

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Sidney E. Parker
The Myth of Morality
3 June 1990

Retrieved on 6 October 2018 from sidparker.com
A lecture given to the South Place Ethical Society on June 3
1990. A much abridged version appeared in *The Ethical
Record* for February 1991.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

The Myth of Morality

Sidney E. Parker

3 June 1990

Morality is concerned with rightdoing and wrongdoing. *Thou shalt* cannot be separated from *thou shalt not*. I have found, however, that many who are eager to praise something as morally good or condemn something as morally bad are not as eager to describe *why* they think that something is morally good or bad. In a way I do not blame them for their reluctance. Perhaps they suspect that if they started to strip off the tinsel wrappings of what they call “morality” they might find that there is nothing there—that morality is a myth. There is also the problem that those who are supposed to be experts on the subject very rarely agree as to how to define it. For example, in *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, published in 1976 by Routledge, it is stated that a “moral principle might be defined as one concerning things in our power and for which we can be held responsible ... or a moral principle might concern the ultimate ends of human action, e.g. human welfare. Other views have it that a moral principle is one which people in fact prefer over competing principles, or else which they should prefer. Others again make principles moral if a certain kind of sanction is applied when they are violated. Universalizability has also been used to define moral principle.”

Is such a verbal hotchpotch what most people have in mind when they talk of morality? I do not think so. What they mean when they say something is moral is that that something *ought* to be done. What they mean when they say something is immoral is that that something *ought not* to be done. As the moralist Stuart Smith wrote: “The supremacy of the moral law means that that law should not be broken, even if by doing so we gain something which is good, or even if by keeping it we have to endure things which are bad...We do not regard a man as keeping the moral law who observes its requirements towards some of his fellows and disregards them towards others. We only regard a man as keeping the moral law who sees that law as binding in his relations to all men...A moral man is not a man who is moral to those he knows and likes...but one who is moral towards all men, for the sake of the moral law.”

Smith is clearly and unambiguously of the opinion that morality consists of obedience to the moral law, that the moral law is above all other laws, and that it applies to all human beings without exception. It is such a view, I think, that lies behind what most people mean when they talk of morality. I am aware that there are moralists who will dissent from such a view, labelling it extreme or unworkable, but to me it appears the only consistent attitude that can be taken by someone who believes in the need for a moral code. To introduce qualifications such a workableness is to introduce the question of expedience, and the expedient is not the moral.

The question for me, however, is: Why should I be “moral”? What is the justification for demanding my obedience to a moral code?

Until recently, one of the most common of these justifications was an appeal to “God” and, indeed, it has not completely disappeared. This god tells us what is right and what is wrong—so runs the belief. However, even supposing that such a god exists, I have no way of knowing whether the moral commandments ascribed to this god are uttered by him, her, or it. I am

to be paralyzed by the inability to apply it. Either way, their particular moral stand will be exposed for the sham that it is. The use of the moral myth clearly has its limitations. Like all myths, it may have its soothing properties and useful deceptions, but when taken literally, it can be poisonous.

To say that something is morally good or morally bad boils down in the end to nothing more than that something is *said* to be morally good or morally bad. What will be said to be good or bad will depend upon the belief of the moralist making the statement. When moral judgements clash, behind all the verbal pyrotechnics there is simply one idea lodged in one head and another and different idea lodged in another head. The passion with which they are expressed is merely a symptom of the unfulfillable desire to prove the unprovable.

For myself, I have no use for the myth of morality, except as a source of amusement or data for a study of slavery to fixed ideas. As Hajdee Abdee el Yezdee put it:

There is no Good, there is no Bad:
these be the whims of mortal will;
What works me well: that I call Good;
what harms and hurts I hold as Ill;

They change with place, they shift with race;
and, in the veriest space of Time
Each Vice has worn a Virtue's crown;
all Good was banned as Sin and Crime.

to glory or sank ever deeper into a terrible mess, it was quite clear that she alone could not have been responsible. Nevertheless, even those who hold that individuals amount to nothing and that “social” or “economic” forces determine everything did not hesitate to berate her as a kind of demon queen. It was, indeed, astonishing how the mere mention of her name was enough to turn historical materialists into hysterical mysticists! But then, the turning of political conflicts into campaigns for moral salvation and purity is often a paying proposition for politicians. Many millions have been slaughtered in the cause of creating a new moral order or defending an old one. As Benjamin de Casseres once pointed out, those who claim to love “humanity” are usually sentimental butchers.

It is true, of course, that those who engage in such crusades are not always mere cynical manipulators of the credulous crowd. There are undoubtedly those who sincerely believe in the validity of the moral principles they preach, however many exceptions reality may compel them to make. But it will be interesting to see how many of these sincere moralists will grapple with certain global applications of their beliefs. Take, for example, the birth rate which, according to a recent United Nations report, is increasing at a phenomenal rate in certain parts of the world—this decade alone will see the addition of another billion to the world population. If this rate of increase continues then a time will come when all the ingenuity of the agronomists will be exhausted and the amount of food available will drastically diminish in relation to the amount of food needed. Expanding needs will run headlong into finite resources. Suppose that among those who will have to decide who is to live and who is to die, there are those who firmly believe in the “right to life”, that is that every human being, by the mere act of being born, therefore has the moral right to all that is necessary to ensure their life and well-being. How will they confront the choices that will have to be made? They will only have two alternatives: to discard their moral principle or

simply told that I must obey them. If I refuse to obey, then I am told that this god will punish me. By threatening me in such a manner, however, the moralist has changed the question from one of morality to one of expediency, to one of my avoiding the painful results of not submitting to someone or something more powerful than I am.

Of course, there are those who do not believe in a god who are nonetheless believers in morality. These moralists seek a sanction for their moral codes in some other fixed idea: the “common good”, a teleological conception of human evolution, the needs of “humanity” or “society”, “natural rights”, and so forth. A critical analysis of this type of moral justification soon shows that there is no more behind it than there is behind “the will of God”. Although for example, there is much talk about the “common good” any attempt to discover what precisely this “good” is will reveal that there is no such animal. All there is is a multiplicity of diverse and often conflicting opinions as to what this “common good” ought to be. Freedom of speech is held by many people to be in the “common good”, but a good number of these would deny that freedom to those holding what are considered to be “racist” views. To be free to express such views, it appears, is not in the “common good”. On the other hand, the so-called racists might well argue that freedom to express their views is in the “common good”. The “common good”, therefore, is not something about which there is a clear and common agreement. It is merely a high-sounding piece of rhetoric used to disguise the particular interests of those making use of it.

It is exactly this dressing up of particular interests as moral laws that lies behind morality. All moral codes are the inventions of human beings who want what they believe to be “right” to be accepted by all to whom the code is meant to apply. An individual, or group of individuals, wants to promote his or their interests and preferences. To make known these interests plainly, to say that I or we want you lot to behave in this fash-

ion because that would serve my or our interests, would reveal the demand for what it is, that is a demand to do this or that for the benefit of those making the demand. I want to promote my interest and I want to persuade other people to support me. If I am frank about this, I might get the support of those whose interest coincides with mine, but that is all. If, on the other hand, I claim that I am speaking in the name of God, or Humanity, or in the interest of the Nation, then my claim becomes much more impressive. This way of demanding gains me the advantage that anyone who disagrees with me I can denounce as being “evil”, since they are opposed to the moral good. Bullshit baffles brains and it is certainly true that in the sphere of morality the ability to use a guilt-inducing technique in an effective manner is an invaluable emotional weapon. Without such bullshit, so-called moral demands would lose their allure and would be reduced to simple commands whose carrying out would depend solely on the power of those making them. Might would make right—until a greater might came along.

There are some who might well agree with much of what I have said so far on the grounds that it refers to a belief in a moral absolute or some objective moral standard, neither of which, they will argue, exist. Authentic morality, they believe, can only be experienced on an individual, subjective level and rests upon what an individual *feels* to be “right”. They look neither to God, nor to the “common good” or its variants, as sanctions, but to *feeling* or *intuition*.

The problem for such people is that they have no way of proving that they are morally right to do such and such, and that someone doing something opposite is morally wrong. If they are confronted with someone who is acting in a way that violates their feeling of moral rightness, but which that someone claims, on the basis of his feeling, to be morally right, what can they do?

Suppose I believe that abortion is morally wrong, because I have a strong feeling that it is, and you believe that abortion

is morally right, because you have a strong feeling that it is, how can the matter be resolved? If we both stick to our conflicting feelings then we have a situation in which one moral right is in direct opposition to another moral right and no compromise is possible since one can only abort or not abort—one cannot half-abort. I accumulate all the evidence I can about the dangers of abortion, I issue sensational statements about crying foetuses and invoke varying degrees of indignation about denying the sacredness of life. You point out the dangers of having unwanted and unloved children, the right of women to control their own bodies, the physical and mental risks of having too many children, all too often in circumstances where they cannot be given a good life, and so on and so forth. Neither of us convinces the other. The result is a moral deadlock that can only be broken by going beyond what is “moral” and finding out who is the strongest party—those who oppose abortion or those who support it.

Morality is therefore a myth, a fiction invented, as I have said, to serve particular interests. As a myth, it nonetheless has its uses, and it is because of these that I do not anticipate that, any more than religion, it will disappear. I have no vision of muddled moralists being replaced by clear-headed amoralists, much as I would personally like to see it.

One of the most popular uses of the moral myth is to add a garnish to the often unsavoury dish of politics. By turning even the most trivial of political pursuits into a moral crusade, one can be assured of the support of the credulous, the vindictive and the envious, as well as giving a pseudo-strength to the weak and the wavering. A good illustration of this was the moral diabolization of the former prime minister Margaret Thatcher. To have read and heard what her political opponents had to say about her role as someone of unparalleled wickedness is to have thrown into stark relief what I said about morality being used as a cloak to cover particular interests. Whether one believes that under her rule the country went from glory