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# THE ETHICS OF CONVENTION AND THE ETHICS OF NATURE

by

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I want to begin this discussion with an account of a mythical race of people called muhans. These muhan people are much like us in most respects—they enjoy watching television, drive automobiles, anguish over fuel shortages and environmental pollution, choose their governments by free elections, have a system of social security, and so on. The only natural difference between these people and ourselves is that they are not distinguished by sex—which is why they are called muhans, instead of humans. They are all of one sex or, better, there are no distinctions of sex at all, and the concept itself has no place in their thinking. They are all just alike.

Each muhan has, accordingly, but one parent, and one such parent together with offspring is quite naturally considered a family. Vast areas of life are simpler among the muhans than with us. Ancestry is linear and easily grasped. Divorce is unheard of, there are no family courts, no domestic quarrels of the more familiar kind, no problems of male domination or sex discrimination, no agitation to ordain women as priests, no prostitution.

Reproduction among the muhans is, as in the case of all living things, achieved by simple cell division, the essential difference being that cells from diverse parents need not be brought into union in order for this division to proceed. The cells all come from one parent—a mode of reproduction perfectly familiar in many other animal forms.

More precisely, each muhan, as it develops, is equipped with a pouch, somewhat like that of the kangaroo, and it is here that the generation of the young is achieved. After a gestation period of about ten lunar months, the young are delivered into the light of day to draw breath and to carry on the life of the species.

The manner in which such gestation is initiated is straightforward and simple. It is achieved by diet. As the muhan attains puberty it becomes susceptible of pregnancy by imbibing of a certain fruit, called by the muhans “the fruit of life,” and also, “the forbidden fruit,” and always referred to in grave tones, surrounded, as it is, by an aura of mystery. This fruit is indeed, among them, the chief theme of poetry, song, story and sometimes humor, though this latter tends to be suppressed, surfacing only here and there and often with shame and embarrassment. Such humor is, for reasons that are unclear, called “off color.”

To taste of the forbidden fruit is considered by these people to be the supreme delight, and some psychologists among them consider this to be the motivation, however disguised, of virtually all muhan endeavor. For this reason, and because of the mysteriousness always associated with it, fairly precise and elaborate ceremonies have evolved with respect to partaking of this fruit and, needless to say, many prohibitions, scrupulously applied and enforced.

Thus, no muhan is supposed under any circumstances to taste of the fruit until he\* has attained the age appropriate to bearing young, and not even then until cer-

\*Though the muhans are not distinguished as male and female, I shall use the pronoun “he” for reasons of style.

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tain rather rigid and elaborate ceremonial requirements have been met. Each young muhan, as he approaches this age, is expected to select one tree from which, eventually, to pluck the fruit of life, and then to abide by that tree alone. To pluck the fruit of another muhan's tree is strictly forbidden unless, again, certain additional ceremonial requirements have first been met. Without these ceremonial prerequisites, such sampling of the fruit of another is deeply resented and severely punished, the bond between owner and tree being considered far stronger than mere possession, being something verging on the sacred. For two muhans simply to exchange trees, in search of mere variety of new pleasures, would be for each to risk permanent loss of reputation and all social standing. The merest hints of lapses in this area become the subject matter of intense gossip.

The bond between any muhan and the tree of life which he selects is the creation of the priesthood. Until then it is considered not to exist at all, and from that moment hence it is considered to be, at least ideally, indissoluble. The manner of its creation is quite simple, though very solemn; namely a member of the priesthood simply escorts the young muhan to the tree of his choice and, to the accompaniment of various gesticulations and utterances and, sometimes, much singing and dancing on the part of the attendant muhans, pronounces this muhan to possess this tree forever. Then, and then only, can he taste of the fruit; nor, ideally, will anyone but he ever taste of it. And normally, the begetting of other muhans follows as a natural consequence.

Inasmuch as all family life, as well as the supremely important life of the species, rests upon a highly specialized dietary practice, it is not surprising that a vast number of prohibitions, injunctions and taboos have arisen and proliferated among the muhans, not merely with respect to the tasting of the forbidden fruit, but in relation to everything having to do with the partaking of any food whatsoever. At the heart of all these, however, are all the solemn associations with the forbidden fruit, so it is with respect to these that the most stringent prohibitions have arisen, as well as the most intense feelings, which are nourished in every way possible, through precepts, stories, the invocation of the gods, and the unfaltering instruction of the young, particularly by the priesthood.

For example, the face is almost always concealed by a veil, and the mouth, in particular, because of its immediate and direct association with the forbidden fruit, is most scrupulously hidden. Of course no one is fooled by this. It is perfectly well known by all what lies behind the veil, and the actual functions of those parts which are, for decency's sake, withheld from view. Though no muhan would, for example, dream of eating anything in public, and would feel deep mortification if he were accidentally discovered performing that act, no one for a moment doubts that everyone at every level of society, the most exalted as well as the least, does in fact eat quite regularly, enjoys eating, and would soon perish otherwise. Nonetheless, references to nutrition are always either very sober and more or less clinical in character or, at the opposite extreme, excessively vulgar, clothed in a rich vernacular, and accompanied by much giggling or laughter. It is not entirely clear, even to the muhans, why this is so. And so far as the actual tasting of the fruit of life is concerned, it is perfectly known that this, too, though perhaps sometimes difficult to imagine, is in fact a universal practice among adults, for no one is under the slightest misconception concerning how the race is begotten. It is further well known that this act is quite commonly performed even before it is legitimized by any priest, that in fact most muhans have tasted of several, often very many, of the fruits of this tree, and even continue to do so after they have been indissolubly and exclusively united to one of them. It is, however, the practice of these people not

to admit this, at least in their own cases, and to pretend that it in fact does not happen, or at least not among normal and self-respecting human beings who have a serious regard for basic moral considerations.

## II

A few more details concerning the moral life of these strange people will emerge as we proceed, but we have enough before us now to raise certain questions of philosophical significance. And the first and most general is: What shall we rational human people say about these strange human people and some of their bizarre notions of right and wrong? And the thing to say is that, from one point of view, these people are not in the least strange. They are the mirror images of ourselves! Even the dullest and least philosophical person can see that the foregoing story is, with only a slight modification of biology, not the imaginative description of some purely fabulous race of people, but, with adjustments of detail, the description of ourselves. If, accordingly, we can find a rationale to the human ethic, then we can find, as all moralists have sought to find, a rationale to our own moral life, at least within the area of relations of the sexes; but if we can find no such rationale there, if the prohibitions of the humans really are as strange as they first seem, then we shall have to draw the same conclusion with respect to our own. And we can then raise the larger philosophical question whether all of our ethics is, like our fairly fixed and elaborate rules concerning the relations of the sexes, with or without some governing rationale; whether, in other words, the ethical prohibitions and injunctions that we honor are purely conventional, without any underlying reason beyond the fact that we have grown accustomed to them, or whether, on the contrary, there are certain rational grounds for our moral life, such that a rational person can see that at least some of our moral ideas are worthy of respect.

Much turns on these questions, of course. For if our conventional ethics or any important part of it is rationally groundless, and if, moreover, as most philosophical people now believe, none of that ethics has been in fact delivered to us by God, then we have no reason to take it seriously at all. Just as no human people, if there were any such, would have any business telling us human people how to live, or expecting us to honor their quaint and ridiculous prohibitions surrounding the taking of food and so on, so also, no human people have any business telling us how to live, or expecting us to honor their prohibitions. The mere familiarity of these latter, the human prohibitions, and the strangeness of the human practices, does not make the human ones more rational. It only renders us less critical of them, and thus inclined to think that they embody some sort of ethical truth, when in fact they may contain none.

## III

Those are the general questions before us. Now let us try to look behind the ethics of our human people. Certainly our first and strongest impression is that this ethics is rather weird. That any people should surround the actions associated with nutrition with all sorts of complex prohibitions and taboos cannot but strike us as wildly capricious. That, in fact, the act itself of taking nourishment should be associated with the sense of shame or embarrassment, that it should be concealed from view, and some sort of pretense kept up that it is not even done, contrary to the certain knowledge of everyone, seems so bizarre as to be simply perverse, as though the very joy of living, and the most basic need of every living thing, must

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somehow be connected with wickedness and guilt. All other living things indulge this practice unabashedly. It is the most natural thing in the world. Why, then, should one species, alone in creation, treat it with such gravity and solemnity?

And of course at one level the answer to this question is obvious. Nutrition, or at least one very limited instance of it, underlies not merely their individual lives, but their entire social life, and hence their most basic institutions. To partake of the forbidden fruit is a condition necessary, and often sufficient, for the begetting of children, hence of perpetuating the race. This is a most awesome consideration. The act itself, therefore, cannot be treated lightly. It must be carefully, scrupulously restricted and enveloped with rules, the conditions for its commission most carefully and elaborately defined, and its normal consequences quite rigidly controlled, for the good of all.

And this suggests the sought-for rationale underlying these muhan practices and prohibitions; namely, that their moral rules, or at least those under consideration, are the product of purely practical considerations. Where behavior has great potentialities for the good or evil of others affected by it, then rules are created in order to maximize the possibilities for good or, at least, to minimize the evil. And when in addition, as here, there are combined great possibilities for evil in the consequences of one's actions, and in addition an overwhelming natural inclination to do those actions, then the rules must be both numerous and stringently enforced. For, it must be remembered, the tasting of the forbidden fruit is considered by muhans to be the ultimate joy, the joy around which many of the others turn. It is the subject of much of their poetry and song, and is woven into all their social life. And at the same time, the effects of indulging this joy are clearly momentous, not merely for individuals, but for society.

It is astonishing how many persons think that this kind of observation, quite clearly correct in itself, is an adequate response to the demand for some sort of rationale to ethics, as ethics is conceived in our society. Moral rules, they say, are not arbitrary prohibitions and injunctions. They rest upon practical or utilitarian considerations. Behavior that is injurious to others is forbidden. Behavior that is not is permitted. Behavior that is immensely beneficial is, at least sometimes, required, by the rules of morality. It will always be found that this is the case, or at least, that it once was. And therefore, we are left to conclude, the rules of morality should be heeded. They have their rationale. A rational person can see what this is, and also why he, as a rational person, should honor those rules, or in other words, why he should be moral.

But the thing for a philosopher to see is that the first part of this claim, that moral rules rest upon a practical foundation, even if true, does not really support the inference we are supposed to draw from it, namely, that we ought, or are somehow morally obligated, to honor those rules. It is in fact a shabby argument, which could only commend itself to even the most moderate intelligence by the deeply felt need to have some sort of justification—any justification—for morality.

For let us look again at this presumed justification. And to gain some objectivity, let us go back to our fabulous people the muhans once more. We said that their tasting of the forbidden fruit has enormous social consequences, which might be either very good or very bad, and this, we are now to suppose, justifies the complex and galling restrictions with which their society envelops this act. But, we should now immediately note, it does not at all justify the similarly elaborate and complex restrictions and rituals that surround everything connected with nutrition—the secrecy, the veils, the cultivation of shame and embarrassment, and so on. For the consequences of these acts, the mere partaking of food, are totally good for the in-

dividual, and indeed essential to his basic well-being, exactly as in the case of human people. And we human people go in for none of this system of ritual and taboo, nor can we see any reason why we should. All of that considerable part of the muhan ethic is, then, entirely groundless. And so, we may infer, is the analogous part of our human ethic; namely, that vast area of conduct associated with what we call decency and modesty, an area in which the courts of law, the churches, and other institutions dedicated to the upholding of morality are so constantly embroiled. They are not, in fact, upholding morality in the least, but are instead enforcing what a philosopher can only judge to be an elaborate hoax upon society, something that is made worse by their own sense of moral rectitude as they do this.

But second, we can now add a detail to our story of the muhans which will, I think, be instructive. For let us suppose that fairly simple ways of avoiding the normal consequences of eating the forbidden fruit are discovered. We can suppose that someone among the muhans has discovered, for example, that if the tree that bears this fruit is nourished with a mild hormonal substance, then the capacity of its fruit to induce pregnancy is destroyed but without, however, diminishing the delight that is associated with tasting the fruit itself. Or we can suppose that the muhans discover that the same result is achieved by removing the seeds of the fruit. Does the discovery of this result in the rapid evaporation of the muhan morality that surrounds nutrition generally and the partaking of the forbidden fruit in particular? To some slight extent, perhaps; but what mostly happens is that the rules are considered still valid, and worthy at least of some heed, so that considerable effort is bestowed upon keeping up the appearance of honoring them while in fact, out of public view, disregarding them. And, of course, there will be heard among the muhans a very loud voice of morality, issuing mostly from the priesthood, which will declare it wrong to treat the tree of life with these hormonal substances, or to excise the seeds from the fruit. Why? Because the rules of morality are presumed by them to be valid and worthy of obedience just because they are the rules of morality.

What, then, can we do with the original "justification" of those rules, which consisted of pointing out that they were evolved for the protection of muhan well-being? A moralist cannot have it both ways. He cannot say, on the one hand, that the justification of ethics lies in the minimizing of evil that is achieved by honoring its rules, and then say, after other ways have been found of minimizing the same evil, that the rules of morality should be heeded just for their own sake. This is simply to go around in circles. The moralist, asked for some reason why we should heed the rules he holds so dear, triumphantly produces his answer, couched in terms of muhan or of human well-being; and then as soon as we describe circumstances under which that justification has no relevance, he retreats to the mere declaration and iteration of those rules themselves, in grave and unctious tones, getting half the race to nod in solemn agreement, not once noticing that, philosophically and rationally, he has made a complete ass of himself.

#### IV

I want now to enlarge our subject of enquiry, going beyond the narrow sphere of morality that involves only the relations of the sexes to consider ethics generally, meaning by this, that whole body of rules and prohibitions that govern our conduct and are generally considered to be moral imperatives. Have they a justification? Or in other words, is there any reason to honor and heed them, apart from the disapproval and perhaps the pain and deprivation that our fellow men will in-

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flict upon us in case we do not? Is fear the only ground for such obedience to moral rule, or is there some other justification which a rational person can discover? Can a philosopher somehow show that we should conform our conduct to at least some of the most fundamental rules of morality, or must he be content, as most persons are, with solemn declamation, like a preacher, perhaps to the accompaniment of a demeanor of outward reverence, intonation, or perhaps solemn music or the symbolic artifacts of religion? Of those rules of the human people that we have been examining, it would be appropriate to say that they are merely human, all too human. Is it similarly true of our rules—all of them—that they are merely human, all too human?

Let us see more precisely what this question means. To say of morality that it is merely human is to make a point that was often made by some of the sophists of antiquity. That is, these thinkers, or some of them, declared that morality is merely a matter of convention, that its rules are all manmade, that they are the deliverance neither of the gods, nature, nor human reason. Throughout the centuries since then, the Church has of course emphatically denied this, claiming that there is a true morality that has been delivered by God to His creatures, through Moses and others, and that it can be found in holy scripture. I shall not be concerned with this opinion, since it has nothing whatsoever to do with philosophy.

But the ancient claim of the sophists has also been denied by virtually every philosopher of stature, beginning with Socrates, even without appealing to any claim of religion. For it has been the contention of most philosophical moralists that there is some true principle of right and wrong, discoverable by reason, such that a rational person can see, not only what he is expected by others to do, but what he morally ought to do. Philosophers have not, to be sure, spoken with one voice in this matter—a consideration which the partisans of religion have cited as showing the superiority of their own claims, but most philosophers have at least agreed that their common quest was intelligible and capable of fulfillment. They have assumed, in other words, that there is such a thing as philosophical ethics, that there is truth in this realm as in others, and that the task was simply to find it. And our question now is whether they are right. We do not ask here, then, what is morally right or wrong, but rather, whether there is any such thing as philosophical ethics at all, or in other words, whether there is any rational basis to morality to begin with, or whether, on the other hand, all this must be left to a priesthood, or to the whim and caprice of the unphilosophical mass of mankind.

With respect to those systems of philosophical ethics that so many thinkers since Socrates have so busily contrived, there are two things that strike our attention. One is their considerable diversity, and the other is the manner in which the basic content of this or that system quite faithfully reflects the inherited mores and taboos of the group to which its inventor happens to belong.

Thus, to remind you of something with which you are already fairly familiar, Callicles declared the true or natural morality to rest upon the inherent right of the superior man to rule and enslave his inferiors—a theory for which he was able to make a strong case. Socrates, on the other hand, having been taught to ~~venerate~~ venerate reason, therewith “discovered” that right conduct is that which is rational and informed, that the wrong-doer is simply him who is ignorant—a notion that has always charmed philosophy, in spite of its almost glaring arbitrariness. This infatuation with the alleged “rational faculty” having been then nourished and perpetuated by every generation of philosophy, including our own, it being the basic preoccupation of philosophers, it is not surprising that most ethical systems have appealed to it, not merely to confirm their fond notions, but as embodying the ulti-

mate goodness. Thus Plato discovered that a good man is nothing but one whose life is governed by reason, and a bad man one governed by desire—a quaint notion to which many still nod uncritical approval. Aristotle, when he turned from the analysis of the conventional or what is happily termed the “vulgar” ethics of his non-philosophical contemporaries to the true ethics of the philosopher, said about the same thing. Indeed, he even declared this precious reason to be that in man which most closely approaches the divine. The Stoics echoed all this, declaring the rational soul to be, if properly tended by its possessor, incorruptible by any combined assault of man and nature. Kant continued in the same tradition, finding in reason a unique, supreme and immeasurable worth, which governs the conduct of the morally right man, but is governed by feelings in him whose conduct lacks this rectitude—exactly as Plato had said. But Kant took an additional step, thereby endearing himself to every philosopher acculturated by the Judeo-Christian tradition, by “discovering” that this rational faculty issues commands or imperatives, and one such supreme command that is not merely inspiring, but one that is binding on every rational being. Thus was he able not merely to perpetuate the ages-old fondness for a nebulous faculty of reason, but, along with this, elevate it to the place of almighty God, who had hitherto been thought by the masses to be the source of such moral commands, binding on all. And even philosophers whom we have been taught to think of as opposed to these philosophical traditions can nevertheless be seen to be deeply immersed in them, such that their philosophical ethics are, like these, no more than the reflections of those traditional habits of thought. J.S. Mill, for example, is often thought of as opposing the Kantian approach. But did he not also assume, entirely uncritically, that there is a true principle of right and wrong, and that it is discoverable by reason? Did he not think, as Kant did, that reason (and hence philosophy) can enunciate a moral law which all persons are morally bound to heed? And did he not believe that this law could replace the traditional commandments of God, if indeed, these latter were not merely the reflection of that law?

We cannot here review the whole history of philosophical ethics, and there is no need to go into it further. The point is already clear, I think, that philosophers, in elaborating their own ethical schemes, really do no more than articulate certain values that they imbibe from their own culture or group. Their theories are totally arbitrary, not the least less whimsical than the strange and amusing prejudices and taboos of the muhans. We can, to be sure, declare with much truth that the basic moral prohibitions and injunctions that we have inherited, not from philosophy, but from our Judeo-Christian culture, have or at least once had practical value, that they tend to promote the good and lessen the evil for society as a whole. That is a sociological observation, and a rather trite one. But from that we can derive no philosophical truth, no moral obligation to heed those prohibitions and injunctions. Certainly we can derive no philosophical ethics at all. All we can get from it is an understanding of why we should be exhorted from every side to honor those inherited rules, and even, perhaps, why we should be expected to continue to do so when that practical foundation becomes inoperative. The muhans, we saw, were expected to conform to the ritualistic and ceremonial requirements surrounding the forbidden fruit, and nutrition generally, even when there had ceased to be any real reason to do so. And we can understand this, in a way. That is the way people are. They become acculturated to certain ways of behaving, and feel discomfort at departures from these, even when the ground for conformity has vanished. It is only muhan, all too muhan. And it is the same with us. It is only human. When the basis of our rule-governed behavior has vanished, then we still feel the need for rules. And phil-

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osophers are always at hand to contrive some sort of "rational" justification for what we feel that need for—a justification that will find wide acceptance, not because it has even a trace of rational foundation, but because the acceptance has already been made in our feelings.

### V

I now want to pull together these reflections, in the form of a conclusion. And that conclusion can rest on what seems to me a most evident truth; namely, that what one human being ordains, another can disregard, unless the ordinance of the first rests upon something more than his inherited prejudices. And that "something more" cannot be, as every philosophical ethics I know of is, a mere elaboration and rationalization of those prejudices. No muhan, to revert once more to these people, has the slightest moral obligation to conform to the rituals and taboos connected with nutrition, merely because some other muhan, or even a whole society of them, bids him to. Nor does it matter if this muhan is a priest, or a philosopher, unless, of course, the priest derives his rules from God, or the philosopher derives them from reason. And so it is with us. No priest can instruct my conduct, unless he speaks for God, as I believe he does not, nor can any philosopher do the same, unless he can show that the rules or imperatives he sets forth are the deliverance of his and my reason, as I am quite sure they are not.

Now of course there does remain one possibility that we must consider, and that is, that there perhaps is some true or valid set of moral principles; that is, some ethic that does not rest merely upon practical considerations of what does and does not advance human welfare, and which is not merely the distillation of our inherited codes and prohibitions. And perhaps, indeed, there is, and that someday it will be known—though I must confess that this strikes me as one of those far-fetched possibilities that only a philosopher could think of, and could take seriously only because it is a mere possibility, not something drawn from actual experience. But if we do take this possibility seriously, then there is another we must take equally seriously; namely, that this system of true morality, when discovered, might be totally at odds with what we now think of as morality, or that, in other words, we might wake up to discover, to our consternation, that our inherited ethics is in fact a system of immorality. A few philosophers have even entertained this possibility. Nietzsche is often thought of as one. Callicles, if he can be called a philosopher, is certainly another, for he thought that the true or natural ethics is in fact opposed to our comfortable ethics of equality and the restraint of the superior.

To understand the possibility that is here being suggested, consider this. What if, in ages past, certain nature philosophers had undertaken to ordain some system of, say, chemistry, finding the materials for this in the inherited prejudices of their traditions. Some alchemists did, in fact, come rather close to doing this. What they mainly lacked was a priesthood and a legislature, having powers of enforcement, capable of imposing such a system of chemistry on the rest of society. But now the question arises: What if such a system had been elaborated, and imposed on entire cultures, with the help of a priesthood and government? What would be the likelihood that such a system would then eventually be vindicated by the actual science of chemistry that has been built up, under the guidance of experiment, observation and reason? The likelihood of such coincidence is, of course, small indeed. The true science of the elements has turned out to be quite utterly different than what anyone could have dreamed, or what some of the alchemists and nature philosophers did dream, in earlier ages. Is there any reason to suppose that a true system of eth-

ics, in case this is not a mere chimera to begin with, would ever coincide with or resemble the ethics which priests and moral philosophers have invented and, with the support of both law and religion, grafted onto our culture from one generation to another? Who can know, for example, that a true morality would represent all men as in any sense equal, that it would not hold it a duty sometimes to take human life, wilfully and deliberately, or that it would protect the weak? The plain fact is that no one knows what a true system of ethics would enjoin. One can reasonably doubt that any such system exists to be discovered. But one can, I think, be fairly sure that, if it does, there is no basis whatsoever for supposing that it resembles the utterly human ethics we have inherited from distant ages, spun out of thin air in response to the felt needs of sometimes beleaguered cultures, and then imposed by the help of law and religion, until, at last, the basic principles of this human ethics seems to us, and even to many philosophers, to be the very deliverance of reason.