beyond human being. Such a person will not need God to find human existence meaningful and will experience the command of the categorical imperative an absolute command. If we had more time it

would be interesting to compare Camus's answer to this question to Kant's: how different is it in the end? Note that with the categorical imperative Kant has placed a limiting condition on our freedom. **But this constraint is only the constraint placed on freedom by its nature as practical reason**.

You should note that Kant gives us three quite distinct formulations of the categorical imperative:

> Objectively the ground of all practical legislation lies (according to the first principle) in the rule and its form of universality, which makes it capable of being a law (at least a natural law); subjectively it lies in the end. But the subject of all ends is every rational being as an end in itself (by the second principle); from this there follows the third practical principle of the will as the supreme condition of its harmony with the universal practical reason, viz., the idea of the will of every rational being as making universal law. (48)

Later, on p. 53, he will return to this triple distinction. The first formulation emphasizes the **form** of the maxims by which we act. By it are rejected all maxims that are not consistent with the **universal** lawgiving of the will. The second formulation looks not so much at the form as at the matter or the **end**. This end is provided by the fact that **every rational being is an end-in-itself and ought to be treated as such**. Here we appeal to the dignity of persons, the dignity that belongs to them, indeed to all rational beings, as such. To treat human beings as material serving other ends violates such dignity. Suicide violates that dignity.

The third formulation invokes the idea of **the will of every rational being harmonizing in the idea of one universal law**. Let us imagine then a state of affairs where all human, indeed all rational beings, treat each other in a way that respects the dignity that belongs to each just by virtue of his or her being a person. We should act as if

that realm were reality. If we do this, we take a perhaps small step, but nevertheless a step towards realizing what the third formulation demands.

The idea of such a realm operates as a regulative idea in history. Kant thus tends to see history as a progress towards freedom, where that progress can be interpreted as a process of awakening. Such awakening is enlightenment. But for Kant such awakening is not simply a natural and as such inevitable process. Nature has long discharged us from her rule. Thus the lack of enlightenment is something for which we bear responsibility. And what prevents us from assuming this responsibility is fear. Let me conclude therefore with the beginning of Kant's little essay: *What is Enlightenment?*

> Enlightenment is man's release from this self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of courage and resolution to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude*! "Have courage to use your own reason!" — that is the motto of enlightenment. (83)

With this we return once again to a theme stated already by Plato. All life that is worth living requires courage, more specifically a courage that overcomes the fear of death and the related preoccupation with our little self and its pleasures and pains.

16. Some Critical Questions

Let me begin by returning once more to Kant's notion of **autonomy**. We are autonomous only when the laws or maxims that govern our actions arise from our own will. Autonomy does not mean an arbitrary freedom. Quite the contrary, freedom is constrained here by law, but this law is not something imposed on us from without, either by God or by nature. And the autonomous person has broken free from that chain of pleasure and pain with which nature binds us, and on which Bentham bases his moral and political philosophy.

But, one may ask, does Kant not stop short of full autonomy when he subjects freedom to the law of reason. One may thus argue that although Kant seeks to free morality from its traditional theological supports, he remains in fact indebted to that tradition when he insists on the authority of the categorical imperative. This, one may argue, becomes particularly important in his third formulation of the categorical imperative. Consider a passage like the following:

> The rational being must regard himself always as legislative in a realm of ends possible through the freedom of the will whether he belongs to it as member or as sovereign. He cannot maintain his position as sovereign merely through the maxims of his will, but only when he is a completely independent being without need and with unlimited power adequate to his will. (50-51)

It is evident that we are not sovereigns in the **kingdom of ends**, but at most members. The sovereign would have to be God. Kant, too, thus measures our everyday human existence by an ideal realm whose sovereign is God, that is to say, by a secularized version of the traditional idea of the **kingdom of God**, a kingdom whose members are all rational agents. Note that this sovereign does not rule by what I earlier called might, nor does he rule by power. We recognize the authority of the divine law, because it is the

very law that we as reasonable beings have to give ourselves. In that sense appeal to the sovereignty of God is dispensable. And yet, does Kant not rely on this idea of the sovereignty of God when he appeals to the idea of the respect that we owe to every human being simply in so far as that being is a being of reason? Do we not have here a secularization of the idea that human beings are the children of God, created in his image, and as such possess a dignity that we ought not to deny? To what extent does Kant's philosophy draw on and gain affective support from a religious tradition that it would yet leave behind?

Without some such support, is Kant's subjection of freedom to the universal really convincing? Could one not argue that this is still heteronomy of some sort, that there is **a still more radical freedom** that reveals itself in the question: Why be moral in the Kantian sense? This would be a freedom that does not belong to human beings in so far as they are members of the kingdom of ends, but to the solitary individual who experiences his membership in the kingdom of ends a something he can him or herself choose or refuse. Say I face this alternative: either to spend my life in an effort to maximize pleasure and to minimize pain or to spend it in an effort to live up to what duty commands. That we face such a choice would seem to presupposes a **freedom "higher" than the freedom bound by reason that Kant has in mind when he speaks of autonomy.** A person who chose to act against what duty commands Kant would call **morally evil** (*Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone,* A 30). How are we to understand such an evil person? If we tried to interpret evil as a case where the body just overwhelmed our reason, it would be difficult to hold the evil person responsible. That we do hold such a person responsible presupposes that we think that he freely chose the evil life. Kant addresses the issue of evil in his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. But without going into details, this much seems clear: The very fact that we hold both the good and the evil person responsible for their choice of life forces us to question any too intimate association of freedom with practical reason. If they are made

inseparable, how are we to hold the evil person responsible? But this forces us to question further: does autonomy really imply that I ought to respect the dignity of every human being? Such questioning seeks to dissociate what Kant argues could not be dissociated, namely freedom and and what pure practical reason commands. A person who wants to argue that way might easily agree with Kant that every ought has its foundation in freedom. But more radically than Kant such a person would insist that freedom is not measured by any reality transcending it, not even by the idea of a kingdom of ends or by the universal, that **freedom is more radical, more abysmal**. Such an **existentialist** interpretation would insist that **freedom is higher than the universal**, that submission to the universal is just another form of heteronomy. We shall have occasion to explore this matter further when we turn to Kierkegaard. On this view the moral imperative, we may want to speak of an **imperative of autonomy**, might read as follows: **act only according to the maxims that have their foundation in your individual freedom**. This sounds very much like Kant's formulation, but gone is the respect for laws, for the universal, that distinguishes Kant's position; gone is also his respect for the dignity of man as such. Some existentialists such as Heidegger or Sartre have tended to develop Kant's position in this direction. With this Kantian **autonomy** is transformed into existentialist **authenticity**.

On this view there is no transcendent measure of human actions, there is no realm of the divine, no God who created human beings in his image and thus endowed them with his measure. God is dead. The only source of value, on this view, is the subject's own radical freedom. The question is: is such radical freedom thinkable? If Kant is right, **when pushed this far, autonomy has to collapse into the most radical heteronomy**.

Let us try to think of such a radical freedom. I try to act in a way where the maxim of my action has its sole foundation in my freedom. The proper answer to the question: why did you do this? would receive by its very nature no reasonable answer,

only: I acted this way because I chose to act that way, because I willed it. But why didn't you will something else? For no reason, I would have to reply. I just decided that this is what I would do.

Note that such **decisionism** renders willing completely arbitrary. For the sake of my personal freedom, I here uncouple the tie of freedom to practical reason, even if this has to mean a surrender to the accidental. But is the rule of accident not the most complete heteronomy? Pushed this far freedom would seem to destroy itself. If we are to escape form such arbitrariness, we have to say that there is a measure, some law that constrains freedom. We have to admit, it would seem, against such an extreme existentialism, that human being has something like an essence. By this I do not mean that the human being has a definite nature that rules his actions, but that he bears within himself an image of what he ought to be. Kant's talk about the human being as a member of the kingdom of ends seeks to articulate this image. Perhaps he was mistaken with this particular articulation of that image, but this much has to be granted: freedom only make sense on the assumption of such an image. Such an image is either given to man from without or it has its foundation in his own being, in his essence. In the former case heteronomy has the last word and autonomy finally turns out to be an illusion. If freedom is to be more than an illusion, it would seem that man must understand himself as member of a community of reasonable beings and must make such understanding a measure of what he ought to do. With this I have returned not only to Kant, but also to Plato. But this return is inevitably shadowed by the possibility of evil, and that means shadowed by a freedom that refuses the call of morality.

Let me now turn to a very different kind of questioning: if Kant can be criticized for giving **too much content** to his notion of autonomy, it is also possible to criticize him for having given it **too little content**, that he has left the moral imperative much **too**

formal and abstract. Let me open up here just two lines of questioning: I do not consider them in any way exhaustive:

1. We can question whether Kant does not place a too one-sided emphasis on reason and thereby **shortchanges the affective, emotional side** of our being, that side for whom Kleist's princess Natalie pleads. Kant does of course grant that we are beings ruled by more or less natural inclinations; thus he grants that we all seek happiness. To this extent he agrees with Bentham. He also grants that this project generates certain hypothetical imperatives. But these, he suggested, ought to submit to the categorical imperatives, the heart to reason. Quite literally Kant's moral person is likely to show a certain sublime heartlessness, somewhat as the elector does in Kleist's play. In the name of morality Kant threatens to do violence to human feelings; but is this violence not also violence to the essence of human being? Would genuine respect for the concrete humanity of a person not have to include respect for his or her unique individuality? And that means also respect for a person's feelings?

2. Kant also underestimated the already mentioned difficulties that we may face when we try to apply the categorical imperative in particular situations. Kant apparently thought that in any given situation, where we are moved by different desires and inclinations, the categorical imperative will be sufficient to tell us how to act. That this is in fact so is not at all clear. Take once more the case where I have to lie to save a person's life, perhaps lie even to the person whose life I am saving. Kant takes up this issue in a little essay, “On a Supposed Right to Lie Out of Love for Humanity," where he reiterates our duty to be truthful in all our declarations.

But what if two or more maxims, all in accord with what is demanded by the categorical imperative, collide — how am I to choose? What higher principle am I to appeal to adjudicate such a conflict? If there are indeed such conflicts, it seems in principle impossible to derive from Kant's categorical imperative the maxims that should govern my action, that is to say: to be workable a morality has to have more content than

Kant is able to give it. And if this is so, there is no reason to insist that there is only one morality. What we could argue for then is at most that there is a **form** of all moralities. It is this form that is articulated by Kant's analysis of practical reason, but into this form are poured contents that will vary with different situations, different places and different times.

A different problem is opened up by the following consideration: take someone who takes his duty to be first of all to members of his immediate family, then, in widening circles, to neighbors and friends, members of the community, fellow citizens, and finally humanity. Such a person would feel that his duty to help a starving family next door greater than his duty to help a starving family in Afghanistan. The question then is, granting that life gains worth and dignity only when the individual understands himself as part of a community, is it clear that the relevant community is the community of all rational beings? Think of the earth being visited or invaded by coldly rational beings from outer space, in some way rather like well functioning super-computers, but looking very much like large green spiders. Would we feel that we owed them the respect we owed human beings? This re-raises the question of how to recognize other beings as members of the community of which I take myself to be a member, the community of persons. **Only such a sense of community**, Kant speaks of membership in the kingdom of ends, **supports the authority of the moral law**. **Community**, it would seem, rests on **communication**. But communication is itself a problematic notion. There is, e.g., a sense in which Plato, Bentham, and Kant still communicate with us. Still, I would suggest that the communication that supports morality cannot be just communication on the level of reason, but that it must be founded in concrete communities and that in the establishment of such communication **affects** come into play. Let me make clearer what is at stake with an example: Most of us, I suspect, want to be treated as persons, but not just as persons. We want others to respect the humanity we share with all human beings,

but feel that only someone who is really open to the inevitably particular person we happen to be, is really doing justice to us. Is the latter morally irrelevant? Note the tension between these demands, treat me as a person and treat me in a way that respects the unique individual I am. The first could be made somewhat more specific to read: respect me as a human being, not as male or female, black or white, rich or poor, etc. The second could be made more specific to read: respect me as this particular human being I am, as male or female, black or white, rich or poor, etc. Someone in love expects the second. This objection to Kant would then insist that we must do justice to the fact that persons are necessarily embodied, concrete, and mortal, that they are recognized and demand respect only as such, as the mortals they are; furthermore that the community that gives meaning and worth to the lives of particular human beings is first of all not the abstract community of all human beings, but always a concrete community, formed first of all by those with whom we communicate, and we are suspicious of those who love humanity and demonstrate this by their generous gifts to all sorts of international organizations committed to helping desperately poor people around the world to live better lives and yet are cold and aloof and want no contact with their somewhat impoverished neighbors.

And yet Kant's insistence that all such concrete communities have their measure in the regulative ideal of the community of all rational beings is not easily dismissed. Dismiss it and you are forced to ask: what is the morally relevant community. To answer that question one is likely to appeal to the concrete situation that has evolved, where love and personal likes or dislike are likely to play an important part in determining the communities of which we are members. But does such membership have a moral significance? What is the moral significance of being a member of, say, your family, the Yale community, the United States, humanity? Whenever we link morality to communities of narrower scope than the community of all human beings, we are in danger of subjecting freedom to history, autonomy to heteronomy. What binds freedom

now threatens to become something that is determined by, among other things, geographical and historical accident. This consideration returns us to Kant's claim that freedom is an illusion unless man understands himself as member of a realm of ends i. e. of the realm of all rational beings.

There is a consideration of a very different kind that merits some discussion. How do we know that freedom is not just an illusion? To the extent that our understanding of reality is more and more shaped by science we may find the concept of freedom more and more elusive. Science seems to have no place for freedom, and it does not help here to appeal to Heisenberg and to argue that our science is no longer the mechanistic science of Kant's day. His fundamental point remains: despite all uncertainties with which we have been forced to reckon, the science of nature, as science, knows nothing of freedom, cannot know anything of freedom.

> We have finally reduced the definite concept of morality to the idea of freedom, but we could not prove freedom to be actual in ourselves and in human nature. We saw only that we must presuppose it if we would think of a being as rational and conscious of its causality with respect to actions, that is, as endowed with a will, and so we find that on the very same grounds we must ascribe to each being endowed with reason and will the property of determining itself to action under the idea of its freedom. (66)

The conception of man as a rational agent forces us to posit freedom, but Kant also recognizes that science's understanding of nature allows no place for this.

> But this concept of a system of nature is confirmed by experience, and it is inevitably presupposed if experience, which is knowledge of the objects of the sense interconnected by universal laws, is to be possible. Therefore freedom is only an Idea of reason whose objective reality in itself is

> doubtful, while nature is a concept of the understanding which shows and must necessarily show its reality in examples of experience. (73)

How then are we to insist on the reality of freedom, and that means also on the reality of persons? And we must not only experience ourselves as persons, but also others, if the categorical imperative is to have an application? The question raised earlier about **recognition** returns. The answer has to be: the description of nature that science offers us may not be taken as an account of reality as it is in itself.

> There now arises a dialectic of reason, since the freedom ascribed to the will seems to stand in contradiction to natural necessity. At this parting of the ways reason in its speculative aspect finds the path of natural necessity more well-beaten and usable than that of freedom, but in its practical aspect the path of freedom is the only one on which it is possible to make use of reason in our conduct. Hence it is as impossible for the subtlest philosophy as for the commonest reasoning to argue freedom away. (73)

Kant's answer to this problem depends on his *Critique of Pure Reason* and the distinction of appearances and things in themselves.

> all conceptions, like those of the senses, which come to us without our choice enable us to know objects only as they affect us, while what they are in themselves remains unknown to us; therefore, as regards this kind of conception, even with the closest attention and clearness which understanding may ever bring to them we can attain only a knowledge of appearances and never a knowledge of things as they are in themselves. When this distinction is once made (perhaps merely because of a difference noticed between conceptions which are given us from somewhere else and to which we are passive, and those we produce from ourselves only and in which we show our own activity), it follows of itself

> that we must admit and assume behind the appearances something else that is not an appearance, i.e. things as they are in themselves, although we must admit that that we cannot approach them more closely and can never know what they are in themselves. (68)

We shall never be able to explain freedom. We shall never gain an objective understanding of it. In that sense there also can be no proof of the reality of the categorical imperative. For the realty of the categorical imperative depends on the reality of freedom, is indeed taken by Kant to be implied by the reality of freedom. But reality cannot be equated with the natural order as science describes it. So understood nature is only a realm of appearances and in that realm nothing like freedom can even show itself. But science could only deny the reality of freedom if it could claim to have seized reality as it is in itself, but just this it cannot legitimately do. All it is concerned with are mere appearances.

Freedom, if Kant is right, will always remain an enigma to us, but the reality of freedom is nonetheless established for us beyond a doubt by what Kant, too, calls **moral feeling**:

> The subjective impossibility of explaining the freedom of the will is the same as the impossibility of discovering and explaining an interest which man can take in moral laws. Nevertheless, he does actually take an interest in them, and the foundation of this interest in us we call the moral feeling. This moral feeling has been erroneously construed by some as the standard for our moral judgment, whereas it must be regarded rather as the subjective effect which the law has upon the will to which reason alone gives objective grounds. (77-78)

With this we have returned once more to Kant's understanding of human being as fundamentally amphibian, belonging to nature, now understood as the realm of appearances, and as belonging to an intellectual realm that Kant interprets as the kingdom

of ends. Yet this poses the problem of the relationship of these two realms, a problem with which Kant was to wrestle especially in *The Critique of Judgment*. To return to a question I raised before: **what is it that lets me understands a person as a person? --** and there must be such understanding if the categorical imperative is to have an application. And does this not mean that **freedom must in some sense appear**? And yet if the realm of appearances is subject to the rule of cause and effect, **how can they appear**? Once again there is a need for mediating what Kant has separated all to sharply.

17. The Knight of Faith

Let me begin by returning once more to Kant. In a number of lectures I raised a question concerning Kant's one-sided emphasis on duty, on pure practical reason, a question to which I would like to return now. It has occasioned the most common criticisms of Kant. Recall what I said about Kleist's *Prince of Homburg*. In a similar vein, Schopenhauer considers Kant's understanding of duty a mistake that offends the sensibility of everyone. He calls it a pedantic rule to claim that to be really good and meritorious a deed must be done simply and solely out of regard for the law and for the concept of duty, according to a maxim known to reason in the abstract; that it must not be performed from inclination, from any benevolence towards others, any tender-hearted sympathy, compassion, or emotion of the heart. Kant thus serves Schopenhauer as an example of moral **pedantry**. Let me read you here Schopenhauer's definition of pedantry:

> Pedantry is also a form of folly. It arises from a man's having little confidence in his own understanding, and therefore not liking to leave things to its discretion, to recognize directly what is right in the particular case. Accordingly, he puts his understanding entirely under the guardianship of reason, and makes use thereof on all occasions; in other words, he wants always to start from general concepts, rules, and maxims, and to stick to these in life, in art, and even in ethical good conduct. Hence that clinging to the form, the manner, the expression and the word that is peculiar to pedantry, and with it takes the place of the real essence of the matter. The incongruity between the concept and reality soon shows itself, as the former never descends to the particular case, and its universality and rigid definitions can never accurately apply to reality's fine shades of difference and its innumerable modifications. Therefore the

> pedant with his general maxims almost always comes off badly in life, and shows himself foolish, absurd, and incompetent.[6]

The pedant is thus someone who distrusts his intuitions, distrusts everything that could be considered a matter of feeling, emotion, instinct. If this is right, if we were to follow Kant, we would alienate ourselves from our own reality, sacrifice our real self to an abstract, fictional self by making this abstraction the measure of life. Schopenhauer would insist that goodness is fundamentally a matter of **feeling, passion, heart**. But not just any passion, but a particular passion: the good person is someone who is selflessly interested in other persons. Schopenhauer calls such selfless sympathy **agapé** and distinguishes it from **eros**, by which he understands a self-centered love. Pure selfless love is for him identical with **compassion**.

In its most fundamental sense Schopenhauer's ethics is an ethics of compassion. But compassion is necessarily a particular state of mind. In this sense we can say: **the particular is here placed higher than the universal**. The claims of feeling have to be placed higher than the claims of reason. You could question the use of "higher" here. Does Schopenhauer not represent a step back to a strange kind of utilitarianism? Bentham after all knew the pleasure of benevolence. But **what does compassion have to do with pleasure**? I am, however, interested here in the general point. Let me repeat it then as a question: **is there a particular that should be placed higher than the universal?**

Schopenhauer wonders indeed whether the categorical imperative makes any sense at all. It is supposed to present us with an **unconditional ought**. Schopenhauer argues that this is a contradiction in terms. And we should ask ourselves what sense we can make of such an ought. Suppose someone were to ask: and if I don't follow the categorical imperative, what then? One answer might be: well, you would then be

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[6] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*. (New York: Dover, 1966). p, 60.

immoral? You might answer: So what? Why be moral? To Kant the very question might very well suggest an evil disposition on your part. Some philosophers have argued that this is a meaningless question. But is it? According to Schopenhauer questions of this kind do have a good sense. Reflective questioning of the categorical imperative brings out its conditioned nature.

What conditions it? If Schopenhauer is right, something like **moral feeling**. This moral feeling is not just another selfish inclination. It is not to be reduced to Bentham's pleasure principle. Schopenhauer, too, thinks that to act selfishly is wrong. Agreeing with Plato and in a sense with Kant, he too, insists on the value of living life in such a way that the individual self is not taken too seriously. Morality must be given a foundation in sympathetic and compassionate love. But such love is always particular. Reason, according to Schopenhauer, articulates what more immediately claims us. It must retain its ground in feeling if it is to claim our allegiance; it cannot do so as pure reason.

Once again we are back with something like Platonic recollection: the pedant would then be the philosopher who forgets that his articulation of some moral maxim is just a human creation. He is someone who is so intent on duty that he does violence to his own heart. **An exaggerated sense of duty lets the heart grow cold and into stone.**

Kant of course would insist, against this, on the authority of the moral law. That authority is founded on the fact that as free, and that means for him rational agents, human beings are themselves the authors of the law that binds them. They submit their feelings to this law. This is the true meaning of autonomy. Freedom truly fulfills itself in submitting to the moral law.

But this, as I suggested briefly just before our brief vacation, generates a new challenge: one might grant Kant that morality must be given its foundation in freedom, but remain unconvinced that freedom is linked to practical reason in the way Kant suggests. Does the very fact that I can raise the question: why be moral? not point to a

freedom above morality? A freedom for which morality is an issue? But does this freedom not have to be placed higher than morality? Such questioning, I suggested, tends to transform Kantian **autonomy** into existentialist **authenticity**. The individual's freedom here appears again as **the particular that is higher than the universal**, higher than the categorical imperative. On this view the final source of value is individual freedom.

But in the preceding lecture I suggested also that such freedom is difficult to understand. Why should such freedom will one thing rather than another? If you try to live in such a way that only your individual freedom is the source of your values, you will end up in despair. Freedom requires a measure of some sort. Without such a measure what would be the most radical freedom betrays itself and becomes the most profound heteronomy. And if Kant is right, freedom requires that the free agent give himself the law by which he acts, and that he can do so precisely and only because he is a being of reason.

But can he not do so also by listening, not to his **reason**, but to his **heart,** to **passion**? Kierkegaard holds such a view, but gives it quite a special twist.

Let me approach Kierkegaard by reading you a passage taken from a sermon by the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart:

> For if life were questioned a thousand years and asked: "Why live?" and if there were an answer, it could be no more than this: "I live only to live!" And this is because Life is its own reason for being, springs from its own source, and goes on and on, without ever asking why — just because it is life. Thus if you ask a genuine person, that is one, who acts from his heart, "Why are you doing that?" — he will reply in the only possible way: "I do it because I do it."[7]

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[7] *Meister Echarts Predigten,* ed. and trans. Josef Quint, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936-1976), "In hoc apparuit caritas Dei in nobis," Quint, 5b, I, pp. 91-92; *Meister Eckhart*, trans. Raymond B. Blakney (New York:Harper, 1957) ,p. 127. Translation changed.

Eckhart here envisions a way of life that in a profound sense has suspended the ethical. Here the person no longer calculates, nor does he follow what reason commands, but does simply what his heart bids him do. When such a person is asked: why are you doing this? he can only answer: I do it because I do it. There can be no justification. Note that the answer here is not: I do it because I will it. This suspension of the ethical, which is also a suspension of reason, makes it impossible to reason with such a person. It seems to invite actions that we would consider immoral. Eckhart is quite aware of this:

> There are people who say: "I have God and God's love. I may do whatever I want to."[8]

Eckhart was speaking of the many people of his day, the early 14th century, who invoking the love of God denied existing morality, suspended it, if you want, in the name of their special relationship to God. Feeling themselves in possession of God's love, feeling attuned to God, they also felt that they could do no wrong. Their faith placed them above morality.

But Eckhart does not accept this claim:

> But they are wrong. As long as you are capable of acting contrary to the will of God, the love of God is not in you, however you may deceive the world. The person who lives in God's love and by God's will takes his pleasure in whatever God prefers and refrains from any act contrary to his wishes, finding it impossible to omit what God wants and impossible to go contrary to him. It is like a man whose legs are tied together. He cannot walk. It is just as impossible for a man who lives in God's love to be evil. Someone has said: "Even if God should command me to do evil and shun virtue, still I could not do what is wrong." For no one loves virtue but the virtuous. The person who has denied himself and all else, who seeks his own advantage in nothing and who loves without assigned reasons, acting

[8] Blakney, p. 193

> solely from loving-kindness, is one who is dead to the world and love in God and God is alive in him.[9]

Kant might speak here of a holy person, but, as we saw, he would have to deny moral worth to such a person. Kant's moral person exists in a constant struggle between duty and inclination. He finds him- or herself placed between the demands of reason and the passions. The person Eckhart has in mind no longer measures himself by a higher ideal. Such a person experiences no tension between what he is and what he should be. The suggestion is that only the individual who has overcome selfishness, and that would mean also selfish passions, but so completely that he does not need to struggle any longer, is truly living in God's love. We do not have here a return to Bentham's pleasure principle. That principle is essentially self-regarding. It represents the particular that is lower than the universal. Here we have a particular that can be called higher than the universal. That is of course Søren Kierkegaard's term. It is illustrated by the example of Abraham.

What is the relationship of Abraham, as Kierkegaard describes him, to Eckhart's man of faith? Both have taken a step to a particular that is higher than the universal. One difference between the two accounts is the way Kierkegaard insists on the importance of the ethical. The ethical for him, as for Kant, is the reasonable. The suspension of the ethical is at the same time a suspension of the reasonable. And it is precisely this suspension that is so difficult and more especially so difficult to understand. Unlike Eckhart's holy person who effortlessly is in accord with the ethical, and like Kant's moral person, Kierkegaard's **knight of faith** has to struggle. That is why he is called a knight. Kierkegaard insists with this example on the primacy of the relationship that ties the individual to God, a relationship that remains unmediated by morality, community, humanity. Another higher dimension breaks here into the everyday. In this respect there is an analogy between Abraham and Socrates. But more important is the difference: Socrates, too, has a kind of faith; that faith finds expression in a particular

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[9] Ibid.

way of life. The way Socrates lives exemplifies his faith. His faith and his morality are inseparable. To be sure there is something like a suspension of morality in Socrates, too, but what he suspends is the morality of the average Athenian, his common sense, the common sense of a Euthyphro for example. But it is suspended for the sake of a higher morality. Anytus, the most distinguished of his accusers, is also in his way a moral man. And may of those who accused him were in their way no doubt moral men. But morality meant for them something intimately tied to an established way of life, to the inherited mores. They sensed the threat that Socrates and his morality posed to this way of life. By opposing Socrates they could claim to be defending the old gods. Compared to their morality the morality of Socrates is no doubt a higher morality. But we can sympathize with the Athenians: it is just this that makes this a **tragic conflict** in the sense in which Hegel understood the term: a conflict between a new and higher, yet still one-sided, morality and an older and lower one.

But it is impossible to understand the Abraham story as told by Kierkegaard as a tragedy in this sense. If, measured by Athenian common sense, Socrates must seem mad, there is yet a higher point of view that will make him seem reasonable. There is, however, no higher point of view that will allow us to understand Abraham. **On Abraham our reason suffers shipwreck**.

The story is told very quickly:

> And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him … take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. (45)

This story is nested in another:

> There was once a man: he had learned as a child that beautiful tale of how God had tried Abraham, how he withstood the test, kept his faith and for the second time received a son against every expectation. (44)

The story is **a story of temptation**. God tempts Abraham. Abraham keeps his faith, and this keeping of his faith finds expression in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, which is also a sacrifice of his morality. If this faith is hard to understand, even harder to understand is that, expecting to sacrifice Isaac, he gets him back a second time.

Before we consider Kierkegaard's discussion of the story in more detail, let us note how it is presented to us. *Fear and Trembling* is attributed to a **pseudonym**, Johannes de Silentio. This pseudonym does not possess the faith of Abraham. He is preoccupied with it, but he knows that he does not possess it. Otherwise he would hardly have composed this **dialectical lyric**. Nor should we assume that Kierkegaard had such faith. Had he possessed it, he hardly would have had to write this book. In reading the book you should also keep in mind the motto taken from Hamann at the bottom of the title page:

> What Tarquin the Proud said in the garden with the poppy blooms, was understood by the son but not by the messenger. (39)

Tarquinius Superbus is said to have chopped off the heads of the tallest poppies. The son understood this to mean that he, too, should chop off the heads of the tallest poppies, i.e. the leaders of the community in which he was staying and which had made him their military commander, after he has pretended that he had had a falling out with his father. This suggests that *Fear and Trembling* is to be read as a coded message. Is Kierkegaard, the sender of this message, then like Tarquinius Superbus? Who then is the son to whom the message js addressed? Kierkegaard's biography gives us the answer. The privileged reader was to be Regine Olsen, the girl whom Kierkegaard loved; and yet it was he who broke the engagement and presented himself as a scoundrel, who sacrificed her in this sense. The recurrent refrain about the mother and the child that must be weaned is a figure of his relationship to Regine Olsen. He thought he had to give her up as Abraham had to give up Isaac. Was he expecting to get her back as Abraham received back Isaac? But one can also compare Kierkegaard to Isaac. He is the child that has to be weaned,

that has to learn to stand alone. Or js it Regine Olsen who has to be weaned from her love to become truly herself?

The juxtaposition of Abraham ready to sacrifice his son and the mother weaning her child is itself significant. It touches on something familiar: the child is weaned for its own sake, so that it might develop into an independent human being. The child has to be cast out of the more intimate relationship with the mother, to learn to become her- or himself. In a way the story tells of a process that in different ways repeats itself again and again in history and in the process of growing up: to become an individual we have to forsake the communities that once sheltered us. We are looking back to a lost paradise, lost community. Every community offers something like a sense of being at home. This is true even of Kant's conception of a kingdom of ends of which all free moral beings are members. Do we then have to forsake this home, too, to become truly free? And do we also have to be weaned of our reliance on love?

The age of faith lies behind us. In an important sense **our reflective age has lost faith in faith**. Think of Kant's determination of our age as an age of enlightenment that drags everything before the court of reason. Kierkegaard is trying to make the opposite point: that **faith** does not lie behind us moderns, but **lies before us**, that it awaits us. But this is also to imply the insufficiency of the ethical:

> If there were no eternal consciousness in a man, if at the bottom of everything there were only a wild ferment, a power that twisting in dark passions produced everything great or inconsequential; if an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness lay hid beneath everything, what then would life be but despair? If it were thus, if there were no sacred bond uniting mankind, if one generation rose up after another like the leaves of the forest, if one generation succeeded the other as the songs of the birds in the woods, if the human race passed through the world as a ship through the sea or the wind through the desert, a thoughtless and fruitless

> whim, if an eternal oblivion always lurked hungrily for its prey and there was no power strong enough to wrest it from its clutches — how empty and devoid of comfort would life be! But for that reason it is not so, and just as God created man and woman, so too he created the hero and the poet or speech-maker. (49)

Johannes de Silentio is the poet who sings of such a hero and at the same time struggles with his own song. We begin to sense what Kierkegaard is attempting here: the story of Abraham is told against the background of nihilism. The strength of the modern age, if it is indeed a strength, is the strength of reflection. But we have reflected ourselves out of all oughts. There is no morality that can withstand the power of reflection, not even Kant's. Reflection is like a solvent that dissolves all that can give us our bearings . We may indeed produce the most wonderful arguments — note the sardonic comments directed by Kierkegaard against Hegel's system — we may offer a strong argument that the categorical imperative is a necessary condition of real self-affirmation, and yet, will such arguments really change one's way of life? Will they really make life any more significant? What we moderns lack is passion, Kierkegaard suggests. And what we need is a passion that is higher than reason. Not just any passion, to be sure, but a passionate faith. **Johannes de Silentio is then the poet who sings us the song of the knight of faith**.

18. The Challenge of Abraham

Last time I suggested that Johannes de Silentio, the pseudonymous author of **Fear and Trembling,** is a poet who celebrates a particular kind of hero, the knight of faith. This hero has to be opposed to the kind of hero exemplified by Socrates. One could describe Plato as a poet who celebrates not the **knight of faith**, but the **knight of reason**. In celebrating the former, placing him higher than all other heroes. Kierkegaard's pseudonym is questioning Plato and with Plato philosophy, especially moral philosophy. Note that the two kinds of hero differ with respect to our ability to understand them. Abraham surpasses our understanding in a way in which Socrates does not. Choosing Abraham for our hero we also commit ourselves to the view that the ground of meaning surpasses human understanding.

Given our sense of morality, or for that matter Kant's, there is only one interpretation of what Abraham is embarking on: he has resolved to murder his son. He thus appears first of all as a lunatic and a would-be murderer. And yet he is said to be the father of faith. How do these two go together, a **lunatic criminal** and the **father of faith**? The most obvious strategy is to give a metaphorical reading of the story. Kierkegaard, more precisely his pseudonym, invites such a reading when he establishes a parallel between Abraham, who is asked to sacrifice Isaac, and the mother who has to wean her child. This suggests that part of the meaning of the story is that we have to permit the other person, especially the child, to develop into a fully independent individual. This involves a separation that is difficult. The mother knows that as the child will grow up that intimate community that once tied her to the child will be broken. She will be left alone. And so will the child. The story thus becomes **an allegory of the necessary loneliness of the authentically existing individual**. The progress towards true individuality shatters all community. And since only in so far as he is a member of a community, is the individual a moral agent, that progress also leads to a **suspension of**

the moral. Remember here the way Kant's categorical imperative remains tied to the idea of the human being as member of the kingdom of ends. In that sense of membership, the human being has a sense of belonging, of being at home. With the story of Abraham Kierkegaard seems to insist that **the individual is fundamentally alone**. To allow the child to develop into an individual the mother has to find the strength to withdraw from the child as a mother, the father the strength to withdraw from the son as a father; and if we are to become individuals in this sense even God has to withdraw from us as a loving father, so that in **fear and trembling** the individual experiences himself as having been cast into a strange world, delivered over to **destructive time**.

In reading *Fear and Trembling* note the emphasis Kierkegaard gives to **time:**

> [Abraham] had fought with that subtle power that invents everything, with that watchful opponent that never takes a nap, with that old man who outlives everything – time itself. He had fought with it and kept his faith. (52)

Let me return once more to a passage I read you last time:

> If there were no eternal consciousness in a man, if at the bottom of everything there were only a wild ferment, a power that twisting in dark passions produced everything great or inconsequential; if an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness lay hid beneath everything, what then would life be but despair? If it were thus, if there were no sacred bond uniting mankind, if one generation rose up after another like the leaves of the forest, if one generation succeeded the other as the songs of the birds in the woods, if the human race passed through the world as a ship through the sea or the wind through the desert, a thoughtless and fruitless whim, if an eternal oblivion always lurked hungrily for its prey and there was no power strong enough to wrest it from its clutches — how empty and devoid of comfort would life be! But for that reason it is not so, and

> just as God created man and woman, so too he created the hero and the poet or speech-maker. (49)

We return here to a theme familiar already from Plato. Platonic is the parallel between man and woman, on the one hand, hero and poet, on the other. Together man and woman conquer time by having children. In the *Symposium* this is the basic mystery of love. And similarly the hero and the poet defeat time. The poet prevents the hero's deeds from being forgotten. But he needs these deeds as an occasion for his song: The poet needs the hero to have something to sing about. His song is thus like the mother's child.

But this theme of having children comes in also in another way: for the longest time Sarah and Abraham had no children. And yet Abraham is he who has been promised that in his seed all the races of the world would be blessed. As Abraham and Sarah grow older without having a child that promise becomes less and less reasonable. Already at that stage Abraham is tempted. And yet, against all reasonable expectation, he keeps his faith, believes in the promise. And the child is finally born and grows up.

But now the temptation is raised to a higher level: Abraham is asked to sacrifice this son, is asked to sacrifice the hope that through his offspring he would live forever, that trough him all the races of the world would be blessed. Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son and with him that hope. God lets Abraham recognize that his situation is finally that of a lonely individual, to be devoured by time. **But in time there is no solace. Such solace can come only from eternity**. So understood the story becomes an allegory about the necessity of faith. It shows us that in the finite we cannot hope to find that meaning that frees us from despair.

But this interpretation renders the story harmless by making out of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac a metaphor for the necessity of subordinating the temporal to the eternal. What is not faced by this interpretation is the fact that the ethical expression of what Abraham is about to do is **murder**. Abraham is about to murder his son.

Another way of rendering the story harmless is to give it a quasi-ethical reading. When two duties conflict, do we not have to chose the weightier duty? This is indeed the way the Abraham story often used to be taught in school. Kierkegaard gives us a neat summary of this interpretation:

> One speaks of Abraham's honour, but how? By making it a commonplace: 'His greatness was that he so loved God that he was willing to offer him the best he had.' That is very true, but ' best"' is a vague expression. In word and thought one can quite easily identify Isaac with the best, and the man who so thinks can very well puff on his pipe as he does so, and the listener can very well leisurely stretch out his legs. If the rich young man whom Christ met on the road had sold all his possessions and given them to the poor, we would praise him as we praise all great deeds, but we could not understand even him without some labour. Yet he would not have become an Abraham, had he given away the best he had. What is left out of the Abraham story is the anguish; For while I am under no obligation to money, to a son a father had the highest and most sacred of obligations. (58)

On this interpretation, Abraham's duty to God conflicts with his duty as a father to his son. Kierkegaard speaks of this as the highest and most shared obligation. The duty to God and the duty to the son conflict in the story. Hegel calls such conflicts tragic. Abraham on that interpretation appears as a tragic hero. He would invite comparison with other heroic figures who, for the sake of duty, were willing to sacrifice their sons or daughters. Greek tragedy and Roman history have provided familiar examples.

One such example is Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, as told by Euripides: The Greek fleet is assembled in Aulis, ready to sail for Troy. But Artemis has been offended by the king and now demands that he sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia.

> When an enterprise involving a whole nation is prevented, when such an enterprise is brought to a halt by heaven's disfavour, when the divine wrath sends a dead calm which mocks every effort, when the soothsayer performs his sad task and proclaims that the deity demands a young girl as a sacrifice — then it is with heroism that the father has to make that sacrifice. Nobly will he hide his grief though he could wish he were 'the lowly man who dares to weep' and not the king who must bear himself in a manner as befits a king. And however solitarily the pain enters his breast, for he has only three confidants among his people [Menelaus, Calchas, and Ulysses], soon the entire population will be privy to his pain, but also to his deed, to the fact that for the well-being of the whole he was willing to offer that girl, his daughter, this lovely young maiden. Oh what bosom! What fair cheeks! What flaxen hair! And the daughter will touch him with her tears, and the father avert his face, but the hero will raise the knife. And when the news of this reaches the ancestral home, all the beauteous maidens of Greece will blush with animation, and if the daughter were a bride the betrothed would not be angered but proud to have been party to the father's deed, because the maiden belonged to him more tenderly than to the father. (86)

A sublime sense of duty here triumphs. The welfare of the whole trumps particular desires.

The second example Kierkegaard gives us, now not from Greek tragedy, but from the Old Testament, is in one sense more disturbing, in another les so:

> When that bold judge, who saved Israel in the hour of need, binds God and himself in one breath with the same promise, then it is with heroism that he is to transform the young girl's jubilation, the beloved daughter's joy, to sorrow, and all Israel will grieve with her over her virginal youth; but

> every freeborn man will understand Jephthah, every stout-hearted woman admire him, and every maiden in Israel will want to do as his daughter; for what good would it be for Jephthah to triumph by making his promise but fail to keep it? Would the victory not be taken once more from the people? (86-87)

Jephthah had made a rather strange vow:

> I thou wilt give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes forth from the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, and I will offer him up for a burnt offering. (*Judges* 11, 30-40)

The person who come out to meet him is his daughter, his only child. But promises have to be kept. And his daughter agrees with him, she submits freely to the sacrifice and asks only for two months to bewail her virginity. Again: the judge obeys the imperative: promises must be kept, especially when they are made to God. And again we have a capricious deity, who apparently can be bargained with, and drives a rather tough bargain. Kant would have little difficulty dismissing both cases as examples of a religion that an enlightened humanity should leave behind. Both Agamemnon and Jephthah use a human being as a means for preserving the national welfare. The case of Jephthah is harder to understand in that it is he who makes an unreasonable, thoughtless promise to God; it is in easier to understand in that his daughter **consents to the sacrifice**, is willing to **sacrifice herself** for the greater good.

The third story falls more squarely under the category of the ethical. Here the child to be sacrificed is guilty of a crime: the crime was conspiracy. The son of Brutus wanted to restore the monarchy. The crime is evident. And the father does his duty, difficult as that duty is made for him by the love that as a father he feels for his son.

Kierkegaard discusses all of these examples in terms of a tragic conflict. We can note a certain ascent in these examples: in the first example it is a Greek deity that

demands the sacrifice, in the second the God of the Old Testament, in the third the law of Rome. In each case we can understand to some extent the sacrifice and its meaning, even if we may reject the unenlightened view of religion that in the first two cases made it necessary. In each case the tragic hero is sublime in the sense in which the Great Elector in the play by Kleist is sublime and, as you will recall, precisely because of that sublimity also heartless. But the Abraham story, Kierkegaard insists, cannot be understood in this way:

> The difference between the tragic hero and Abraham is obvious enough. The tragic hero stays within the ethical. He lets an expression of the ethical have its *telos* in a higher expression of the ethical; he reduces the ethical relation between father and son, or daughter and father, to a sentiment that has its dialectic in its relation to the idea of the ethical life. Here, then, there can be no question of a teleological suspension of the ethical itself. (87-88)

There is another way of approaching the story of Abraham. We can approach it as a marking a certain stage in the moral evolution of humanity: Abraham marks the threshold between a stage where human sacrifice is still part of religion to a stage that no longer knows of such sacrifice. But Kierkegaard is not interested in such a historical reading:

> Or perhaps Abraham simply didn't do what the story says, if perhaps in tbe context of his times what he did was something quite different. Then let's forget him, for why bother remembering a past that cannot be made into a present? (60)

Kierkegaard resists all these interpretations. What is essential in the story of Abraham is the love that Abraham bears for Isaac, his faith that through his son all the races of the

world will be blessed. Abraham has faith in that promise. Yet at the same time he is also obedient to God's command that he sacrifice his son.

But this decision to sacrifice or renounce the son is still not what is hardest to understand here: harder to understand is Abraham's willingness to execute God's command, given his faith that his son will nevertheless live so that through him all the races of the world can be blessed. And harder to understand than his renunciation is his return with Isaac to Sarah. We will have to try to understand the first movement, which can be discussed in terms of a movement of infinite resignation or a **teleological suspension of the ethical,** which is inevitably involved when what the world would consider **murder** is understood as **sacrifice**. We will also have to understand the second movement, which is a **movement of return to the everyday and with it to the ethical**.

But before returning to these issues, let us consider another analogy Kierkegaard offers us, to make the knight of faith more intelligible. This one he draws from his own involvement with Regine Olsen.

He tells the story of a young man in love with a princess. He knows that he will never get her. This hopeless love lets the young man turn inward. Not that he renounces or loses his love. What he renounces is its realization. What he comprehends or thinks he comprehends is that in loving another person one must be sufficient unto oneself, must not need the other.

> He pays no further finite attention to what the princess does, and just this proves that he has made the movement infinitely. Here we have the opportunity to see whether the movement in the individual is proper or not. There was a person who also believed that he had made the movement, but time went by, the princess did something else, she married, say, a prince, and his soul lost the resilience of resignation. He knew then that he had not made the movement correctly; for one who has infinitely resigned is sufficient to himself. The knight does not cancel

> his resignation, he keeps it, just as young as in the first instance, he never lets it go, simply because he has made the movement infinitely. What the princess does cannot disturb him, it is only lower natures who have the law for their actions in someone else, the premises for their actions outside themselves. If, on the other hand, the princess is similarly disposed, there will be a beautiful development. (73-74)

The princess figures of course Regine Olsen, but I am not interested here in the autobiographical side of the story, but in the way what is called here a **movement of infinite resignation** looks like what the tradition had considered the **sin of pride**, a demonic refusal to admit that we do need the other, that there is something inhuman about the movement of infinite resignation. Kierkegaard suggests here that the higher natures may not need the other, must not need to possess the other, to be authentically themselves. They can let the other be. In this sense the movement of infinite resignation is also a movement of introversion. Kierkegaard suggests here that he lacked that strength, that he proved himself human, all too human. But we may feel that where he failed was not in that he lacked the strength to make the movement of infinite resignation, but in that he was too preoccupied with himself, too afraid of losing himself to the princess, that he was not human enough.

17. The Knight of Faith

Let me begin by returning once more to Kant. In a number of lectures I raised a question concerning Kant's one-sided emphasis on duty, on pure practical reason, a question to which I would like to return now. It has occasioned the most common criticisms of Kant. Recall what I said about Kleist's *Prince of Homburg*. In a similar vein, Schopenhauer considers Kant's understanding of duty a mistake that offends the sensibility of everyone. He calls it a pedantic rule to claim that to be really good and meritorious a deed must be done simply and solely out of regard for the law and for the concept of duty, according to a maxim known to reason in the abstract; that it must not be performed from inclination, from any benevolence towards others, any tender-hearted sympathy, compassion, or emotion of the heart. Kant thus serves Schopenhauer as an example of moral **pedantry**. Let me read you here Schopenhauer's definition of pedantry:

> Pedantry is also a form of folly. It arises from a man's having little confidence in his own understanding, and therefore not liking to leave things to its discretion, to recognize directly what is right in the particular case. Accordingly, he puts his understanding entirely under the guardianship of reason, and makes use thereof on all occasions; in other words, he wants always to start from general concepts, rules, and maxims, and to stick to these in life, in art, and even in ethical good conduct. Hence that clinging to the form, the manner, the expression and the word that is peculiar to pedantry, and with it takes the place of the real essence of the matter. The incongruity between the concept and reality soon shows itself, as the former never descends to the particular case, and its universality and rigid definitions can never accurately apply to reality's fine shades of difference and its innumerable modifications. Therefore the

> pedant with his general maxims almost always comes off badly in life, and shows himself foolish, absurd, and incompetent.[10]

The pedant is thus someone who distrusts his intuitions, distrusts everything that could be considered a matter of feeling, emotion, instinct. If this is right, if we were to follow Kant, we would alienate ourselves from our own reality, sacrifice our real self to an abstract, fictional self by making this abstraction the measure of life. Schopenhauer would insist that goodness is fundamentally a matter of **feeling, passion, heart**. But not just any passion, but a particular passion: the good person is someone who is selflessly interested in other persons. Schopenhauer calls such selfless sympathy **agapé** and distinguishes it from **eros**, by which he understands a self-centered love. Pure selfless love is for him identical with **compassion**.

In its most fundamental sense Schopenhauer's ethics is an ethics of compassion. But compassion is necessarily a particular state of mind. In this sense we can say: **the particular is here placed higher than the universal**. The claims of feeling have to be placed higher than the claims of reason. You could question the use of "higher" here. Does Schopenhauer not represent a step back to a strange kind of utilitarianism? Bentham after all knew the pleasure of benevolence. But **what does compassion have to do with pleasure**? I am, however, interested here in the general point. Let me repeat it then as a question: **is there a particular that should be placed higher than the universal?**

Schopenhauer wonders indeed whether the categorical imperative makes any sense at all. It is supposed to present us with an **unconditional ought**. Schopenhauer argues that this is a contradiction in terms. And we should ask ourselves what sense we can make of such an ought. Suppose someone were to ask: and if I don't follow the categorical imperative, what then? One answer might be: well, you would then be

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[10] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*. (New York: Dover, 1966). p, 60.

immoral? You might answer: So what? Why be moral? To Kant the very question might very well suggest an evil disposition on your part. Some philosophers have argued that this is a meaningless question. But is it? According to Schopenhauer questions of this kind do have a good sense. Reflective questioning of the categorical imperative brings out its conditioned nature.

What conditions it? If Schopenhauer is right, something like **moral feeling**. This moral feeling is not just another selfish inclination. It is not to be reduced to Bentham's pleasure principle. Schopenhauer, too, thinks that to act selfishly is wrong. Agreeing with Plato and in a sense with Kant, he too, insists on the value of living life in such a way that the individual self is not taken too seriously. Morality must be given a foundation in sympathetic and compassionate love. But such love is always particular. Reason, according to Schopenhauer, articulates what more immediately claims us. It must retain its ground in feeling if it is to claim our allegiance; it cannot do so as pure reason.

Once again we are back with something like Platonic recollection: the pedant would then be the philosopher who forgets that his articulation of some moral maxim is just a human creation. He is someone who is so intent on duty that he does violence to his own heart. **An exaggerated sense of duty lets the heart grow cold and into stone.**

Kant of course would insist, against this, on the authority of the moral law. That authority is founded on the fact that as free, and that means for him rational agents, human beings are themselves the authors of the law that binds them. They submit their feelings to this law. This is the true meaning of autonomy. Freedom truly fulfills itself in submitting to the moral law.

But this, as I suggested briefly just before our brief vacation, generates a new challenge: one might grant Kant that morality must be given its foundation in freedom, but remain unconvinced that freedom is linked to practical reason in the way Kant suggests. Does the very fact that I can raise the question: why be moral? not point to a

freedom above morality? A freedom for which morality is an issue? But does this freedom not have to be placed higher than morality? Such questioning, I suggested, tends to transform Kantian **autonomy** into existentialist **authenticity**. The individual's freedom here appears again as **the particular that is higher than the universal**, higher than the categorical imperative. On this view the final source of value is individual freedom.

But in the preceding lecture I suggested also that such freedom is difficult to understand. Why should such freedom will one thing rather than another? If you try to live in such a way that only your individual freedom is the source of your values, you will end up in despair. Freedom requires a measure of some sort. Without such a measure what would be the most radical freedom betrays itself and becomes the most profound heteronomy. And if Kant is right, freedom requires that the free agent give himself the law by which he acts, and that he can do so precisely and only because he is a being of reason.

But can he not do so also by listening, not to his **reason**, but to his **heart,** to **passion**? Kierkegaard holds such a view, but gives it quite a special twist.

Let me approach Kierkegaard by reading you a passage taken from a sermon by the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart:

> For if life were questioned a thousand years and asked: "Why live?" and if there were an answer, it could be no more than this: "I live only to live!" And this is because Life is its own reason for being, springs from its own source, and goes on and on, without ever asking why — just because it is life. Thus if you ask a genuine person, that is one, who acts from his heart, "Why are you doing that?" — he will reply in the only possible way: "I do it because I do it."[11]

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[11] *Meister Echarts Predigten,* ed. and trans. Josef Quint, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936-1976), "In hoc apparuit caritas Dei in nobis," Quint, 5b, I, pp. 91-92; *Meister Eckhart*, trans. Raymond B. Blakney (New York:Harper, 1957) ,p. 127. Translation changed.

Eckhart here envisions a way of life that in a profound sense has suspended the ethical. Here the person no longer calculates, nor does he follow what reason commands, but does simply what his heart bids him do. When such a person is asked: why are you doing this? he can only answer: I do it because I do it. There can be no justification. Note that the answer here is not: I do it because I will it. This suspension of the ethical, which is also a suspension of reason, makes it impossible to reason with such a person. It seems to invite actions that we would consider immoral. Eckhart is quite aware of this:

> There are people who say: "I have God and God's love. I may do whatever I want to."[12]

Eckhart was speaking of the many people of his day, the early 14th century, who invoking the love of God denied existing morality, suspended it, if you want, in the name of their special relationship to God. Feeling themselves in possession of God's love, feeling attuned to God, they also felt that they could do no wrong. Their faith placed them above morality.

But Eckhart does not accept this claim:

> But they are wrong. As long as you are capable of acting contrary to the will of God, the love of God is not in you, however you may deceive the world. The person who lives in God's love and by God's will takes his pleasure in whatever God prefers and refrains from any act contrary to his wishes, finding it impossible to omit what God wants and impossible to go contrary to him. It is like a man whose legs are tied together. He cannot walk. It is just as impossible for a man who lives in God's love to be evil. Someone has said: "Even if God should command me to do evil and shun virtue, still I could not do what is wrong." For no one loves virtue but the virtuous. The person who has denied himself and all else, who seeks his own advantage in nothing and who loves without assigned reasons, acting

[12] Blakney, p. 193

> solely from loving-kindness, is one who is dead to the world and love in God and God is alive in him.[13]

Kant might speak here of a holy person, but, as we saw, he would have to deny moral worth to such a person. Kant's moral person exists in a constant struggle between duty and inclination. He finds him- or herself placed between the demands of reason and the passions. The person Eckhart has in mind no longer measures himself by a higher ideal. Such a person experiences no tension between what he is and what he should be. The suggestion is that only the individual who has overcome selfishness, and that would mean also selfish passions, but so completely that he does not need to struggle any longer, is truly living in God's love. We do not have here a return to Bentham's pleasure principle. That principle is essentially self-regarding. It represents the particular that is lower than the universal. Here we have a particular that can be called higher than the universal. That is of course Søren Kierkegaard's term. It is illustrated by the example of Abraham.

What is the relationship of Abraham, as Kierkegaard describes him, to Eckhart's man of faith? Both have taken a step to a particular that is higher than the universal. One difference between the two accounts is the way Kierkegaard insists on the importance of the ethical. The ethical for him, as for Kant, is the reasonable. The suspension of the ethical is at the same time a suspension of the reasonable. And it is precisely this suspension that is so difficult and more especially so difficult to understand. Unlike Eckhart's holy person who effortlessly is in accord with the ethical, and like Kant's moral person, Kierkegaard's **knight of faith** has to struggle. That is why he is called a knight. Kierkegaard insists with this example on the primacy of the relationship that ties the individual to God, a relationship that remains unmediated by morality, community, humanity. Another higher dimension breaks here into the everyday. In this respect there is an analogy between Abraham and Socrates. But more important is the difference: Socrates, too, has a kind of faith; that faith finds expression in a particular

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[13] Ibid.

way of life. The way Socrates lives exemplifies his faith. His faith and his morality are inseparable. To be sure there is something like a suspension of morality in Socrates, too, but what he suspends is the morality of the average Athenian, his common sense, the common sense of a Euthyphro for example. But it is suspended for the sake of a higher morality. Anytus, the most distinguished of his accusers, is also in his way a moral man. And may of those who accused him were in their way no doubt moral men. But morality meant for them something intimately tied to an established way of life, to the inherited mores. They sensed the threat that Socrates and his morality posed to this way of life. By opposing Socrates they could claim to be defending the old gods. Compared to their morality the morality of Socrates is no doubt a higher morality. But we can sympathize with the Athenians: it is just this that makes this a **tragic conflict** in the sense in which Hegel understood the term: a conflict between a new and higher, yet still one-sided, morality and an older and lower one.

But it is impossible to understand the Abraham story as told by Kierkegaard as a tragedy in this sense. If, measured by Athenian common sense, Socrates must seem mad, there is yet a higher point of view that will make him seem reasonable. There is, however, no higher point of view that will allow us to understand Abraham. **On Abraham our reason suffers shipwreck**.

The story is told very quickly:

> And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him … take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. (45)

This story is nested in another:

> There was once a man: he had learned as a child that beautiful tale of how God had tried Abraham, how he withstood the test, kept his faith and for the second time received a son against every expectation. (44)

The story is **a story of temptation**. God tempts Abraham. Abraham keeps his faith, and this keeping of his faith finds expression in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, which is also a sacrifice of his morality. If this faith is hard to understand, even harder to understand is that, expecting to sacrifice Isaac, he gets him back a second time.

Before we consider Kierkegaard's discussion of the story in more detail, let us note how it is presented to us. *Fear and Trembling* is attributed to a **pseudonym**, Johannes de Silentio. This pseudonym does not possess the faith of Abraham. He is preoccupied with it, but he knows that he does not possess it. Otherwise he would hardly have composed this **dialectical lyric**. Nor should we assume that Kierkegaard had such faith. Had he possessed it, he hardly would have had to write this book. In reading the book you should also keep in mind the motto taken from Hamann at the bottom of the title page:

> What Tarquin the Proud said in the garden with the poppy blooms, was understood by the son but not by the messenger. (39)

Tarquinius Superbus is said to have chopped off the heads of the tallest poppies. The son understood this to mean that he, too, should chop off the heads of the tallest poppies, i.e. the leaders of the community in which he was staying and which had made him their military commander, after he has pretended that he had had a falling out with his father. This suggests that *Fear and Trembling* is to be read as a coded message. Is Kierkegaard, the sender of this message, then like Tarquinius Superbus? Who then is the son to whom the message js addressed? Kierkegaard's biography gives us the answer. The privileged reader was to be Regine Olsen, the girl whom Kierkegaard loved; and yet it was he who broke the engagement and presented himself as a scoundrel, who sacrificed her in this sense. The recurrent refrain about the mother and the child that must be weaned is a figure of his relationship to Regine Olsen. He thought he had to give her up as Abraham had to give up Isaac. Was he expecting to get her back as Abraham received back Isaac? But one can also compare Kierkegaard to Isaac. He is the child that has to be weaned,

that has to learn to stand alone. Or js it Regine Olsen who has to be weaned from her love to become truly herself?

The juxtaposition of Abraham ready to sacrifice his son and the mother weaning her child is itself significant. It touches on something familiar: the child is weaned for its own sake, so that it might develop into an independent human being. The child has to be cast out of the more intimate relationship with the mother, to learn to become her- or himself. In a way the story tells of a process that in different ways repeats itself again and again in history and in the process of growing up: to become an individual we have to forsake the communities that once sheltered us. We are looking back to a lost paradise, lost community. Every community offers something like a sense of being at home. This is true even of Kant's conception of a kingdom of ends of which all free moral beings are members. Do we then have to forsake this home, too, to become truly free? And do we also have to be weaned of our reliance on love?

The age of faith lies behind us. In an important sense **our reflective age has lost faith in faith**. Think of Kant's determination of our age as an age of enlightenment that drags everything before the court of reason. Kierkegaard is trying to make the opposite point: that **faith** does not lie behind us moderns, but **lies before us**, that it awaits us. But this is also to imply the insufficiency of the ethical:

> If there were no eternal consciousness in a man, if at the bottom of everything there were only a wild ferment, a power that twisting in dark passions produced everything great or inconsequential; if an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness lay hid beneath everything, what then would life be but despair? If it were thus, if there were no sacred bond uniting mankind, if one generation rose up after another like the leaves of the forest, if one generation succeeded the other as the songs of the birds in the woods, if the human race passed through the world as a ship through the sea or the wind through the desert, a thoughtless and fruitless

> whim, if an eternal oblivion always lurked hungrily for its prey and there was no power strong enough to wrest it from its clutches — how empty and devoid of comfort would life be! But for that reason it is not so, and just as God created man and woman, so too he created the hero and the poet or speech-maker. (49)

Johannes de Silentio is the poet who sings of such a hero and at the same time struggles with his own song. We begin to sense what Kierkegaard is attempting here: the story of Abraham is told against the background of nihilism. The strength of the modern age, if it is indeed a strength, is the strength of reflection. But we have reflected ourselves out of all oughts. There is no morality that can withstand the power of reflection, not even Kant's. Reflection is like a solvent that dissolves all that can give us our bearings . We may indeed produce the most wonderful arguments — note the sardonic comments directed by Kierkegaard against Hegel's system — we may offer a strong argument that the categorical imperative is a necessary condition of real self-affirmation, and yet, will such arguments really change one's way of life? Will they really make life any more significant? What we moderns lack is passion, Kierkegaard suggests. And what we need is a passion that is higher than reason. Not just any passion, to be sure, but a passionate faith. **Johannes de Silentio is then the poet who sings us the song of the knight of faith**.

19. The Teleological Suspension of the Ethical

I would like to return in this lecture to what Kierkegaard calls the **teleological suspension of the ethical**. What he means by this should have become clear enough. From the ethical point of view what Abraham is contemplating is **murder**. Faith would, however, have us speak of **sacrifice**, a sacrifice decided on, following a divine command. Faith thus, according to Kierkegaard, places us outside and beyond the ethical. It involves a suspension of the ethical for the sake of a higher telos or end, i.e. a teleological suspension of the ethical.

At this point you may well ask: why read *Fear and Trembling* at all in a course that is supposed to introduce you to ethics. This text would seem to have its more natural home in a course in the philosophy of religion. In answer let me read you a statement from *Fear and Trembling*:

> An ethics that ignores sin is an altogether futile discipline, but if it postulates sin, then it has *eo ipso* [thereby] gone beyond itself. (124)

Ethics, Kierkegaard maintains, cannot get by without a conception of **sin**. But if it has such a conception, it is no longer just ethics, but is beyond itself. This is to say, ethics is not a neatly circumscribed discipline. The more we push what is claims, the more it explodes itself, pushes beyond whatever neat boundaries we have tried to establish for it. In particular it forces us to operate with the concept of sin, which would seem to belong to religion.

Do we agree with Kierkegaard or his pseudonym, Johannes de Silentio, on this point? But before asking this question, let me ask another: what is **sin**? The continuation of the quote addresses itself to this question:

> Philosophy tells us that the immediate is to be superseded [*ophoevet,* German *aufgehoben*]. True enough, but what is not true is that sin any more than faith, is without further ado the immediate. (124)

The reference to philosophy, which "tells us that the immediate is to be superseded" or ***aufgehoben,*** is first of all a reference to Hegel. But the basic point should be clear enough even without that reference: the immediate here refers to our natural being and to the desires and inclinations that are connected with it. This has to be superseded, i.e. in Kantian language, we have to raise ourselves above the immediate, have to rule over it, impose on it the maxims with which reason provides us. We could thus say also, translating Kierkegaard's statement back into the to us more familiar language of Kant: human beings must subject their natural being to the imperative of reason. But how is this **must** to be understood? It would appear to really mean **should**. But then the question: what is the force of this should? What if I don't follow the categorical imperative, when I **refuse to do what it commands,** and not out of weakness of will, letting desire overwhelm me, but with very open eyes, **choosing**, perversely, to do not good, but **evil**? What motive could I have for such an action? I trust that the difference between the two cases is clear. We can thus imagine a willful disregard of the moral law that is not motivated just by natural passion or desire. Kierkegaard speaks in this connection of sin. And of this sin he says that it is not the immediate. This is to say, **what propels us into sin is not the flesh, but the spirit**. Sin is not the spirit perverted by the flesh, but the spirit's self-perversion. The sinful person refuses to submit to the authority of the moral law. Note that if sin is to be a possibility then there must be a choice to acknowledge or defy the categorical imperative or whatever other moral commandments one may want to invoke. The possibility of sin attests to a freedom beyond the categorical imperative, a freedom free to reject the categorical imperative. It is this freedom to which Kant failed to do justice, at least in the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. As I pointed out before, however, Kant himself was to address himself to this problem in the *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Kant there insists that the acceptance of moral maxims has a subjective ground that cannot be exhibited or understood. There is a **groundless decision for good or evil**. Kant, too,

insists that the appeal to sensibility or what Kierkegaard calls immediacy cannot account for moral evil. **Reason perverts itself**. Kant speaks here, as I have already pointed out, of a **radical evil,** radical in the sense of being evil in its *radix*, its very root, because particular evil deeds have their foundation in a perversion of the will. The person who is radically evil **refuses to subordinate his freedom to the universal**. He aspires to a godlike self-sufficiency. For the sake of his own individual freedom he suspends the ethical, suspends the categorical imperative. In this case, too, we can speak of a teleological suspension of the ethical, but here the ethical is suspended not because of a divine command, but because of self-will. **Sin places the individual higher than the universal.** Note that we now have a problem: **how are we to distinguish between the knight of faith and the sinner**? From the outside the two may look very much alike. Kierkegaard discusses this likeness in the form of the similarity that exists between the **demonic individua**l and **the knight of faith**:

> One generally hears very little about the demonic, in spite of this territory's having a peculiarly valid claim to discovery in our time, and notwithstanding that once he knows how to establish a certain rapport with the demon an observer can, at least in some respect or other, use almost anyone as an example. In this respect, Shakespeare is and will always remain a hero. That horrid demon, the most demonic figure Shakespeare ever portrayed, and did so incomparably, Gloucester (later Richard III), what made him a demon? Obviously that he could not endure the pity that had been piled on him from childhood. His monologue in the first act of *King Richard III* is worth more than all moral systems, none of which bears a hint of the terrors of existence or of their nature.
>
> I, that am rudely stamped, and want love's majesty
> To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
> I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,

> Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
> Deform'd, unfinished, sent before my time
> Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
> And that so lamely and unfashionable
> That dogs bark at me as I halt by them--.

> Natures such as Gloucester cannot be saved by mediating them into an idea of society. Ethics really only makes sport of them, just as it would make a mockery of Sarah [the reference is to the story of Tobias and Sarah, who was betrothed seven times, only to have all seven men become victims of the demon that possessed her, until Tobias with the help of the archangel Raphael delivers her] if it were to say to her: 'Why don't you express the universal and get married. Such natures are aboriginally in the paradox, and they are by no means less perfect than others; it is only that they are either damned in the demonic paradox or delivered in the divine. (130-131)

The Duke of Gloucester is a misfit. In almost Nietzschean fashion Kierkegaard suggests that he became a demon because he could not bear the pity to which he was subjected. Precisely because they are misfits, misfits tend to become **outsiders**. Kierkegaard himself, a hunchback of sorts, thought himself such a misfit, unable "To strut before a wanton ambling nymph." As outsiders, such misfits tend to become **introverted**.

> Now people have been pleased to think from time immemorial that witches, gnomes, trolls, etc. are misshapen creatures, and it is undeniable that we all have a tendency, when we see a misshapen person directly to link this idea with that of moral perversion. But what a colossal injustice! It should really be the other way around. It is life itself that has corrupted them, as a stepmother makes degenerates of her stepchildren. To be put outside the universal from the start, by nature or by historical

> circumstance, that is the beginning of the demonic, and the individual can hardly be blamed for that. (131)

The demonic person learns to understand him- or herself as being outside the community. As we have seen, however, the authority of the categorical imperative is inseparably bound up with a sense of belonging to a community.

Kierkegaard's Johannes de Silentio insists on the similarity between the demonic and the religious:

> The tragic hero, the darling of ethics, is a purely human being, and he is someone I can understand, someone all of whose undertakings are in the open. If I go further I always run up against the paradox, the divine and the demonic; for silence is both of these. It is the demon's lure, and the more silent one keeps, the more terrible the demon becomes; but silence is also divinity's communion with the individual. (114-115)

Kierkegaard explores the demonic in the legend of *Agnete and the Merman*:

> The merman is a seducer who rises up from concealment in the depths, and in wild desire seizes and breaks the innocent flower standing in all its charm by the shore, pensively bending its head to the ocean's roar. (120)

The references both to the misshapen Gloucester and to the merman have obvious autobiographical overtones, just as Agnete is another figure for Regine Olsen. Kierkegaard now imagines Agnete looking at the seducer, with a look full of love and complete trust. How does the merman react? Her innocence and trust disarm him; he leads her back to the shore, explains that he only wanted to show her the beauty of the sea. Agnete has triumphed over the merman.

Let us now imagine the merman as a human being with a conscience. The seducer has been crushed. He cannot seduce again: two forces now are struggling to gain possession of him:

> repentance [alone] and repentance with Agnete. If repentance alone takes possession of him he remains concealed, if repentance and Agnete take possession of him he is disclosed. (96)

In the former case the merman will not only make Agnete unhappy, for Agnete loved him, but himself unhappier still, for he will wallow in his own self-incriminations. He may even attempt to "cure" Agnete of her love, by mocking her, ridiculing her, meanwhile torturing himself. Kierkegaard of course put on such a show for Regine Olsen and here portrays his own proximity to the demonic. But note also the proximity of the religious to the demonic. Once more I return to the Abraham story:

> Abraham climbed the mountain in Moriah, but Isaac did not understand him. Then he turned away from Isaac for a moment, but when Isaac saw his face a second time it was changed: his gaze was wild, his mien one of horror. He caught Isaac by the chest, threw him to the ground and said: 'Foolish boy, do you believe I am your father? I am an idolater. Do you believe this is God's command? No, it is my own desire."' Then Isaac trembled and in his anguish cried: 'God in heaven have mercy on me, God of Abraham, have mercy on me; if I have no father on earth, be Thou my father!' But below his breath Abraham said to himself: 'Lord in heaven, I thank Thee; it is after all better that he believe I am a monster than that he should lose faith in Thee." (45-46)

From the outside there is indeed no distinction between the demon and the knight of faith. Here of course Abraham is trying to make himself look like a monster, just as Kierkegaard tried to appear monstrous to Regine Olsen, to free her from their relationship. But it is of course easy to imagine a monstrous person who commits no monstrous actions. Just as Kierkegaard insists that the knight of faith is often not recognized as such by those with whom he lives, so is the monstrous or demonic individual. **Both have fallen out of the community**. The monstrous person is lost in his

own privacy. The religious person, on the other hand, as Johannes de Silentio understands such a person, stands in an **absolute relationship to the absolute**. Note that Kierkegaard speaks here of the demonic individual as entering into an absolute relationship with the demonic. **Here the individual's freedom attempts to be its own ground**. Using the language of tradition we can perhaps say: here the individual usurps the place of God. This defines what the tradition had called **pride**.

I have pointed to the similarity between the knight of faith and the demonic individual. This similarity finds expression in the following:

> The paradox of faith has lost the intermediate term, i.e. the universal. On the one hand it contains the expression of extreme egotism (doing this dreadful deed for his own sake) and on the other the expression of the most absolute devotion (doing it for God's sake). (99)

Extreme egoism and readiness to surrender oneself to God here lie very close together. This proximity of the religious and the demonic might lead one to argue that the picture that Kierkegaard paints of religion, more particularly of Christianity is itself monstrous. Consider the way he dwells on the notorious passage in Luke:

> If any man comes to me and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. (99, Luke 14.26)

One can get rid of what disturbs one in this passage by suitably clever interpretations that argue that "hate" here means no more than "love less." Kierkegaard, however, insists here that what it demands of us is exactly a teleological suspension of the ethical. One may thus try to interpret the text in such a way that the affront that lies in the word "**hate**" is taken away. Kierkegaard insists on it. Implicit is his vehement rejection of any religion that collapses the religious and the ethical.

We can imagine thus an interpretation of Christianity that makes of Christ simply an ethical ideal. Such an interpretation overlooks the paradoxical nature of Christ. It

may well grant the historical reality of Christ, but it would insist on the paradigmatic significance of this life, while it would make little of Christ's divinity. When offered an interpretation that insists on this divinity one may well feel that Socrates is the preferable hero. At least there are no such extravagant claims attached to him.

Johannes de Silentio challenges such a view of Christianity with the following **either-or**:

> So, either there is an absolute duty to God, and if so then it is the paradox described, that the single individual as the particular is higher than the universal and as the particular stands in an absolute relation to the absolute — or else faith has never existed because it has existed always, or else Abraham is done for; or else one must interpret the passage in Luke 14 in the way the tasteful exegete did, and explain the corresponding passages likewise, and similar ones. (108)

Note that there are two parts to Kierkegaard's statement of the paradox:

1) that the individual as the individual is higher than the universal

and

2) that the individual as the individual stands in an absolute relationship to the absolute.

The first statement Kierkegaard takes for granted, at least for himself. The fact that supports it is nothing other than that radical freedom that is attested to by the **possibility of radical evil**, or, to give it a Christian expression, by the **possibility of sin.** Finally **my recognition of the validity of values depends on how I, as this particular individual, choose to exist**. Such recognition is tied to a free act. I may thus choose to embrace the ethical, or I may cboose not to be open to its claims. Only a person who has become in this sense an individual can make the second movement and relate himself as this individual to the absolute.

The difficulty is how to distinguish the knight of faith from the demon. Kierkegaard insists in this connection that in order to suspend the ethical it first must have been recognized in all its weightiness. It is thus essential to his analysis that Abraham not only loved Isaac, but loved him more than anything in the world. Or consider the following passage: the knight of faith

> knows it is glorious to belong to the universal. He knows it is beautiful and benign to be the particular who translates himself into the universal, the one who so to speak makes a clear and elegant edition of himself, as immaculate as possible, and readable for all.... But he also knows that higher up there winds a lonely path, narrow and steep; he knows it is terrible to be born in solitude outside the universal, to walk without meeting a single traveller. He knows very well where he is, and how he is related to men. Humanly speaking he is insane and cannot make himself understood to anyone. And yet 'insane' is the mildest expression for him. If he isn't viewed thus, he is a hypocrite and the higher up the path he climbs, the more dreadful a hypocrite he becomes. (103)

There is a certain security that comes with the ethical, a sense of being at home in the world. Fundamental to faith, as Kierkegaard's Johannes de Silentio understands it, is a fundamental homelessness. This mood of **homelessness** places the individual outside the universal.

Kierkegaard gives only a very sketchy account of this homelessness. A hint is provided in the passage in which he speaks of nature and historical circumstance placing the individual outside the universal, and not because of anything the individual has done: it simply happens. But if freedom is constitutive of human being, then it is our own being that cements such homelessness. It is this fundamental homelessness that finds expression in the story of the fall, the first sin, and the expulsion from paradise. But Kierkegaard also thinks of history as a process that increasingly emancipates the

individual from the community. And the balance between individual and community is still being shifted towards the individual. Think of a title like David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*. Along with this the ethical dimension becomes ever more problematic. We find it difficult to appeal to moral maxims with the conviction of Kant. A Kierkegaardian expression of this is that more and more we find it difficult to engage in genuine communication. More and more speaking threatens to degenerate into idle chatter, our love-making into superficial sex. Only superficially do these break the profound silence and isolation in which so many live. For Kierkegaard, once the former sense of community has been lost, there is no stepping back. The lost community cannot be recovered by returning to the past. All that remains is the step forward, to faith. But that step, Kierkegaard insists, knowing about the paradox involved, would return us to the community and thus to the ethical, as Isaac was returned to Abraham.

20. Pride and Concealment

Last time I began with the question: why read *Fear and Trembling* in a course on ethics. In answer I read you a passage from *Fear and Trembling* where Kierkegaard claims that an ethics that disregards the concept of **sin** is perfectly idle science. To speak of sin is of course to speak the language of religion. But is that language one that we can still use with confidence? Does it not lie behind us? And if so, must we not dismiss the suggestion that ethics, which disregards the concept of sin is an idle science?

Or is Kierkegaard here making a point that remains valid even without religious presuppositions? That does indeed seem to me to be the case. What Kierkegaard recognizes is **the possibility of placing oneself as this individual outside or beyond the community**. Or, if you wish, of choosing oneself to exist as an **outsider**. This community may be a particular community. We may preserve a critical distance from that community in which we happen to exist, but in the name of some higher community. Here the decision would be an ethical decision. Such a decision would always have something tragic about it. Socrates comes to mind. But we can also imagine someone placing himself outside all communities, even that largest community which is mankind. This would imply **a teleological suspension of the ethical.** I do not want to claim at this point that this is good or bad, only that it is **possible**. It is possible to exist in such a way that one teleologically suspends the ethical. If this is possible then the question arises: **ought we to choose in this way**? Note that this ought cannot now be understood as a moral ought, for a positive answer to the question is a presupposition of the moral life. In that sense the question is more fundamental than morality and its commands. What is at issue is precisely the authority of moral commands.

I have spoken with Kierkegaard of a teleological suspension of the ethical. That telos can be conceived of in one of two ways: we can suspend the ethical for the sake of God. Morality here is suspended for the sake of that absolute relation to the absolute that

provides the key to Kierkegaard's characterization of the faith of Abraham. But we can also suspend the ethical for the sake of our own individual freedom. Here we have a way of distinguishing between a **theistic** and an **atheistic existentialism**. Common to both is that **the individual or the particular is placed higher than the universal**. That is to say also that it is higher than the ethical, at least when the ethical is tied to the universal as it is by Kant, and also by Kierkegaard. Theistic existentialism insists that if the individual is to escape despair, such an individual must ground him- or herself in the absolute. That is to say, it insists that the answer to the problem of individuality is finally only faith, faith in that God who, since He is also believed to be the author of the moral law revealed in the Ten Commandments, will return the ethical to us, as God returned Isaac to Abraham. Atheistic existentialism considers such a divine absolute in which the individual could ground himself a chimera. In the end we are left here only with a **groundless freedom**.

To say that the individual is higher than the community, or higher than the universal — the universal referring to the community of all human beings — is **to place silence above communication**. This is the issue to which Kierkegaard addresses himself with the third problem: **was Abraham ethically defensible in keeping silent about his purpose?** Once again silence appears to us in two forms, not always easy to disentangle: there is the **silence of the demon** and there is the **silence of the knight of faith**. Let me return to a passage I read you last time:

> The tragic hero, the darling of ethics, is a purely human being, and he is someone I can understand, someone all of whose undertakings are in the open. If I go further I always run up against the paradox, the divine and the demonic; for silence is both of these. It is the demon's lure, and the more silent one keeps, the more terrible the demon becomes; but silence is also divinity's communion with the individual. (114-115)

With the last point Kierkegaard is on quite traditional ground. The language of genuine **prayer** is silence. Prayer is the silent communication between the person who has faith and his God. Silence here does not mean that the person of faith says many things to his God, but does not utter them, does not speak out. There is a higher prayer, a prayer that dispenses with words even in that sense. This is what Kierkegaard has in mind when he speaks of the individual's absolute relationship to the absolute. Such a relationship transcends words. Again, I would not want to deny that such a relationship is possible. What I cannot understand, and Johannes de Silentio would no doubt agree, is how such an immediate relationship to the absolute could ever yield a command such as the one Abraham faced, who is told by his God to do something quite specific; or a command such as the one Kierkegaard tells of, when he suggests that it was God who commanded him to sacrifice Regine Olsen, as God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. I agree with Kierkegaard that **silence is the demon's trap, and,** I would suggest**, that trap may even entrap religion**. I shall return to this point.

But before doing so, let us consider this phrase, **silence is the demon's trap?** What does Kierkegaard have in mind?

To explain the demonic, as we saw last time, Kierkegaard tells us or rather retells, the story of Agnete and the Merman. The story is, as we saw, also a figure of Kierkegaard's relationship to Regine Olsen. The story is a story of a seducer, who is disarmed by the innocence and trust of the woman he wanted to seduce. But let us consider Kierkegaard's merman a bit more carefully: Kierkegaard presents the merman to us as a mixture of Faust and Don Juan. To say that he is like Faust is to say that he is an individual who has placed himself as this individual beyond the universal. Consider this passage:

> By means of the demonic, the merman would thus aspire to be the single individual who as the particular is higher than the universal. The demonic

> has the same property as the divine, that the individual can enter into an absolute relationship to it. (122-123)

So understood, the merman has placed himself beyond any community. To such a merman all relationships must become asymmetrical. He must substitute possession for communication. This is why Kierkegaard says that Agnete can become the merman's only as prey, but he cannot belong faithfully to her. That is to say, the merman lacks the strength and the courage to genuinely reveal himself to her. The question we should ask ourselves is to what extent the merman is not only a figure of Kierkegaard, but of modern narcissistic humanity.

But we have not done justice to the other part of the story. After all, Agnete looks at him, and the merman cannot go through with the seduction.

> And look! The ocean roars no more, its wild voice is stilled, nature's passion — which is the merman's strength — forsakes him, the sea becomes dead calm. And still Agnete is still looking at him in this way. Then the merman collapses, he is unable to resist the power of innocence, his element becomes unfaithful to him, he cannot seduce Agnete. He leads her home again, he explains to her that he only wanted to show her how beautiful the sea is when it is calm, and Agnete believes him. (120)

The raging sea is of course a figure of sensuousness, of sexual desire. Sexual desire fails the merman when Agnete looks at him, in a way that communicates love and trust. We can assume that this is how Kierkegaard experienced the look of Regine Olsen. And he was unable to stand up to this look. It proved too much and so he flees into himself. His failure results in a movement of introversion. What grows out of his desire is something equally tumultuous, but what now rages in him is despair. What causes this transformation is the challenge presented by another human being; what is demanded of him is that he belong faithfully to another human being. What is demanded of the merman then is that he place his own self lower than the relationship between himself

and Agnete; that he place the demands of love higher than the demands of self, that he abandon his attempt to make sexual desire serve his own selfish ends. But for that he is too self-centered, too narcissistic. And yet he is too insecure in this self-understanding, too aware that what presents itself to him in Agnete is the possibility of a much more meaningful mode of existence, than to remain simply a merman. This explains his **despair**.

But let me continue with Kierkegaard's telling of the story.

> There is nothing to prevent his becoming a hero; for the step he now takes is reconciliatory. He is saved by Agnete, the seducer is crushed, he has bowed to the power of innocence, he can never seduce again. But immediately two powers claim control of him: repentance [alone], and repentance with Agnete. If repentance alone takes possession of him, he remains concealed, if Agnete and repentance take possession of him he is disclosed. (122)

Note that repentance here is described as demonic:

> Now in so far as repentance alone grips the merman and he remains concealed, then he must certainly make Agnete unhappy, for Agnete loved him in all her innocence, she believed him that moment even when even to her he seemed changed, however well he concealed it, and said that he only wanted to show her the beautiful calm of the sea. However, as far as his passion is concerned, the merman himself becomes even more unhappy; for he loved Agnete with a multiplicity of passions and has a new guilt to bear besides. The demonic side of repentance will now no doubt explain to him that this is precisely his punishment, and the more it torments him the better. (122)

One may ask at this point, why does he not let his love for Agnete take possession of him, why does he not make the decision to belong to her? The answer is obvious enough: he

lacks the strength or courage to let go of himself. He desperately seeks to hold on to himself and Agnete's love threatens that hold, threatens to take him away from himself. He is too **narcissistic** to return her love and so he becomes **introverted**. The merman occupies himself with phantasies of Agnete, tortures himself, as Kierkegaard tortured himself, even as this story is part of Kierkegaard's self-torture. And yet, Kierkegaard, like the merman, is unwilling to get over his pain. He dwells on it, fondles it. Agnete has become the occasion for a game the merman plays with himself. And similarly Regine Olsen is the occasion for a play Kierkegaard plays with himself. Kierkegaard describes the way he developed that play as follows:

> If he gives in to this demonic possibility, he may make one more attempt to save Agnete, in the way one can in a sense save someone by resort to evil. He knows Agnete loves him. If he can only tear this love away from her she will in a way be saved. But how to do that? The merman has too much sense to reckon that a candid confession will arouse her disgust. Then perhaps he will try to arouse all dark passions in her, scorn her, mock her, hold her love up to ridicule, if possible stir up her pride. He will spare himself no torment, for this is the deep contradiction in the demonic and in a sense there dwells infinitely more good in a demonic than in superficial person. (122)

The Merman wants to free Agnete from her love for him and thus save her — as if he were in a position to save anyone. Such action masquerades as being for the sake of the other. But all this self-torment remains narcissistic or, if you want, demonic. The merman's narcissism demands concealment.

Note that when Kierkegaard thinks here of the demonic individual what he has in mind is not first of all an individual who does what we would consider obviously monstrous or evil. It is indeed easy to imagine **a "good" demon**. Imagine, e.g. someone who does a great many good deeds, but in such a way that only he knows that he is the

benefactor. He keeps silent. He enjoys the happiness his good deeds bring others, enjoys also his own self-sufficiency that can do without the admiration and praise of others. But just here is the demonic. Our benefactor gets his reward by thinking himself a **benevolent deity.**

Kierkegaard is right to insist on the demonic character of such silence. Also on the everyday character of such silence. Suppose you have had an argument with someone you care about. Instead of communicating with the other you sulk in silence. You hope that the other will make the move that will break the silence, but you are too proud to make the first move. This is **an everyday form of the demonic**.

Or imagine a doctor telling you that someone you love does not have very much time to live. He also tells you that he has not told this to that person, that he thought it would be better not to, but he would not object if you did, although he would not advocate it either. And you keep silent, torturing yourself with what you know, with your secret. You justify your silence by arguing that thereby you keep the other happier. It is for the sake of the other's happiness that you torture yourself. According to Kierkegaard there is something demonic about such silence, too: **it shatters the community between you and the other** and builds invisible walls.

When can silence be justified? Often the answer is simple enough: e.g. when it does not involve concealment. Suppose two lovers look at the ocean and say nothing. Yet this may be an **extroverted silence** implying an openness to the other and to the ocean. There is indeed something about the immediacy of love that requires, that demands **a suspension of language**. This is why the discourse of lovers is so often a childish babble, a tearing of silence. But here silence is not tied to concealment. For the same reason love also involves something like **a suspension of the ethical**, if we tie the ethical to the universal. The demands of love, understood here as a relationship between two individuals, each open to the uniqueness of the other, and the demands of the universal are incommensurable. Nor is it clear when love ought to be subordinated to the

universal. I would thus suggest that in genuine love we meet with something like a teleological suspension of the ethical. There is thus a certain analogy between the relationship that joins two lovers and the relationship that joins Abraham to God in Kierkegaard's retelling of the Abraham story. For this reason Kierkegaard, and of course not just he, again and again approaches faith relying on the human analogue of love. Both faith and love insist that the particular is higher than the universal.

The difficulty I have with Kierkegaard's conception of faith is that, try as I may, I cannot finally distinguish his knight of faith from his demon. Kierkegaard himself seems to me a kind of demoniac. One possible reply might be that I lack faith — not surprising, given what Kierkegaard demands of faith. Of such a faith I am indeed suspicious. And I would reply to such an answer with a question: what distinguishes such faith from a narcissistic refusal to let go of oneself? Kierkegaard, to be sure, insists that faith is a relation that joins the individual to something other than himself; thus he speaks of faith as an absolute relation of the individual to the absolute. This absolute is infinite. But how can this infinite make a definite demand, such as, sacrifice your son, Isaac! Or, sacrifice, i.e. do not marry Regine Olsen! Kierkegaard admits that this is paradoxical. I would suggest that this paradox has its ground in the demonic, or the narcissistic, which invokes God to cover up its own narcissism. To put it simply, Kierkegaard's attempt to explain his failure to go through with his engagement by invoking God does not make his failure anything more than an all too human failure and at the same time it invites us to question his conception of faith. Yet Kierkegaard is right when he criticizes traditional ethics for not having taken seriously enough the possibility of a demonic existence, and he is right again when he insists that individual existence gains meaning only when the individual in his freedom grounds himself in a reality that transcends him. Such grounding is not achieved by philosophical reflection, but requires courage and faith. And with Plato I would say, it requires love.

21. History and Value

Like Kierkegaard Nietzsche is a questionable thinker, like *Fear and Trembling*, *The Genealogy of Morals* is a questionable book, in the double sense of both inviting and demanding challenge. It **demands challenge** because it challenges assumptions that are very much part of our common sense, that are part of the moral tradition that has assigned us our place, a tradition that includes the Hebrew-Christian inheritance, as it also includes the Socratic-Platonic inheritance. *The Genealogy of Morals*[14] demands challenge then because it challenges our common sense. But it **deserves challenge** because issues that Nietzsche raises are issues that we cannot avoid. We, too, are forced to struggle with these issues.

Nietzsche challenges the established value system of his time on two grounds: he challenges its **content**, i.e. the particular values that occupy a central place in it; he also challenges its **form**, the presupposed understanding of values. Such a challenge is implicit in the very idea of a *Genealogy of Morals*. Are moral norms of the sort that their validity depends on and varies with time? Think back to Plato? How would he have answered this question? He would have insisted that human beings stand in a relation to a dimension that transcends becoming and time. Our reason puts us in touch with the timeless realm of forms or ideas. These are thought of as **time-transcendent**. What gives our life its significance is a reality that transcends time.

Kant gives a different answer. The categorical imperative is said by him to be inseparable from the essence of practical reason, which with that imperative gives itself its law. It is a law under which human beings are said to stand simply in so far as they are human beings. Once again moral imperatives are give a foundation in what transcends time.

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[14] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and RJ Hollingdale and *Ecce Homo*, trans.Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

Kierkegaard insists that the particular is higher than the universal, that faith is higher than the commandments of ethics. But the object of that faith, God, is again thought of as transcending the vicissitudes of time. The God of Abraham does not belong to a particular time, he is **eternal**. So Kierkegaard, too, insists that to have meaning human existence has to be grounded in a dimension that transcends time.

Of the thinkers we have studied so far, only Bentham provides this view with a serious challenge. The authority of his principle of utility is said by him to have its foundation in nature, not in a realm transcending it. Nature lets us avoid pain, seek pleasure. But note that here, too, human nature is assumed to be constant. The principle of utility is presented to us as applying to all human beings. A reasonable person reflecting on the human condition will find it to be self-evident. On Bentham's view, too, there is no need to pay much attention to history. There is, on this view, little need to write a *Genealogy of Morals*.

And yet, such a project is deeply connected with certain presuppositions of the world we live in. Our modern world has been shaped by science and technology. The presuppositions of these two are deeply embedded in that world.

These presuppositions are crucially linked to a reflection on the **nature of perspective**, where there is a connection, as I hope to show, between **genealogy** and the theme of **perspective**. Let me approach that theme here by turning to a text that gave that theme a particularly influential expression, to Book X of Plato's *Republic*. Let me read some crucial lines:

> S: The body which is large when seen near, appears small when seen at a distance.
>
> G: True.
>
> S. And the same object appears straight when looked at out of the water, and crooked when in the water; and the concave becomes convex, owing to the illusion about colours to which the sight is liable. Thus every

> sort of confusion is revealed within us: and this is that weakness of the human mind on which the art of conjuring and of deceiving by light and shadow and other ingenious devices imposes, having an effect on us like magic.
>
> G. True.
>
> S. And the arts of measuring and numbering and weighing come to the rescue of the human understanding — there is the beauty of them — and the apparent greater or less, more and heavier, no longer have mastery over us, but give way before calculation and measure and weight.[15]

Socrates here is insisting that proper access to reality is gained only after we have reflected on the fact that what presents itself to our senses are only appearances. Appearances are always relative to a particular point of view and to the particular nature of the observer, the nature of his senses, etc. Plato insists that, to gain proper access to what is, we have to free ourselves from the limits imposed by particular points of view. Only thinking that has disengaged itself from the particular, that has placed the universal higher than the particular, gives us access to reality. A corollary of this is the demand for objectivity, that is to say, the demand that the knower free himself from the contribution made by the particular place occupied by the observer and from the make-up of his body, his senses. A further corollary is the thesis of the essential invisibility of reality as it really is.

The full consequences of such reflections were drawn only by that revolution in thought that separates us moderns from the Middle Ages. What is crucial about the **Copernican revolution** is not so much the shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric cosmology, but the underlying conviction that only a-perspectival, objective thinking gives us access to reality. **Geocentrism is unmasked a just a perspectival illusion**.

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[15] Plato, *Republic*, X, 602 c-d, trans. Benjamin Jowett.

Human beings have a tendency to assume themselves to occupy a place of special importance. The Copernican revolution shakes such conviction.[16]

Such Copernican reflection concerning the eccentric position of human beings is of decisive importance for Nietzsche. And Nietzsche insists that this reflection be gone through, not only with respect to space, but also with respect to time. We should not think that just because we happen to be caught up in particular language-games, what we now take to be true has therefore a timeless validity. We have no good reason to think that we have finally arrived at the truth and are therefore in a position to make our conviction the measure of all other opinions. And this goes especially for our ethical convictions. These themselves reflect our historical position, reflect our inheritance, and most be understood in their relativity. **Their perspectival nature must be grasped**. Note how a fundamentally Platonic conviction here undermines itself. Plato began with trust in reason. In the name of reason he devalued sensible experience. Now reason questions itself, **forces us to question that faith in reason with which we began**.

To make this point a bit more intuitive and at the same time to underscore its connection with the Copernican revolution let me read here what is essentialy the same fable, first as Schopenhauer tells it in the second volume of *The World as Will and Reprentation*, and then as Nietzsche retells it in *On Truth and Lie in an Extramoral Sense*. First then Schopenhauer:

> In endless space countless luminous spheres, round each of which some dozen smaller illuminated ones revolve, hot at the core and covered with a hard cold crust. On this crust a mouldy film has produced living and knowing beings: this is empirical truth, the real, the world. Yet for a being who thinks, it is a precarious position to stand on one of these numberless spheres freely floating in boundless space, without knowing whence or whither, and to be only one of innumerable similar things that

[16] Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001)

> throng, press, and toil, restlessly and rapidly arising in passing away in beginningless and endless time.[17]

Human existence on this view is the product of a cosmic accident. There is no higher significance. Human life is no more than a passing and pointless episode. We cannot claim a special place for ourselves.

Nietzsche tells essentially the same story:

> Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed in numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of "world-history," but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die. — One might invent such a fable, and yet would not have adequately illustrated how miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature. There were eternities during which it did not exist.[18]

Given the post-Copernican vantage point here assumed, human existence has to appear as a contingent fact, devoid of higher significance. There is no place for God or for Plato's forms in that world picture. It knows nothing of such a higher dimension. The place God once occupied has become empty. Nietzsche's famous utterance, "God is dead," is a corollary of this view. It is compounded by the realization that time will overtake us and all that we can achieve. Nihilism, which shows itself ever more clearly, is, if Nietzsche is right, inseparable from that trust in reason which through science and

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[17] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* , vol. 2, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), p. 3.

[18] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Unmoral Sense," *Philosophy and Truth. Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the early 1870's*, trans. and ed, Daniel Breazeale (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1979), p. 79.

technology has shaped and is still shaping out situation. As he asks in *The Will to Power"*:

> Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?

The following point is especially important given our focus:

> Skepticism regarding morality is what is decisive. The end of the moral interpretation of the world, which no longer has any sanction after it has tried to escape into some beyond, leads to nihilism.[19]

Nietzsche, too, speaks in this place of the nihilistic consequences of modern science.

> Since Copernicus man has been rolling from the center toward X.[20]

The rise of nihilism is the progressive awareness that there is no transcendent beyond which we can appeal to to give meaning and direction to our existence. This thought intertwines with another: ever since Plato philosophers have given a special prestige to reason, have asked reason to become practical. **Nietzsche questions that prestige** and asks: is it not perhaps precisely the prestige accorded to reason that has led to the present nihilistic predicament?

But behind that prestige lies a human need, the need to escape a sense that human existence is fleeting, doomed to annihilation, and finally pointless. Behind it lies an inability on the part of human beings to accept their essential temporality, a hatred of time. In *Zarathustra* Nietzsche calls this **the spirit of revenge.** The spirit of revenge insists that the human being ground himself in **a reality that transcends time**, to think true being in opposition to time. Plato thus speaks of the forms. Reason is to give us access to the forms. Similarly the Christian may speak of God and insist that faith alone will grant access to this reality which alone is able to take away the sting of death, the sting of time. But let me try to make what Nietzsche calls the spirit of revenge a bit clearer:

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[19] Ibid., Number 1, 3, p. 7.
[20] Ibid., Number 1, 6, p. 8.

We experience ourselves as subjected to time. Such subjection reveals itself most forcefully in the certainty of death. But as long as death is experienced as something that we must suffer, how can we ever be truly at one with ourselves, fully at peace with ourselves? To quote Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization*:

> The brute fact of death denies once and for all the reality of nonrepressive existence. For death is the final negativity of time, but joy wants eternity. Timelessness is the ideal of pleasure.[21]

The incompatibility of the ideal of pleasure and time suggests itself when we enquire into the meaning of the word **satisfaction**: Satisfaction suggests wholeness, completeness. To be satisfied is to be at one with oneself. But are we not denied such completeness by our temporality? Think of desire, care, or anticipation, especially of the anxious anticipation of death. **Do they not all betray a lack that seems inseparable from human existence?** Plato already understood temporal existence in this way. In time there is no true satisfaction. This is why the philosopher seeks to escape becoming, seeks to find refuge in a higher reality. This is the point of Socrates's **art of dying**. But if Nietzsche is right, the idea of such a higher reality can no longer be taken seriously by us moderns. We know no such higher reality. To us it appears as an invention of human beings who with it sought to console themselves about their lack. Let me call here already attention to the very last words of *The Genealogy of Morals*:

> man would rather will *nothingness* than *not* will. (193)

I shall return to this statement and consider it in some detail. Here I only invite you to consider this statement in conjunction with the Socratic art of dying. Is Socrates one of those who would rather have the void for his purpose than be void of purpose? The forms are of course not supposed to be the void, but a reality that grounds and measures human existence. If Nietzsche is right this realm of the forms is a human fabrication

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[21] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974)), p, 231.

designed to console human beings who cannot make their peace with time and therefore dream of escaping from time.

Values, Nietzsche insists are human creations. There is no timeless realm of values. This, however, is not to say that we are therefore free to create values. The values we hold will reflect the society into which we were born and in which we were raised. First of all they present themselves as an **inheritance**. Nietzsche insists that ours is a questionable inheritance. The *Genealogy of Morals* invites us to consider our own morality as a perspectival phenomenon. But to see it as such a phenomenon is to be free of its hegemony:

> Even then [at the time he wrote *Human All Too Human*] my real concern was something much more important than hypothesis-mongering, whether my own or other people's, on the origin of morality (or more precisely, the latter concerned me solely for the sake of a goal to which it was only one means among many). What was at stake was the *value* of morality — and over this I had to come to terms almost exclusively with my great teacher Schopenhauer, to whom that book of mine, the passion and the concealed contradiction of that book addresses itself as if to a contemporary. (19)

At issue is the value of morality. This is not to say that Nietzsche will not also insist on the value of morality. He, too, knows that we cannot do without one. What he will be questioning, however, is the dominant tradition:

> What was especially at stake was the value of the "unegoistic," the instincts of pity, self-abnegation, self-sacrifice, which Schopenhauer has gilded, deified, and projected into a beyond for so long that at last they became for him "value-in-itself," on the basis of which he said No to life and to himself. But it was precisely against *these* instincts that there spoke from me an ever more fundamental mistrust, an ever more corrosive

> skepticism! It was precisely here that I saw the great danger to mankind, its sublimest enticement and seduction — but to what? to nothingness? (19)

The tradition had been governed by values that Nietzsche takes to be in a deep sense life-denying. Morality, and not only Plato's, has long taught an art of dying, had taught that man's natural, selfish being had to be negated. What Nietzsche hears in the tradition is above all the hatred human beings have for what they are.

> One has taken the value of these "values" as a given, as factual, as beyond all question; one has hitherto never doubted or even hesitated in the slightest degree in supposing "the good man" to be of greater value than "the evil man," of greater value in the sense of furthering the advancement and prosperity of men in general (the future of man included). But what if the reverse were true? What if a symptom of regression were in the 'good," likewise a danger, a seduction, a poison, a narcotic through which the present was possibly living *at the expense of the future*?

Next time I shall return to the issue just raised, to the distinction between bad and evil, and between their opposites.

22. Beyond Good and Evil

Last time I linked the idea of writing a *Genealogy of Morals* to Nietzsche's perspectivism: our ethical convictions reflect our historical position; they are part of our inheritance — if Nietzsche is right a questionable inheritance. On his view the prevailing morality betrays not only prejudice, but to an unfortunate prejudice. Nietzsche attempts to free us from this prejudice. His historical approach is to liberate us from it by letting us understand how it arose.

One thing we can learn from Nietzsche is **the liberating power of historical reflection**. Only a philosophy that allies itself with history can hope to exhibit the prejudices or presuppositions that determine a way of thinking, a culture. Only in uncovering these presuppositions do we gain that distance from them that is a necessary condition of critical evaluation. We learn that the path that our culture took is not the only one it might have taken. In the past one may find hints of desperately needed alternatives. One can give a Kantian twist to this observation and argue that autonomy, as Kant understands it, is possible only on the basis of critical historical reflection.

Before presenting his own account, Nietzsche points briefly to the British psychologists, also to his former friend Paul Rée, as the only ones who have attempted to provide something like a genealogy of morals. Consider the account Nietzsche gives of the views of the former:

> All respect then for the good spirits that may rule in these historians of morality! But it is, unhappily, certain that the *historical spirit* itself is lacking in them, that precisely all the good spirits of history itself have left them in the lurch! As is the hallowed custom with philosophers, the thinking of all of them is *by nature* unhistorical; there is no doubt about that. The way they have bungled their moral genealogy comes to light at the very beginning, where the task is to investigate the origin of

> the concept and judgment "good." "Originally" — so they decree— "one approved unegoistic actions and called them good from the point of view of those to whom they were done, that is to say, those to whom they were *useful;* later one forgot how this approval originated and, simply because unegoistic actions were always *habitually* praised as good, one also felt them to be good — as if they were something good in themselves." (25)

Decisive is the emphasis on unegoistic actions, on **altruism**. It is just this emphasis Nietzsche wants to question. What is at stake is the association of **moral, altruistic, disinterested**.

Nietzsche finds such a theory not only historically false, but also psychologically unconvincing.

> — but how is this forgetting possible? Has the utility of such actions come to an end at some time or other? The opposite is the case: this utility has rather been an everyday experience at all times, therefore something that has been underlined again and again: consequently, instead of fading from consciousness, instead of becoming easily forgotten, it must have been impressed on the consciousness more and more clearly. How much more reasonable is that opposing theory (it is not for that reason more true —) which Herbert Spencer, for example, espoused: that the concept "good" is essentially identical with the concept "useful." (27)

The good is here identified with what has proven useful. Altruism and self-interest are here linked. But this view, too, Nietzsche suggests, cannot be reconciled with the historical evidence. What sort of evidence does Nietzsche have in mind? Given his training as a classical philologist his answer is not surprising: Nietzsche places a great deal of weight on **etymology**. Etymology represents a kind of linguistic **archeology**. Pursuing etymologies we dig up submerged layers of our culture. What then does etymology have to tell us?

> What was the real etymological significance of the designations for "good" coined in the various languages? I found that they all led back to the same conceptual transformation — that everywhere "noble," "aristocratic" in the social sense, is the basic concept from which "good" in the sense of "with aristocratic soul," "noble," "with a soul of a high order," "with a privileged soul" necessarily developed: a development which always runs parallel with that other in which "common," "plebeian," "low" are finally transformed into the concept "bad." (27-28)

Here we run up against one of the most questionable aspects of Nietzsche's thinking. **Utilitarian ideas are linked by him to democracy**; they are said to reflect democratic prejudice. Historically and conceptually the point is easy to grant: the main representatives of utilitarianism were also committed to democracy. The principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number allies itself quite naturally with **democracy**. What is questionable is Nietzsche's presentation of this connection as a **prejudice**, a **plebeian bias**. To it he opposes his own **aristocratic bias**:

> With regards to *our* problem, which may on good grounds be called a *quiet* problem and one which fastidiously directs itself to few ears, it is of no small interest to ascertain that through those words and roots which designate "good" there still shines the most important nuance by virtue of which the noble felt themselves to be men of a higher rank. (28)

Nietzsche then not only makes the claim that the values underlying and supporting democracy are themselves human creations and have their history, but he is suspicious of them, suspicious of the shape of the modern world.

> At this point I cannot suppress a sigh and a last hope. What is it that I find utterly unendurable? That I cannot cope with, that makes me choke and faint? Bad air! Bad air! The approach of some ill-constituted thing; that I have to smell the entrails of some ill-constituted soul! (43 - 44)

> For this is how things are: the diminution and leveling of European man constitutes *our* greatest danger, for the sight of him makes us weary. — We can see nothing today that wants to grow greater, we suspect that things will continue to go down, down, to become thinner, more good natured, more prudent, more comfortable, more mediocre, more indifferent, more Chinese, more Christian — there is no doubt that man is getting "better" all the time. (43-44)

Nietzsche's genealogy will have to show how aristocratic values were transformed into their opposite.

But before turning to this transformation let us keep in mind that **earlier need not mean better**. It is indeed tempting to read Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* as a **secularization and inversion of the fall story**: Nietzsche, too, begins with a state of comparative innocence. This original innocence is in a sense taken to have been perverted by the Hebrew-Christian tradition. He himself seems to call for a step beyond that culture, which may suggest that he is calling for a step back to those earlier beginnings. But is he really doing that?

Nietzsche had already given a similar account in *The Birth of Tragedy*. There, too, he saw modern culture drifting into nihilism. To it he opposed the tragic culture of the Greeks and in that book called for a recovery of Greek tragedy, for a new tragedy and thus for a new **tragic** and as such **inevitably postmodern culture**. In the later work it is however the Hebrew-Christian rather than the Socratic-Platonic that is the main target.

But given this parallel we should not overlook how Nietzsche has inverted the traditional account: the original state he envisions is hardly to be compared with paradise. To us it has to look more like the opposite, like a disgusting **barbarism**. Nietzsche of course insists on just this and to us moderns his barbarians are about as difficult to accept as Kierkegaard's Abraham, especially given the way they now force us to think of the Nazis.

> Here there is one thing we shall be the last to deny: he who knows these "good men" only as enemies knows only *evil enemies*, and the same men who are held so sternly in check *inter pare*s by custom, respect, usage, gratitude, and even more by mutual suspicion and jealousy, and who on the other hand in their relations with one another show themselves so resourceful in consideration, self-control, delicacy, loyalty, pride, and friendship — once they go outside, where the strange, the *stranger* is found, they are not much better than uncaged beasts of prey. There they savor a freedom from all social constraints, they compensate themselves in their wilderness for the tension engendered by protracted confinement and enclosure within the peace of society, they go *back* to the innocent conscience of the beast of prey, as triumphant monsters who perhaps emerge from a disgusting procession of murder, arson, rape, and torture, exhilarated and undisturbed of soul, as if it were no more than a students' prank, convinced that they have provided the poets with a lot more material for song and praise. One cannot fail to see at the bottom of all these noble races the beast of prey, the splendid blond beast prowling avidly in search of spoil and victory; this hidden core needs to erupt from time to time, the animal has to get out again and go back to the wilderness: the Roman, Arabian, Germanic, Japanese nobility, the Homeric heroes, the Scandinavian Vikings — they all shared this need.
>
> It is the noble races that have left behind them the concept "barbarian" wherever they have gone. (40 - 41)

Kaufmann, who admires Nietzsche, has done his best to defang that blond beast, for him the lion — see his not quite convincing footnote! What Nietzsche is suggesting here is that our culture rests on a progressive repression of our instincts, and these offer not at all a pleasant spectacle: deep in us there still lurks the beast of prey. **We have become**

alienated from who we truly are: thinking animals, where Nietzsche would underline **animals**. And this animal lurks within us and demands satisfaction. And the more we cage it the more it threatens to erupt in violent and disgusting destruction.

If the first state then is **not at all like the peaceful kingdom of**, more the opposite, we also should not think that Nietzsche calls on us to simply return to that barbarian state: to awaken the blond beast to new life. What he insists on is rather that we tame the animal within us, that we sublimate our too barbarian desires instead of trying to deny and eradicate them. Presupposed is a conception of human being that **inverts the traditional picture**: on the traditional account the human being is spirit possessing a body — remember the metaphor of the coat for the body that we find in the *Phaedo*. On the Platonic view it makes sense to say that the human being **has a body**, somewhat in the way that the wearer of the coat has that coat. Nietzsche insists that **we are** fundamentally **body**. The soul is nothing apart from the body. It is just something about the body. Similarly Nietzsche insists that human beings are not first of all thinking substances, as Descartes had taught. First of all they are desiring beings, willing beings, and often they hide from themselves what they most deeply desire. In this respect, too, Nietzsche follows Schopenhauer, who may be said to have thus inverted the traditional conception of human being.

But to repeat: it would be a mistake to read Nietzsche as calling for a return to this barbarian state. The very title of his book *Beyond Good and Evil* suggests this. Nietzsche would have us take a step beyond good and evil, a step forward, not a step backward to our beginnings. We should not forget that according to Nietzsche the fall away from the barbarian state has made us much more interesting, however that is evaluated:

> it is only fair to add that it was on the soil of this *essentially dangerous* form of human existence, the priestly form, that man first became an interesting animal, that only here did the human soul in a higher sense

> acquire *depth* and become *evil* — and these are the two basic respects in which man has hitherto been superior to the beasts. (33)

But let us consider more carefully the stages in the history of moral ideas that Nietzsche sketches them for us: the first stage is marked by a linkage between power and goodness. We have already seen that good, on Nietzsche's account, initially was tied to noble in a class sense. It is tied first of all to a ruling caste. How then is this first stage shattered?

> One will have divined already how easily the priestly mode of valuation can branch off from the knightly-aristocratic and then develop into its opposite; this is particularly likely when the priestly caste and the warrior caste are in jealous opposition to one another and are unwilling to come to terms. The knightly-aristocratic value judgments presupposed a powerful physicality, a flourishing, abundant, even overflowing health, together with that which serves to preserve it: war, adventure, hunting, dancing, war games, and in general all that involves vigorous, free, joyful activity. The priestly-noble mode of valuation presupposes, as we have seen, other things: it is disadvantageous for it when it comes to war! As is well known, the priests are the *most evil enemies* — but why? Because they are the most impotent. It is because of their impotence that in them hatred grows to monstrous and uncanny proportions, to the most spiritual and poisonous hatred. The truly great haters in world history have always been priests. (33)

Note how supposedly historical events may thus be read as an event in the evolution of the individual psyche: there are those who are not happy with their bodies, who, like Kierkegaard,

> want love's majesty
>
> To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;

and therefore turn within and turn into demons or perhaps knights of faith. This movement of introversion splits body and spirit. Introversion and the genealogy of evil belong together.

Nietzsche distinguishes two stages in this process: the first he associates with the Hebrews, the second with Christ. Both according to Nietzsche rest on hate. Hate of what? Hate of those in power, but even more hate of oneself in one's impotence, one's vulnerability. The human being is understood by Nietzsche as a being **who wills power, yet** all too often **lacks power**. This inability to accept our lack of power, our mortality, is the deepest source of our self-alienation. Historically Nietzsche roots such self-alienation in Biblical morality:

> It was the Jews who with awe-inspiring consistency dared to invert the aristocratic value-equation (good = noble = powerful = happy = beloved of God) and to hang on to this inversion with their teeth, the teeth of the most abysmal hatred (the hatred of impotence), saying "the wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are pious, alone are blessed by God, blessedness is for them alone — and you, the powerful and noble, are on the contrary the evil, the cruel, the lustful, the insatiable, the godless to all eternity; and you shall be in all eternity the unblessed, the accursed, and damned!" One knows who inherited this Jewish revaluation... In connection with the tremendous and immeasurably fateful initiative provided by the Jews through the most fundamental of all declarations of war, I recall the proposition I arrived at on a previous occasion (*Beyond Good and Evil*, section 195) — that with the Jews there begins *the slave revolt in morality*: that revolt which has a history of two thousand years behind it and which we no longer see because it —has been victorious. (34 - 35)

The spirit of the Old Testament presides over our culture, Nietzsche here asserts. It has shaped our morality, our world.

Is Nietzsche an anti-Semite? Let me answer with a quote from the *Genealogy*:

> To the psychologists first of all, presuming they would like to study ressentiment close up for once, I would say: this plant blossoms best today among anarchists and anti-Semites — where it has always bloomed, in hidden places, like the violet, though with a different odor. (73)

I shall return to the topic of **ressentiment**. But let me return to the main narrative. Christianity is grafted unto this tree:

> from the trunk of that tree of vengefulness and hatred, Jewish hatred — the profoundest and sublimest kind of hatred, capable of creating ideals and reversing values, the like of which has never existed on the earth before — there grew something equally incomparable, a *new love,* the profoundest and sublimest kind of love — and from what other trunk could it have grown? (34)

It is this love especially that Nietzsche wants to call into question:

> And could spiritual subtlety imagine any *more dangerous* bait than this? Anything to equal the enticing, intoxicating, overwhelming, and undermining power of that symbol of the "holy cross," that ghastly paradox of a "God on the cross," that mystery of an unimaginable ultimate cruelty and self-crucifixion of God for the salvation of man?
>
> What is certain at least, is that *sub hoc signo* Israel, with its vengefulness and revaluation of all values, has hitherto triumphed again and again over all other ideals, over all *nobler* ideals.— (35)

There is of course yet a third chapter to this story. Many of us moderns don't take Christianity this seriously any more.

> Does the church today still have a *necessary* role to play? Does it still have the right to exist? *Quaeritur* [one asks]. It seems to hinder rather than hasten this progress [of the poison]. But perhaps that is its usefulness. — Certainly, it has, over the years, become something crude and boorish, something repellent to a more delicate intellect, to a truly modern taste. Ought it not to become a little more refined? — Today it alienates rather than seduces. — Which of us would be a free spirit if the Church did not exist? It is the church and not its poison that repels us. -— Apart from the church, we, too, love the poison. (36)

What is that **poison** that does not offend us that we in fact love? The leveling of humanity implicit in the valorization of the human being as such, equally presupposed by the Enlightenment, for example by Kant. Modern mass society is a product of such leveling. So is the understanding of society as an aggregate of lonely, atomic individuals. This whole development, Nietzsche suggests, is fuelled by **ressentiment.**

So what then is ressentiment? **Ressentiment is a will to power that finds no outlet and therefore, bottled up, turns inward**. That movement of **introversion**, so characteristic of Kierkegaard and his knight of faith, is linked to a no to the outside — recall what Kierkegaard calls the teleological suspension of the ethical. Ressentiment, as Nietzsche understands it, begins with a **negation**, a no. **Its creativity is this negation**:

> The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge. (36)

Nietzsche opposes to the person filled with ressentiment, the strong person who cannot for long take seriously his misfortunes, his misdeeds, his enemies. He shakes them off. The person of ressentiment will dwell on them. He needs the **scapegoat** whom he holds responsible for his sufferings, or the apparent power of those others he resents. He

consoles himself with **conspiracy theories**. And the greatest of all conspiracy theories is that which makes the **devil** the author of a cosmic conspiracy. What gives birth to the devil is finally the inability of human beings to affirm their situation, especially their final impotence, their subjection to time, to death. [This relationship between the devil and time is revealed in striking and frightening fashion in two paintings: in Goya's *Saturn Devouring his Children* and In Hieronymus Bosch's representation of satan in the lower right hand corner of the Hell Wing of his *Garden of Earthly Delights* in the Prado.] Note that this inability to forgive ourselves our temporality also has to lead to a disgust with all that ties us to time, to a disgust with the body, the senses, with sex. It has to lead to a demonization of the sensuous, of the sexual.

In support of his thesis that official Christianity is supported by ressentiment Nietzsche cites Thomas Aquinas and the Church Father Tertullian.

> "The blessed in the kingdom of heaven," he [Aquinas] says meek as a lamb, "will see the punishment of the damned, in order that their bliss be more delightful for them." (49)

Tertullian is much more outspoken in his *De Spectaculis*, as noted already by Edward Gibbon in his *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.* Tertullian here, seeking to turn his fellow Christians away from Rome's cruel public spectacles, promises them this compensation:

> "For the faith offers us much more, … something much stronger; thanks to the Redemption, quite other joys are at our command; in place of athletes we have our martyrs; if we crave blood, we have the blood of Christ ... But think of what awaits us on the day of his return, the day of his triumph!": and then he goes on, the enraptured visionary: "Yes, and there are other sights: That last day of judgment, with its everlasting issues; that day unlooked for by the nations, the theme of their derision, when the world,

> hoary with age, and all its many products, shall be consumed in one great flame! How vast the spectacle then bursts upon the eye... (49)

And Tertullian continues to show us in great detail the punishments inflicted on the damned: a spectacle that will put every Roman spectacle and every modern horror movie to shame. All sorts of sinners, including of course kings and even the Greek gods will be seen groaning in the depth. What circus, theater, amphitheater, or stadium can offer a spectacle such as this, a joy to compare with this? A joy promised to the faithful. "Thus it is written" (52) Nietzsche observes.

The distinction between good and evil, on the one hand, and good and bad, on the other, as Nietzsche understands it, is then a distinction between an existence subject to the spirit of ressentiment on the one hand, and one free of that spirit on the other. Keep in mind how ressentiment is linked to introversion. The distinction between good and evil, we can therefore also say, is linked by Nietzsche to a profoundly questionable movement of introversion. I remind you once more of what I said earlier about radical evil in Kant and about Kierkegaard's demon.

23. Guilt and Bad Conscience

Last time we discussed the first part of the *Genealogy of Morals* in which Nietzsche launches his attack on the Hebrew Christian tradition for having alienated man from his animal being, for doing violence to the beast that he still is, and thus to himself. Such alienation, as Nietzsche is the first to admit, is not to be presented in purely negative terms: without it we would not have what we now would consider a fully human existence. But this is to say, as Freud was to say later, that such humanity is bought at a heavy price. To be human then is not simply to have emerged from a state of immediacy and innocence; to be human is to have been forced to **repress** desires, instincts carried along from an earlier state. Again, to avoid misunderstanding, Nietzsche does not want to undo the results of that process, does not want us to go back to the barbarian state. As he points out, without that process human beings would have remained shallow, they would lack what most distinguishes them from the rest of creation. And given what Nietzsche himself says **against reactive thinking**, a thinking that first says no and **generates its yes out of this no,** we can expect that his own thinking would not have its origin in a simple negation of the Hebrew-Christian tradition, but that negation is just the offspring of his own ideal image of humanity, an ideal that may perhaps be understood as a synthesis of the barbarian state, as I described it last time, and Hebrew-Christian morality. I am using the word synthesis here in a Hegelian sense, where synthesis is thought as the last step in a triple movement that leads from thesis to antithesis to synthesis. Barbarian humanity and its morality of the naturally strong, of those who by their nature are masters, would be the thesis; the morality of the slaves represented by the Hebrew-Christian tradition, crucial to the inward turn presupposed by the modern understanding of the individual, would be the antithesis. At this point the meaning of the synthesis must be left rather vague.

But to make a little clearer what we might expect let me take a somewhat different approach. I spoke of the fact that on Nietzsche's view post-barbarian humanity is in a deep sense alienated from itself. For Nietzsche, too, **civilization generates**, and generates necessarily, **its discontents**. To be civilized is to have done violence to the animal within. Some discontent is the indispensable condition of existing as *an animal rationale,* as a rational animal, as that animal that has reason and is free. Kant recognized this and therefore posited a tension between man's **natural being** with its desires and instincts and what is demanded by the **categorical imperative**, i.e. by practical reason. I want to make a related, but rather more general point: let me emphasize with Kant the **phenomenon of freedom** and begin with it. What is presupposed or implicit in this phenomenon? First of all that you face an **open** future, a future that presents itself to you in **different possibilities**; also that you bear some responsibility for which of these possibilities are going to be realized. You have to **decide or choose**. But such choice requires **criteria** if it is to be a genuine choice and not just a spontaneous happening. Kant makes what is essentially the same point. In his categorical imperative he gives us the master criterion that should govern all choice. And even if we question Kant's understanding of the categorical imperative, the need for criteria must be granted. Nietzsche, too, grants it. Where then do we find our criteria? Are they given to us by pure reason? Or should we answer this question along lines suggested by the utilitarians: that these criteria are given by our natural needs: e.g. we are hungry and want to eat. The answer to the question: why do you want to eat? is often very simple: because I am hungry. But Nietzsche demands more than this from life: let me read you a passage from near the very end of the *Genealogy*:

> Apart from the ascetic ideal, man, the human *animal*, had no meaning so far. His existence on earth contained no goal; "why man at all?" — was a question without an answer; the *will* for man and earth was lacking; behind every great human destiny there sounded as a refrain a yet

> greater "in vain!" This is precisely what the ascetic ideal means: that something was lacking, that man was surrounded by a fearful void — he did not know how to justify, to account for, to affirm himself; he suffered from the problem of his meaning. He also suffered otherwise, he was in the main a sickly animal: but his problem was not suffering itself, but that there was no answer to the crying question, "why do I suffer."
>
> Man, the bravest of animals and the one most accustomed to suffering, does *not* repudiate suffering as such; he *desires* it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a *meaning* for it, a purpose of suffering. The meaninglessness of suffering, not suffering itself, was the curse that lay over mankind so far — *and the ascetic ideal offered man meaning*! It was the only meaning offered so far; any meaning is better than none at all; the ascetic ideal was in every sense the *"faute de mieux" par excellence* so far. In it, suffering was interpreted; the tremendous void seemed to have been filled; the door was closed to any kind of suicidal nihilism. This interpretation — there is no doubt of it — brought fresh suffering with it, deeper, more inward, more poisonous, more life-destructive suffering: it placed all suffering under the perspective of *guilt*. (162)

We should consider carefully what Nietzsche says here: first of all, it was the ascetic ideal, and it does not matter here whether we think it in its Platonic Christian, or Indian version that gave a meaning to human existence, more especially to suffering, its only meaning so far, Nietzsche claims. There is no adequate historical alternative, he suggests. **We need ideals to deal with the sense that human existence is fundamentally pointless.** We need to feel that it has a point. Nietzsche's barbarians were crypto-nihilists, even if they were too unreflective to open themselves to the "in vain" that haunted their existence. The ascetic ideal offered a defense against such nihilism. With its collapse, with the death of God, understood in its broadest sense, this

nihilism asserts itself with a new vehemence. What is necessary is to replace this ascetic ideal with a new ideal. But how will this new ideal differ from the old? It will differ both in its form and in its content. It will not be offered as having a timeless validity, independent of human beings, but as a human **creation.** Ideals and values are **artifacts**, they are manufactured. To say that they are manufactured is, however, not to say that they are therefore arbitrary. They have to articulate and speak to genuine human needs. They have to be such that people can recognize their validity, their binding power. Nietzsche, too, needs something like Platonic recollection. Only what is recollected are not eternal forms, but, as Nietzsche puts it in *Zarathustra*, **the meaning of the earth**, where that meaning shows itself in our body and desires.

Now to the content: the ascetic ideal, as we have seen, answers to the **spirit of ressentiment**. Behind that spirit we meet with what in *Zarathustra* is called the **spirit of revenge,** with the will's ill will against time and its it was. Human beings, Nietzsche suggests, find it difficult to make peace with their essential temporality. To exist in time is to exist in such a way that one is never completely at one with oneself, always in some sense ahead of oneself, lacking in some sense, that is to say, dissatisfied, needy. Plato thus already ties the temporality of human existence to a fundamental dissatisfaction. The other side of his interpretation is the ideal of satisfaction, of being at one with oneself. In this sense I speak of an **ethics of satisfaction**. But if it is our temporal condition that denies such satisfaction then we must overcome it in some way. The ideal of satisfaction demands thus **a flight from time**. This flight can take one of two forms:

1. We may look for satisfaction by turning to a dimension beyond time. Here the ideal of satisfaction leads necessarily to some version of the **art of dying**. We can distinguish between Buddhistic, Platonic, and Christian versions of this art of dying. In this connection we can speak of **asceticism**.

2. We may look for **satisfaction in time**. We may thus try to lose ourselves so completely in the immediacy of enjoyment that past and future are negated. Aesthetic

experience has long been interpreted in this way. The magic appeal of beauty has thus been linked to its ability to, lift, at least for a time, the burden character for time. In this connection theorists of art such as the art historian Michael Fried have spoken of the particular kind of presentness that art works possess. "**Presentness is grace**," he concludes one of his essays on modern art.[22] This interpretation has a venerable ancestry. Kant and Schopenhauer are important representatives. In a world that finds it increasingly difficult to believe in religious salvation, aesthetic experience has offered itself as a substitute for faith, the artist as a substitute for God. In time art lifts the burden of time in a manner that is analogous to the way that divine grace was thought to lift the burden of time. Nietzsche would have us judge this understanding of beauty as also born of the spirit of revenge, like a religion that emphasizes the power of faith to deliver us from the tyranny of time. Triumphantly the believer can ask: "Death where is thy sting?"

Indeed, not only aesthetic experience, but all immediate enjoyment, no matter how vulgar, promises something like an at least momentary deliverance from what is experienced as the tyranny of time.

Like asceticism, **aestheticism** is an expression of the **ethics of satisfaction**. By an "ethics of satisfaction" I mean one that makes satisfaction the end of human action. Within the ethics of satisfaction we can distinguish ascetic, e.g., Buddhist, Platonic, or Christian variants, from aesthetic and utilitarian variants. But **all versions of an ethics of satisfaction would share a common origin in the spirit of revenge**. Nietzsche seeks to oppose to this ideal of satisfaction another ideal. What might this be? I shall have to return to this in a later lecture.

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[22] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), p. 147

After these more general observations let me return to the second essay of the *Genealogy*, which discusses the problem of **guilt** and **bad conscience**. At the same time it offers an account of the genealogy of moral consciousness, which is inevitably also an account of the genealogy of what we may call genuine humanity. What makes us fully human, according to Nietzsche, is our ability **to act responsibly**. To act responsibly is to act in such a way that one is able to make promises to oneself and to others, that one can call oneself and others can call one to account for what one has done. Without responsibility in this sense there cannot be anything like what Kant calls **autonomy**. The ability to act responsibly is inseparably bound up with the ability to promise and thereby to bind oneself in some way. **To promise is to give oneself a principle that will bind one's future actions**. Note once more how close we are here to Kantian autonomy.

> To breed an animal with the right to make promises — is not this the paradoxical task that nature has set itself in the case of man? is it not the real problem regarding man? (57)

To be able to make promises means to be responsible. **Responsibility** is given by Nietzsche a social origin.

> This precisely is the long story of how *responsibility* originated. The task of breeding an animal with the right to make promises evidently embraces and presupposes as a preparatory task that one first *makes* men to a certain degree necessary, uniform, like among like, regular, and consequently calculable. The tremendous labor of what I have called "morality of mores" (*Dawn*, sections 9, 14, 16) — the labor performed by man upon himself during the greater part of the existence of the human race, his entire *prehistoric* labor, finds in this its meaning, its great justification, notwithstanding the severity, tyranny, stupidity, and idiocy involved in it: with the aid of mores and the social straitjacket, man was actually *made* calculable. (58-59)

In the process of making human beings calculable and responsible, society also makes the individual more and more into an autonomous agent, i.e. a sovereign individual. The individual is in this sense a product of social processes.

> If we place ourselves at the end of this tremendous process, where the tree at last brings forth the fruit, where society and the morality of custom at last reveal *what* they have simply been the means to: then we discover that the ripest fruit is the sovereign individual, like only to himself, liberated again from morality of custom, autonomous and supramoral (for "autonomous" and "moral" are mutually exclusive), in short, the man who has his own independent, protracted will and *the right to make promises*... (59)

Note the opposition to Kant when Nietzsche calls autonomy and morality mutually exclusive. And yet, to say that man now is master of his will, i. e. autonomous in that sense, is not to say that he is without all law, but that the law by which the sovereign person lives is **his measure of value** (60): but this "'free' man, the possessor of a protracted and unbreakable will" (60), bound to honor those like him, is a late development. First of all it is not the individual who tells himself what is to be done or not to be done, but society, the group one belongs to, or one's peers. And Nietzsche knows about the suffering connected with the evolution of full humanity: he speaks of torture, blood, sacrifice. And that inheritance of pain is carried by the culture and by the individual.

Like responsibility, guilt and bad conscience have a social origin. Nietzsche insists that guilt originally meant debt. Originally punishment involved forcing someone to pay his debts: it is a settling of accounts. So understood punishment has little to do with freedom. The problem of freedom has not as yet entered the discussion. The link between punishment and responsibility, our sense that someone has to have been

responsible for what he has done to deserve punishment, is a late development. Initially, Nietzsche suggests, there was no worry about this at all.

It is then in the sphere of contracts, social obligations that morality has its origin. But in what sense is punishment of someone adequate compensation for some committed wrong. This presupposes that the wronged person finds pleasure in seeing the person who wronged him being punished. Nietzsche insists on **the pleasure we take in inflicting pain**, in seeing those who wronged us or were simply higher than we are suffer. In this sense we are all a bit like Tertullian, who looked forward to being able to watch the pains of the damned from his ring-side seat in heaven. Nietzsche speaks here of a human, an all too human sentiment. Its sublimation is for him a good part of cultural progress.

Again we may feel that Nietzsche is painting a too depressing picture of human being. But Nietzsche would not have us understand it as such:

> With this idea, by the way, I am by no means concerned to furnish our pessimists with more grist for their discordant and creaking mills of life-satiety. On the contrary, let me declare expressly that in the days when mankind was not yet ashamed of its cruelty, life on earth was more cheerful than it is now that pessimists exist. (67)

Nietzsche would have us question the shame with which our body and bodily desires so often fill us:

> On his way to becoming an "angel" (to employ no uglier word) man has evolved that queasy stomach and coated tongue through which not only the joy and innocence of the animal but life itself has become repugnant to him — so that he sometimes holds his nose in his own presence and with Pope Innocent the Third disapprovingly catalogues his own repellent aspects (“impure begetting, disgusting means of nutrition in his mother’s

> womb, baseness of the matter out of which man evolves, hideous stink, secretion of saliva, urine, and filth"). (67)

In this connection Nietzsche takes issue with Schopenhauer, who insisted that a surplus of suffering over pleasure is part of life and who did not believe in a higher realm that could compensate us for such an excess of pain. With Schopenhauer such recognition leads to a world- and life-denying pessimism.

Against this Nietzsche insists that suffering has never been an argument against life.

> What really arouses indignation against suffering is not suffering as such but the senselessness of suffering: but neither for the Christian, who has interpreted a whole mysterious machinery of salvation into suffering, nor for the naive man of more ancient times, who understood all suffering in relation to the spectator of it or the causer of it, was there any such thing as *senseless* suffering. So as to abolish hidden, undetected, unwitnessed suffering from the world and honestly to deny it, one was in the past virtually compelled to invent gods and genii of all the heights and depths, in short something that roams even in secret, hidden places, that sees even in the dark, and will not easily let any painful spectacle go unnoticed. (68)

The Greeks thus thought of their gods as spectators of such cruel spectacles as the Trojan War. And much of this need for a divine witness of human suffering still lives in Christianity.

Nietzsche, as we have seen, ties *Schuld* to *Schulden*, guilt to debts. The guilty person is originally the debtor. In this connection Nietzsche points out that first of all the debt is owed to the community. The community stands to its members as creditor to debtor. The individual has to keep his contract, pay his debt to the group. If he fails to do so, he is guilty, where such guilt is punished by exclusion from the group in one way

or other. But this does not mean that such guilt should be considered an absolute wrong or absolute injustice: in a way that recalls Hobbes' *Leviathan*, Nietzsche insists that

> "Just" and "unjust" exist, accordingly, only after the institution of the law (and *not*, as Dühring would have it, after the perpetration of the injury). To speak of just or unjust in itself is quite senseless; in itself, of course, no injury, assault, exploitation, destruction can be "unjust," since life operates essentially, that it in its basic functions, through injury, assault, exploitation, destruction and simply cannot be thought of at all without this character. One must indeed grant something even more unpalatable: that, from the highest biological standpoint, legal conditions can never be other than exceptional conditions, since they constitute a partial restriction of the will to life, which is bent upon power, and are subordinate to its total goal as a single means: namely, as a means of creating greater units of power (76)

Legal systems have an instrumental function. They have no absolute or eternal significance. This goes also, if Nietzsche is right, for moral codes. They are artifacts, human creations, and we should not absolutize them as Nietzsche thinks Plato, and in a different way, Kant have done. On Nietzsche's view it makes no sense to speak of a categorical imperative. And if there is not categorical imperative there also is no such thing as radical evil.

24. God and the gods

In his *Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche tells the story of the progressive socialization and individuation of man. As Nietzsche tells it, this is not at all a nice story, but a story of violence and cruel repression, of ghastly sacrifices and pledges, of cruel mutilations, self-mutilations, of painful rituals. Think of Kierkegaard's Abraham. Such stories are part of our inheritance. Violence and repression were necessary to cage the animal in us, but they succeeded only in caging, not in eradicating it. The beast still lives and announce itself in our dreams and daydreams, attests to a tension within us, a tension that the traditional determination of the human being as the reasonable animal, the *animal rationale*, glosses over. What it glosses over is the war that continues to rage within the self, which may be understood as a war of the civilized present and our barbarian past, although it is a bit misleading to speak here of a barbarian past — in an important sense that past is a continuing living reality and gives the lie to all who insist on the fundamental goodness of human beings.

Again and again this past erupts in what to those who like to think themselves civilized must seem surprisingly barbarian behavior, behavior that testifies to the fact that the beast has only been caged, not really transformed. According to Nietzsche such caging or suppression of the beast is inseparable from the development of what is often called the **soul.** The soul is the product of a process of introversion, not a reality independent of the body as Plato would have it, but **a natural historical product.**

> All instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly turn inward -— this is what I call the internalization of man: thus it was that man first developed what was later called his "soul."
>
> (84)

Given that account we should expect the soul to be first of all a repository of what civilization proscribes, a dark place of forbidden urges, tempting images. It is also to be

expected that this soul would be difficult to reconcile with what is demanded of the individual by the community. The soul, as it may show itself in our daydreams, gives testimony to the fact that human beings are not as good as they should be. Small wonder that so often they are filled with loathing for their beastly nature and should have a bad conscience.

> The man who, from lack of external enemies and resistances and forcibly confined to the oppressive narrowness and punctiliousness of custom, impatiently lacerated, persecuted, gnawed at, assaulted, and maltreated himself; this animal that rubbed itself raw against the bars of its cage as one tried to "tame" it; this deprived creature, racked with homesickness for the wild, who had to turn himself into an adventure, a torture chamber, an uncertain and dangerous wilderness — this fool, this yearning and desperate prisoner became the inventor of the "bad conscience." But this began the gravest and uncanniest illness, from which humanity has not yet recovered, man's suffering *of man, of himself* — the result of a forcible sundering from his animal past, as it were a leap and plunge into new surroundings and conditions of existence, a declaration of war against the old instincts upon which his strength, joy, and terribleness had rested hitherto. (85)

If the barbarian knows only external enemies, leads indeed a completely extroverted existence, civilization transfers the theater of war within man's own soul. The soul becomes a battlefield: God and the devil, good and evil fight here for our possession. Life becomes an adventure. And note that on Nietzsche's interpretation this battle between good and evil, waged within, **compensates** for the loss of external enemies and resistance.

Given Nietzsche's claim that the individual is a late product of human evolution, that it presupposes political organization, presupposes the state, it is to be expected that he would have little patience with social contract theories.

> the oldest "state" thus appeared as a fearful tyranny, as an oppressive and remorseless machine, and went on working until this raw material of people and semi-animals was at last not only thoroughly kneaded and pliant, but also formed.
>
> I employed the word "state"; it is obvious what is meant: some pack of blond beasts of prey, a conqueror and master race which, organized for war and with the ability to organize, unhesitatingly lays its terrible claws upon a populace perhaps tremendously superior in numbers but still formless and nomad. That is after all how the state "began" on earth; I think the sentimentalism which would have it begin with a "contract" has been disposed of. (86)

The state appears here as a human artifact, in some ways like a work of art. Brutish human or proto-human material is forced into an order. But "work of art" may be a bit misleading here: at first there is no master artist, but only a group, or as Nietzsche puts it, a pack of savages, and its will to power. This group imposes an order on the population that they rule. It would be a mistake to think of these savages as being very much like artists as we usually understand that term; for that they are too unreflective. And yet they are in a sense inspired artists:

> Their work is an instinctive creation and imposition of forms; they are the most involuntary, unconscious artists there are — wherever they appear something new soon arises, a ruling structure that lives, in which parts and functions are delimited and coordinated, in which nothing whatever finds a place that has not first been assigned a "meaning" in relation to the whole. They do not know what guilt, responsibility, or consideration are,

> these born organizers; they exemplify that terrible artists' egoism that has the look of bronze and knows itself justified to all eternity in its "work," like a mother in her child. (86- 87)

The creation of such organization or order is, if Nietzsche is right, a necessary condition for the emergence of the phenomenon of bad conscience. Not that these barbarian rulers had a bad conscience.

> It is not in *them* that the "bad conscience" developed, that goes without saying — but it would not have developed *without them*, this ugly growth, it would be lacking if a tremendous quantity of freedom had not been expelled from the world, at least from the visible world, and made as it were latent under their hammer blows and artists' violence. This *instinct for freedom* forcibly made latent — we have seen it already — this instinct for freedom pushed back and repressed, incarcerated within and finally able to discharge and vent itself only on itself: that, and that alone, is what the *bad conscience* is in its beginnings. (87)

Crucial is the interiorization of freedom. We may of course wonder in what sense the barbarians Nietzsche imagines could be said to have been free at all. They would presumably simply have tried to follow their own instinct and desires, their own will to power. Freedom with them could only have meant spontaneity. But once forced to exist in a community, subject to its mores or laws, spontaneity is no longer allowed to determine behavior. The result is **the tension between want and should**. In this awareness of wants lies a premonition of the possibility of acting against what the community demands, of making oneself the author of one's actions, of becoming truly autonomous. **Freedom** in this sense is **born of the conflict between personal desires and social expectations**. **Pride** may be defined as the individual's presumption to make his own desires the measure of his actions. Pride lets the individual fall out of the community, makes him an outsider even while still within it. Note the parallel to the

Biblical story of the fall. Before the fall man exists unproblematically as part of a larger order. Pride lets him fall out of this order, and precisely this fall, and **only this fall, lets him become morally responsible**. The fall is both a fall out of paradise and a fall into moral responsibility. **The fall story may be read as the Biblical *Genealogy of Morals*.** Note that before the fall Adam and Eve are in an important sense in a premoral state. This is expressed by the fact that they have not yet eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This has to mean also that their transgression is qualitatively different from transgressions after the fall. **They are only ambiguously guilty**. After all, the original sin is that they ate from the tree of knowledge. But before they had eaten of the tree, they were in no position to distinguish good from evil.

In a somewhat parallel sense Oedipus is only ambiguously guilty. His transgression against the natural order is one that he stumbles into, unwittingly, indeed taking all sorts of precautions to make sure that what the oracle had foretold would not come to pass. In vain! As a result of his transgression Oedipus loses his place in the community, the polis. He becomes *apolis*, somewhat in the way Adam and Eve lose their place in the community of paradise.

Both stories belong to a family of stories that tell of the genesis of the moral situation, of the transition from a stage where man existed first of all as part of the community to a stage where the individual loses his place in the community and as a result gains a new sense of responsibility. Only this loss makes him an individual.

We can understand the transition also as a transition from the notion of **tabu** to a notion of **good and evil**. Nietzsche, too, tells such a story. What on his account displaces the individual and takes him out of the community is simply the awareness of his own desires and their incompatibility with what the community demands, an awareness that forces the individual to place himself at a certain distance from the community. Important here is that the moral situation involves something like a dislocation, a loss of community.

On Nietzsche's account this dislocation, this finding oneself outside of the community, having one's own desires and urges, desires which may not meet with the community's approval, is tied to a sense of guilt. When Socrates likens the Athenian state and its laws to parents, likens his obligation to them to the obligation a child owes to father or mother, he is expressing a very fundamental sense of indebtedness:

> Within the original tribal community — we are speaking of primeval times — the living generation always recognized a juridical duty towards earlier generations, and especially towards the earliest, which founded the tribe (and by no means a merely sentimental obligation: there are actually reasons for denying the existence of the latter for the greater part of human history). The conviction reigns that it is only through the sacrifices and accomplishments of the ancestors that the tribe exists — and that one has to pay them back with sacrifices and accomplishments: one thus recognizes a debt that constantly grows greater, since these forbears never cease, in their continued existence as powerful spirits, to accord the tribe new advantages and new strength. (89)

This ever growing debt raises the question of repayment:

> Can one ever give them enough? This suspicion remains and increases; from time to time it leads to a wholesale sacrifice, something tremendous in the way of repayment to the "creditor" (the notorious sacrifice of the first-born, for example; in any case blood, human blood). (89)

The Biblical account raises this account of indebtedness to a higher power: take for example the conclusion of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, which bears the disturbing title: "Ultimatum: The Edification implied in the thought that as Against God We Are Always in the Wrong." You can imagine what Nietzsche would have said. What is edifying about the thought that as against God we are always in the wrong, against a God who asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, even if only as a trial? Implicit in that title is an

insistence that it is wrong to want to be right, to make one's own measure of right and wrong the measure of divine reality. Implicit is thus a devaluation of autonomy in the Kantian sense. The person who self-righteously tells himself that he has done his duty does not recognize the pride that lies in such self-righteousness. Doing what one knows is right is not sufficient to assure entry into the kingdom of Kierkegaard's God. God will not be bartered with in this sense. Our debt to God is such that we cannot hope to pay it back. God has to do so himself:

> suddenly we stand before the paradoxical and horrifying expedient that afforded temporary relief for tormented humanity, that stroke of genius on the part of Christianity: God himself sacrifices himself for the guilt of mankind, God himself makes payment for himself. God as the only being who can redeem man from what has become unredeemable for man himself — the creditor sacrifices himself for his debtor, out of love (can one credit that?), out of love for his debtor! — (92)

The debt the individual feels he owes God is, according to Nietzsche, the sublimation of that debt, which, given an earlier state of development, the individual felt he owed his ancestors, to those who founded the community. Implicit in this sense of debt is a sense that there is something wrong with the individual's personal animal desires, that these have to be somehow **atoned for**. And this inability to accept the animal within, this cruelty against one's own self, is again raised to a higher power with the conception of God:

> In this psychical cruelty there resides a madness of the will which is absolutely unexampled: the *will* of man to find himself guilty and reprehensible to a degree that can never be atoned for, his *will* to think himself punished without any possibility of this punishment becoming equal to his guilt; his *will* to infect and poison the fundamental ground of things with the problem of punishment and guilt so as to cut off once and

> for all his own exit from this labyrinth of "fixed ideas"; his *will* to erect an ideal — that of the "holy God"— and in the face of it to feel the palpable certainty of his own unworthiness. Oh this insane, pathetic beast — man! (93)

Note that the devil here is linked to the beast in man. The idea of the devil as the tempter is the sublimation of the caged beast within man. The same would be true of what Kierkegaard calls the demonic. Freedom, as we have seen, according to Nietzsche is generated out of the conflict between natural desires and the order imposed on the individual by his communal being. That conflict dislocates the individual in such a way that existing as a part and existing as an individual for the first time present themselves as options.

To natural desires correspond attitudes. The person who desires a particular piece of bread endows it with a positive value. His desire lets him see the bread as valuable. The attitude here is not mediated by reflection. Let us speak in such cases of attitudes of the first order. The tension between these attitudes and the demands of the community distances man from these attitudes and lets him approve or condemn these first order attitudes. We now get higher order attitudes: attitudes towards attitudes. I desire the bread, but it is not mine and there is a social imperative, thou shalt not steal. I disapprove of the desire I have for what is not mine. I call it bad. This is an attitude to an attitude, a second order attitude. Such disapproval presupposes that I have understood myself as a part and thus as belonging to the communal whole. But the beast in me may say: what does the community matter? It may bid me to suspend the ethical. We now get an attitude of the third order. With this we have returned to Kant's notion of radical evil and to Kierkegaard's understanding of the demonic. But according to Nietzsche such notions finally have to be understood as transformations of animal desire. The voice of the devil is nothing other than the voice of the transformed beast in us, just as the voice of God is the transformed voice of the community.

Nietzsche's account is of course a bit more complicated than this. Nietzsche emphasizes that in human beings we meet with something like a need to hurt themselves. After the blocking of natural outlets for his cruelty man takes to hurting himself. God and the devil are creations with which man hurts himself.

> You will have guessed *what* has really happened here, *beneath* all this: that will to self-tormenting, that repressed cruelty of the animal-man made inward and scared back into himself, the creature imprisoned in the "state" so as to be tamed, who invented the bad conscience to hurt himself after the *more natural* vent for this desire to hurt had been blocked — this man of the bad conscience has seized upon the presupposition of religion so as to drive his self-torture to its most gruesome pitch of severity and rigor. Guilt before *God*: this thought becomes an instrument of torture to him (92)

Is this an altogether convincing account? A negative answer is suggested by Nietzsche's understanding of the Greek gods, whom he opposes to the Christian God:

> That the conception of gods in itself need not lead to the degeneration of the imagination that we had to consider briefly, that there are nobler uses for the invention of gods than for the self-crucifixion and self-violation of man in which Europe over the past millennia achieved its distinctive mastery — that is fortunately revealed by even a mere glance at the *Greek* gods, those reflections of noble and aristocratic men, in whom the *animal* in man felt defied and did not lacerate itself, did not rage against itself. For the longest time these Greeks used their gods precisely so ward off the "bad conscience," so as to be able to rejoice in their freedom of soul -— the very opposite of the use to which Christianity put God. (94)

What to the Christian is a temptation of the devil to the Greeks becomes the voice of a god or goddess, say Aphrodite. Think of Paris abducting Helen and of the suffering to which it led. Yet Paris listened to a goddess, not to the devil, where the fact that the Olympians addressed human beings with conflicting speech is significant. The Greeks were prevented by their gods from torturing themselves with feelings of guilt. But this is to say that it is not inevitable that human beings should torture themselves by demonizing the animal within. The Greeks not only accepted, but celebrated, transfigured, and glorified that animal. The Greek gods, not at all nice or overly moral, are witness to that glorification.

But how are we to understand the desire of human beings to torture themselves? This implies the question to which Nietzsche devotes the Third Essay: "What is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals?" I shall return to this question in my next and penultimate lecture.

25. The Ascetic Ideal

Freedom, I have emphasized a number of times, requires criteria. We can only be said to choose where there are reasons governing our choice. Or, as Nietzsche puts this point: **our will requires an aim**. This again is to say that life requires a meaning of some kind and, furthermore, that this meaning prescribes a direction. But what sort of meaning? And where is this meaning to be found? Our tradition, Nietzsche claims, that is to say the Platonic-Christian tradition, which still presides over our self-understanding, has answered this question in a way that has made **self-alienation unavoidable**. It has made it unavoidable by giving the whole problem of values an **ascetic twist.** How are we to understand this ascetic twist? And what accounts for this?

As we have seen, human beings, if Nietzsche is right, find it difficult to accept their temporal condition; and they find it especially difficult to accept the finality of death, this final and irrevocable negation of the individual's life. In his *Zarathustra* Nietzsche thus speaks of the **spirit of revenge**, which he defines as the will's ill will against time, and discusses as the deepest source of our inability to accept ourselves as we are. And what are we? A traditional answer is provided by the phrase *animal rationale*: We are thinking animals, that is to say, whatever else we may be, we are also animals, animals who seek to assert themselves in the world. In this connection Nietzsche speaks of a will to power: the human being is **will to power, lacking power**. This lack of power manifests itself most forcefully in the knowledge that in the end we will die. But if the human being is indeed will to power, it is to be expected that he should find it difficult to accept his lack of power, that he will find it difficult to forgive himself his temporality, and that in him that ties him into time. But what is it that makes the human being a temporal being? Plato already gave the basic answer: precisely as an embodied self, precisely because and in so far as he has or rather is a body, the human being is subjected to time. **If the human being finds it difficult to forgive himself his**

temporality, he will also find it difficult to come to terms with his body, with the animal that he also is. And for the same reason he will tend to glorify and idealize what seems to transcend the power of time: reason or spirit. Again we should think back to Plato: when I think about some truth, say a truth of arithmetic or geometry, I seem to participate in a realm that is not subject to time: the truth of 2 + 2 = 4 or the Pythagorean theorem is timeless. It was as true when Plato lived it as it is today. Do we not have here some evidence that there is indeed something in us that transcends the power of time, that cannot be touched by that power? This is a central part of the argument for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*. The spirit of revenge, the ill will against time, now lets human beings place a special value on this dimension, which promises to deliver us from the tyranny of time. The other side of such positive valuation of the spirit tends to be the negative valuation of the body, of life. In that sense all of Plato's thought appears to Nietzsche to teach the art of dying, as indeed Plato's Socrates himself seems to insist in the *Phaedo*, although, as I pointed out when we were discussing Plato, death cannot mean here simple negation. But it does mean negation of life in its present form, even if Plato seems to promise a higher form of existence, where human being will no longer be subject to destructive time and the power of death. Only seemingly paradoxical is the fact that for Plato it is death, not just any death, but the right kind of death, that opens the gate to this higher existence. It is easy to translate this basic point into the language of Christianity: here, too, the good life can be understood as a preparation for a death that for the person who has indeed lived such a good life, and that is to say, who has not invested too much in his death-bound individual life, more especially in the body and its pleasures, is a gate to a higher existence.

Here then we have at least the outline of a possible answer to the question with which I concluded my last lecture: how are we to understand man's tendency to demonize the body, the sensuous, sexuality? Why do human beings find it so difficult to affirm the

animal within? Why have human beings, again and again, brought this animal as a sacrifice to the spirit?

One answer is given by the necessarily **repressive character of civilization**, on which Nietzsche insists in the *Genealogy*. But this does not account for the degree of repression that exists in our culture. In it we meet with what we may call **a surplus of repression**. And in this respect, Nietzsche claims, we are only the inheritors of two thousand years of training in Christianity. But one should not overemphasize here the Christian background of such repression. Nietzsche points out that we meet with a similar tendency towards repression in other cultures, e.g. in India. The key to this surplus repression is provided, not just by particular historical or cultural conditions, although these two play an important part, but by what Nietzsche calls the spirit of revenge, which has its deepest foundation in the human condition, in the difficulty human beings have confronting and accepting their essentially temporal condition, their vulnerable and mortal bodies. This already suggests what would allow for a less repressive culture, a culture of the sort represented by ancient Greece, which ever since *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche held up as a promise for the future rather than just history that lies behind us. Such a culture would become a real possibility only if human beings somehow could find the strength to accept their temporal condition, including the fact of death that is inseparable from it.

Note how close we suddenly are to that courage exemplified by Plato's Socrates. Nietzsche, too, emphasizes the theme of courage, where in his *Zarathustra* Nietzsche ties this theme of courage to another quite traditional theme, to the theme of grace. Only grace now is understood, not as something extended to the human being by a transcendent God. Zarathustra has proclaimed the death of this God. If the human being is to find grace, he himself must extend such grace to himself. That is to say, we must learn to forgive ourselves our essential lack of power. We have to learn to become more genuinely accepting, and first of all of ourselves.

I have given you a sketch that suggests an answer to the question: **why do human beings turn to ascetic ideals**? But before filling out this sketch let us take a more careful look at Nietzsche's discussion in the Third Essay. Nietzsche distinguishes a number of different expressions of the ascetic ideal. Three deserve to be singled out: we thus arrive at three questions:

1. What does the ascetic ideal mean in art?
2. What does the ascetic ideal mean in philosophy and science?
3. What does the ascetic ideal mean in religion?

1. Let me begin with the first: **What does the ascetic ideal mean in art?** This leads to another question: to what extent does the ascetic ideal govern our conception of the beautiful? This will of course depend on our understanding of beauty. What then do we get out of our contemplation of the beautiful? One influential answer was given by Schopenhauer -— you should ask yourself whether or to what extent you find his answer convincing:

> Listen, for instance, to one of the most explicit of the countless passages he has written in praise of the aesthetic condition (*World as Will and Representation,* I, p. 231); listen to the tone, the suffering, the happiness, the gratitude expressed in such words.
>
> "This is the painless condition that Epicurus praised as the highest good and the condition of the gods; for a moment we are delivered from the vile urgency of the will; we celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of volition; the wheel of Ixion stands still!"
>
> What vehemence of diction! What images of torment and long despair! What an almost pathological antithesis between "a moment" and the usual "wheel of Ixion," "penal servitude of volition," "vile urgency of the will!." (105)

For a moment art is said here to let us forget our temporal condition. The aesthetic condition is thus said by Schopenhauer to be essentially disinterested. The term is Kant's and Schopenhauer appropriated Kant's determination of the beautiful as object of an entirely disinterested perception. And for Schopenhauer it is especially sexual interest that is quieted by beauty.

To show that this is not the only way in which beauty can be understood, Nietzsche opposes to Kant's and Schopenhauer's understanding of the experience of the beautiful as disinterested that of Stendhal, who calls beauty a promise of happiness. The aesthetic experience is here understood as future-directed. Here it affirms the temporality of human existence, while according to Schopenhauer it lifts the burden of time:

> to him [Stendhal] the fact seems to be precisely that the beautiful arouses the will ("interestedness"). And could one not finally urge against Schopenhauer himself that he was quite wrong in thinking himself as Kantian in this matter, that he by no means understood the Kantian definition of the beautiful in a Kantian sense -— that he, too, was pleased by the beautiful from an "interested" viewpoint, even from the very strongest, most personal interest: that of a tortured man who gains release from his torture? — And to return to our first question: "what does it *mean* when a philosopher pays homage to the ascetic ideal?" — here we get at any rate a first indication: he wants *to gain release from a torture*. — (105-106)

This gives us a general answer to the question: what do ascetic ideals mean? One thing they often mean is this: they promise release from torture, where torture is given its ground in the temporality of the human condition. This also gives an answer to the second question:

2. **What does the ascetic ideal mean in philosophy and science?** The philosopher, too, craves release from torture; he, too, finds it difficult to make his peace

with the temporality of human existence. Nietzsche also gives a second, less vengeful answer: the philosopher sees the ascetic ideal as providing the condition **most favorable to the exercise of his intelligence**:

> Thus the philosopher abhors *marriage*, together with that which might persuade to it — marriage being a hindrance and calamity on his path to the optimum. What great philosopher hitherto has been married: Heraclitus, Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Schopenhauer — they were not; more, one cannot even *imagine* them married. A married philosopher belongs *in comedy*, that is my proposition — and as for that exception, Socrates — the malicious Socrates, it would seem, married ironically, just to demonstrate this proposition. (107)

Nietzsche presumably would have included himself in the list of unmarried philosophers. The philosopher should be a free spirit, and such a free spirit should not be married:

> Every philosopher would speak as Buddha did when he was told of the birth of a son: "Rahula has been born to me, a fetter has been forged for me" (Rahula here means "a little demon); every "free spirit" would experience a thoughtful moment, supposing he had previously experienced a thoughtless one, of the kind that once came to the same Buddha — "narrow and oppressive," he thought to himself, "is life in a house, a place of impurity; freedom lies in leaving the house": "thinking thus, he left the house." (107)

We know that Nietzsche himself wanted to get married. This should put us on guard when he continues:

> Ascetic ideals reveal so many bridges to *independence* that a philosopher is bound to rejoice and clap his hands when he hears the story of all those resolute men who one day said No to all servitude and went into some

> *desert*: even supposing they were merely strong asses and quite the reverse of a strong spirit. (107)

Yet on one thing Nietzsche is right: the ascetic ideal is born of a will to power, but of an exaggerated and therefore distorted will to power:

> What, then, is the meaning of the ascetic ideal in the case of a philosopher? My answer is — you will have guessed it long ago: the philosopher sees in it an optimum condition for the highest and boldest spirituality and smiles — he does *not* deny existence, he rather affirms *his* existence and only *his* existence, and this perhaps to the point at which he is not far from harboring the impious wish: *pereat mundus, fiat philosophia, fiat philosophus, fiam!* (Let the world perish, but let there be philosophy, the philosopher, me!) (107-108)

Let me emphasize the point that when the philosopher affirms the ascetic ideal he, if we follow Nietzsche, not only affirms his own existence, but does so **to the point of hubris,** claiming a godlike self-sufficiency. Again we see that what underlies the ascetic ideal is an exaggerated preoccupation with self. For the sake of himself the philosopher renounces the world, renounces the sensuous. I would suggest that Nietzsche's critique of philosophy extends to much of his own philosophizing. There is too much of the spirit of revenge, too much *ressentiment* in his own work, and especially in this book. Here, too, philosophy threatens to become just another expression of a will to power that cannot forgive itself its lack of power and retreats from reality into a realm of thought. Consider once more the statement that every free spirit would be afraid of being fettered, as the Buddha was afraid to be fettered to a house, to a wife, to a child, and meditating left them all behind. But such meditation is just another expression of the spirit of revenge. We have to learn to accept that we are not self-sufficient, that a resolute yes to oneself is also a yes to this lack of self-sufficiency. To really affirm ourselves we have to overcome pride, t have to overcome hat narcissism to which the aesthetic ideal in all its forms

appeals. That is to say also that in reading and appropriating Nietzsche we have to measure his own work by what he has to tell us about the spirit of revenge and *ressentiment*. That is to say, we have to think with Nietzsche against Nietzsche. His own attitude to narcissism, to the ascetic ideal, to hubris, is thoroughly ambiguous: he is too narcissistic to think what his own insight into the necessity of forgiving oneself one's own lack of power demands through to the end. But Nietzsche is right to see the modern world governed by a desperate attempt to secure human existence through a manipulation of reality, i. e. by ***hubris*:**

> measured ... by the standards of the ancient Greeks, our entire modern way of life, insofar as it is not weakness, but power and consciousness of power, has the appearance of sheer *hubris* and godlessness: for the longest time it was precisely the reverse of those things we hold in honor today that had a good conscience on its side and God for its guardian. Our whole attitude toward nature, the way we violate her with the aid of machines and the heedless inventiveness of our technicians and engineers, is *hubris*; our attitude toward God as some alleged spider of purpose and morality behind the great captious web of causality, is *hubris*....; our attitude toward ourselves is hubris, for we experiment with ourselves in a way we would never permit ourselves to experiment with animals and, carried away by curiosity, we cheerfully vivisect our souls: .. .(113)

I find it difficult to overhear the voice of narcissism in the last statement. We torture ourselves with endless self-explorations, self-examinations, self-doubts, and thus **entertain** ourselves. Nietzsche and Kierkegaard are perhaps the most passionate explorers of the self in the history of philosophy. In the light of the passage I just read to you, their whole thinking appears governed by **hubris** or **pride**. It was their pride that prevented them from accepting themselves as parts of some larger whole. Kierkegaard's tortured relationship to Regine Olsen, Nietzsche's only slightly less tortured relationship

to Lou Andrea Salome and generally to women provides us with instructive case studies of the way in which pride must alienate the individual from himself.

3. But let me turn to the third question: **What does the ascetic ideal mean in religion?** Since I have already discussed Nietzsche's answer to the first two questions at some length, I can now be briefer: Nietzsche discusses the ascetic priest as a would-be healer, a doctor. The fundamental picture is provided by Plato's *Phaedo*: human existence, subject to time, is itself the disease. But does this physician really have a cure?

> But is he really a physician, this ascetic priest? — we have seen why it is hardly permissible to call him a physician, however much he enjoys feeling like a "savior" and letting himself be reverenced as a "savior." He combats only the suffering itself, the discomfiture of the sufferer, *not* its cause, *not* the real sickness: this must be our most fundamental objection to priestly medication...
>
> Christianity in particular may be called a great treasure house of ingenious means of consolation... we may generalize: the main concern of all great religions has been to fight a certain weariness and heaviness grown to epidemic proportions. (129-130)

Nietzsche does not deny the effectiveness of these priestly remedies. They all hold out the promise of a reality beyond that temporal reality that, if Nietzsche is right, is the only reality, they all prescribe a discipline that is to grant access to that reality. In different ways, they all teach the art of dying. The still fashionable ***Journey to the East***[23] only gives striking expression to this:

> ... it is not easy for us to take seriously the high valuation placed on deep sleep by the people [remember Crito's respect for the sleep of Socrates],

[23] Cf, Hermann Hesse, *The Journey to the East,* trans. Hilda Rosner (New York: Picador, 2003).

> so weary of life that they are too weary even to dream — deep sleep, that is, as an entry into Brahma, as an achieved *unio mystica* with God.
>
> "When he is completely asleep" — it says in the oldest and most venerable "scripture" — " and perfectly at rest, so that he no longer dreams, then dearly beloved, he is united with What Is, he has entered into himself — embraced by the cognitive self, he is no longer conscious of what is without or within. Over this bridge come neither day nor night, nor death, nor suffering, nor good works, nor evil works." ....
>
> Nonetheless, we must bear in mind here, as in the case of "redemption," that, although it is arrayed in Oriental exaggeration, what is expressed is merely the same appraisal as that of the clear, cool, Hellenically cool, but suffering Epicurus: the hypnotic sense of nothingness, the repose of deepest sleep, in short *absence of suffering* — sufferers and those profoundly depressed will count this as the supreme good, as the value of values; they are bound to accord it a positive value, to experience it as the positive as such. (According to the same logic of feeling, all pessimistic religions call nothingness *God*.)
>
> (133, 134)

The statement that all pessimistic religions bestow on nothingness the title of God, that they all illustrate the point that man would rather have the void for his purpose than be void of purpose, raises the question: what would a religion and what would an ethics be like that is not subject to the spirit of revenge? Nietzsche's description of the Greek religion gives us a pointer: it would be a religion or an ethics that, without evading the finality of death, yet says an unconditional yes to life. The struggle to become genuinely accepting of reality, of others, of oneself, is necessarily a struggle against what the tradition called pride. Such acceptance will undermine the power of the ascetic ideal.

But what then are we to put in its place? I shall begin my final lecture with this question and with my answer attempt to tie together some of the themes pursued in this course.

26. Conclusion

Over the years I have been asked more than once whether studying philosophy has much to contribute to the way we conduct our everyday lives. That question made me think of Schopenhauer, who considered all philosophy theoretical, and all attempts by philosophers to teach virtue ineffective:

> But to become practical, to guide conduct, to transform character, are old claims which with mature insight it [philosophy] ought to abandon. For here, where it is a question of the worth or worthlessness of existence, of salvation or damnation, not the dead concepts of philosophy decide the matter, but the innermost nature of man himself.[24]

I agree that the dead concepts of philosophy will never lead anyone to virtue, that what one is going to do will be decided by what Schopenhauer calls the innermost nature of man himself, where that nature remains profoundly problematic. But must the concepts of philosophy remain "dead"? Might they not come to life when understood as **articulations of "the innermost nature of man"?** Plato might have said: when we **recollect** their truth. To be sure, if that innermost nature spoke to us unambiguously and demanded a clear course of action there would be no need for the work of the philosopher. Philosophical problems, as Wittgenstein suggests, and I began my very first lecture with that quote, have the form: I have lost my way. The fundamental question of philosophy, so understood, is: What is man's place? What should it be? Generally we don't ask such questions: first of all and most of the time, we find ourselves caught up in situations that direct us and suggest what is to be done. Family, society, common sense have furnished us with maps that we accept more or less unquestioningly. We do what one does in this sort of situation and do not worry too much about it. But our ever more

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[24] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1968), vol. 1, p. 271.

open cultural condition forces us increasingly to question such maps. We have become less sure about what we ought to do. This is not to deny that in large measure everyday morality continues to be determined by our inherited Hebrew-Christian morality. And this holds for believer and non-believer alike. We continue to live in a moral edifice on which millennia have built. It is part of our cultural inheritance. At the same time we have to admit that we no longer live securely in that edifice. With what Nietzsche calls the death of God that edifice **has lost founder and foundation**. The value system in which we still live looks more and more like a **ruin**. Again I would suggest that this holds for both believer and non-believer. The very fact that religion has increasingly become a **private matter**, that we insist on the separation of church and state, shows how dubious it is to found on religion a morality that would lose its very point were it to cease to be public. There is thus a certain similarity between our situation and that of the Athenians in Socrates' time. They, too, lived in an age when the inherited religion had ceased to give unity and a clear direction to Athenian society. It was this loss of way that helped lead some young Athenians to philosophy. Today there is a similar interest in philosophy, similarly bound up with our cultural situation. To speak here of an interest in philosophy is not to say that academic philosophy will always or even usually address, let alone satisfy such interest.

But it is not only the cultural situation that leads to an interest in philosophy. A certain loss of way is inseparable from facing the future responsibly. The future is open. Different possibilities present themselves. But the more open the future, and that is to say the freer the individual, the more insistently the question, what ought I to do? will present itself. Freedom and a certain loss of way belong together. The freer an individual, the more inescapably such an individual will be faced with ethical problems, the more insistent the question: what should my place be? — a question that calls into question the place supposedly assigned to us by nature or society. Freedom demands something like philosophical reflection — and once again this is not to say that it

therefore demands professional philosophers. Often it is just the professional philosopher who, eager to measure up to professional standards, betrays the kind of radical questioning that I take to be inseparable from philosophy.

What then should our place be? If the answer to that question is to be more than idle theory, I have suggested, it will have to be experienced as an articulation of our innermost nature. In that sense all arguments in moral philosophy should finally be *ad hominem*, directed to the individual. As long as a philosophical text is not read by the individual as addressed to her or him, as challenging her or him, it will remain only the object of an intellectual game.

But what is our innermost nature? We have no clear answer to that question. Nor should this surprise us: part of doing philosophy is learning who one is, which inevitably intertwines with learning what one ought to do. In wrestling with a text like Plato's *Phaedo*, Bentham's *Introduction to the Principles of Legislation and Morals*, or Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, with Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* or Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals,* one should also be wrestling also with oneself.

From Nietzsche we can learn how such struggle is made difficult by the **ascetic ideal** that has long presided over moral reflection. That ideal, Nietzsche suggests, is supported by our inability to accept ourselves as we are: subject to time and mortal. If the human being wills power, he yet lacks power and finds it difficult to forgive himself that he is as he is: vulnerable and mortal. The fear of death especially blinds us to what allows us to live a truly full and human life. Note that this is related to a point Socrates makes in the *Phaedo*: on this Nietzsche and Plato, despite all that separates them, would seem to agree: **The fear of death leads to distortions that alienate the individual from him- or herself**, that lead the individual to betray his innermost nature. If this is accepted, however, we have also already said something positive about that innermost nature: to the extent that innermost nature is tied to the mortal individual self, there is no way of overcoming the terror of death. To argue that the fear of death is what prevents

one from acknowledging what gives meaning to life is to insist also that the individual should not make his own individuality the measure of his actions, but should recognize that the individual is part of something larger and must affirm himself as such a part. We should remember here Plato's or rather Socrates' claim that **fear of death is born of ignorance concerning the true significance of death and that means also born of ignorance of the true significance of life and of what gives life dignity and meaning**. Such ignorance is inseparable from narcissism or from what Nietzsche calls the spirit of revenge. The courage of Socrates in the face of imminent death remains a continuing challenge, and unlike Nietzsche, I would not want to interpret such courage as born of the spirit of revenge, born of Socrates's inability to say yes to life and a desire to flee it, but rather of the recognition that the individual's life will become meaningful only for the individual who recognize that he participates in a reality that transcends the individual. Only the individual who does not take his own life too seriously will be able to fully affirm it.

I accept much of what Nietzsche has to say about the ascetic ideal. And following Nietzsche I would argue that this ideal has its origin in our inability to fully accept our temporality. As I have pointed out, the human being is will to power, lacking power. **Unable to forgive itself its lack of power, the will to power perverts itself**. The spirit of revenge, the will's ill will against time, represents such a perversion.

This invites the question I raised at the end of the last lecture: **what would an ethics look like *not subject* to the spirit of revenge?** Let me approach it by turning first to the closely related question: **what would an ethics look like *subject* to the spirit of revenge?** To what kind of values does the spirit of revenge lead us?

By now the answer to that second question should have become obvious. Let me return here to a distinction I drew earlier between the **form** and the **content** of such values.

First a few comments about the **form**: the spirit of revenge leads to a demand that values be established once and for all, that moral philosophy should lead to insights that can claim the same **timeless validity** that mathematical truths are thought to possess. An ethics subject to the spirit of revenge is thus likely to claim insight into a reality that transcends time, into values that are eternal. Against this I would argue with Nietzsche that values are first of all human creations. To be sure, human beings require ideals by which to measure their actions. Human beings will always measure themselves by some ideal image of human being, but this ideal will change with history and so will its mode of articulation — thus it may find expression in philosophy, or in art, or in religion.

To say that values or ideal images of human being are human creations is not to say that they are therefore arbitrary. A value is recognized as a value, an ideal image of human being is recognized as indeed such an ideal only when it is experienced as an articulation of something that more immediately speaks to us, if you want, as an articulation of our innermost nature. Plato would say that we have to recollect its truth. Values have their measure in human reality, and human reality is essentially historical. One reason for opposing the elevation of value into timeless entities claiming unconditional assent from individuals, is that so elevated values become obstacles that stand in the way of recollection, obstacles that prevent the individual from opening himself to his innermost nature. Values placed beyond challenge have to alienate us from who we are.

I have spoken of the form of values. Values, I suggested, are human constructions articulating demands placed on human beings by their own nature. That there is a significant similarity between this view and Kant's understanding of **autonomy** should require no comment, also that there is a significant difference: the possibility of a pure practical reason has been called into question.

Let me now turn to the second part of the question: what is the **content** of the values generated by the spirit of revenge. Let us keep in mind the definition of the spirit

of revenge as "the will's ill will against time and its 'it was'". That ill will is tied to the difficulty we have accepting that every future will become a past, that our life and all we can achieve some day will be past. How can the individual rescue himself from time, how can he bid time stand still? The spirit of revenge lets us dream of a plenitude that would deliver us from desire and care. It is thus closely tied to what in an earlier lecture I called the **ideal of satisfaction**. Satisfaction I understand here first of all quite formally as being-at-one-with oneself. To exist in time is first of all to be in this sense not at one with oneself. Think of care, desire, fear, anticipation. We are future directed. That is to say, in an important sense we are first of all and most of the time ahead of ourselves. This is to say also that **the ideal of satisfaction calls for a negation of our usual way of existing**. It leads to dreams of a reality beyond time, be it given the form of timeless Platonic ideas, or of God's eternal kingdom, or of Nirvana. Or it leads to attempts to abolish time within time, for instance in aesthetic experience or by discovering a pleasure so consuming that for its duration the burden of temporal existence has been lifted. I agree with Nietzsche that **the ideal of satisfaction in all its forms is alienating and born of alienation**. And over most of us this ideal has some hold. Thus it claims us as the search for happiness, where happiness is thought as being something like being truly at one with oneself; it is associated with some dream of personal fulfillment that haunts us, where what exactly this might mean in the end remains quite vague.

I asked: what is the content of the values generated by the spirit of revenge and I answered with a brief sketch of what I called the ideal of satisfaction. There is a different, though related answer: if the spirit of revenge is the ill will against time, then we can expect that that spirit will let us place a negative value on everything that ties us too closely to time, thus on sensuousness, on the body, on sexuality. Conversely it will place a positive value on what promises an escape from the tyranny of time: on the mind, on spirit, on reason. **The spirit of revenge will lead to a subordination of eros to logos**. One could make this more concrete by speaking of that demonization of the body

that is part of our Christian inheritance. Think of the traditional account of the fall, which links it to sexual awakening. The fall is also a fall into sexuality. Sex and sin appear thus linked from the very beginning. This should be remembered when we try to understand values as articulations of our innermost nature. Our supposedly innermost nature has too often been defined in ways that exclude the body, that devalue sexual desire, sensuousness. Plato has contributed to that exclusion: and even if Nietzsche to some extent offers us a caricature of Plato's position, there is some truth to that caricature. Thus when Plato speaks of recollection he has in mind an opening to a realm that transcends not just the individual, but also time and the body. I would like to broaden our understanding of recollection in such a way that it suggests opening oneself to what one is; and what one is most definitely includes the body.

I have expressed agreement with Nietzsche on two points: I agree with Nietzsche when he insists that we demand a meaning for human existence, that we demand something like an ideal image of human being, whether it be articulated by philosophy, by art, or by religion. I also agree with Nietzsche that such articulation must free itself from the spirit of revenge if it is not to lead to destructive self-alienation.

This returns me to the question: what would an ethics look like that has freed itself from the spirit of revenge. An answer is suggested by what I have just said about an ethics subject to the spirit of revenge. An ethics free of the spirit of revenge would accept that all values are human creations and as such precariously established, but not therefore arbitrary, but articulations of what more immediately claims us, articulations of what following Schopenhauer I called our innermost nature. In describing that nature Nietzsche gives us valuable hints. He reminds us that to affirm ourselves we also have to also affirm the animal in us. But we have to add that just as we fail to do justice to human being when we exclude the animal in us, we do not do justice to it either when we exclude what makes us more than animals, the domain of reason or spirit, which is also the domain of freedom, that is to say that domain on which Kant placed such emphasis.

As free, rational agents we bear responsibility for what we will be, for what will be, for the world that those who come after us will inherit. Responsibility demands self-assertion in the world. But such self-assertion must know about its limits. This is the point of insisting that we affirm ourselves as will to power, lacking power. As Nietzsche knew, such affirmation requires a courage that overcomes the spirit of revenge, a courage even unto death. Without such courage there cannot be that love that finally holds the key to the meaning of life, the love, say, that Plato attributes to Alcestis in the *Symposium*, that is to say, a love that knows that only that life is finally worth living that is lived in the knowledge that the individual belongs to something larger than our death-bound little self.

A natural expression of such love, as Plato suggests in the *Symposium*, is the family, where the question of the meaning of love is not answered by an appeal to whatever pleasure the act of love may give, but to what it leads to, i.e. in terms of the future — and in this connection it is worth noting that Nietzsche's Zarathustra, too, finally finds meaning in the thought of the proximity of his children. Plato also insists on broadening and raising the relevant community from the family, to the political community and finally to the community of all human beings. Key here is the thought that the meaning of the present does not lie in the present, but in the future, the meaning of an individual life not just within that individual, but in the on-going community. With Kierkegaard I would say that the individual is higher than the universal, but I would add that the community is higher than the individual. As Plato knew, in the end it is love that gives meaning to human existence. Love, however, requires openness and a commitment to others. Both remain a task.