

The Fog of Moral Rhetoric

Any casual observer of contemporary debates on ethics and morals may be forgiven for being confused. They might suppose that this is due to their ignorance of the subject. Yet this would be odd, since we nearly all have some intuitive grasp of ethics; much as we have an intuitive grasp of what constitutes – or fails to constitute – a grammatical sentence in our mother tongue, even though we may have no explicit understanding of grammar.

It might further be supposed that we – i.e. those contributing to the various discussions on the nature of right & wrong, or of the good life – are pursuing some common goal, though it will be conceded that some are seriously mistaken on matters of detail.

Suppose for the moment that these two suppositions are in error. It could be the case that some – indeed many – participants are using ethical language to advocate their own power interests; that these are people who have not seriously thought through what a well-founded ethical standpoint might be, or have any interest in using moral terms carefully and cogently. Their sole aim might, rather, be to use evaluative phrases stridently and confidently in the hope that others will be duly impressed and concur.

Suppose, too, that novel ways of conceptualising matters ethical are constantly making an appearance, such that anyone wishing to engage has to cope with words changing their meanings with each new debate.

It is against this background that it makes sense to talk of a fog of moral war, or, more pacifically and less ambiguously, a fog of moral rhetoric.

What is going on? What is going on here, but also in society at large?

People are keen to present their personal values and priorities as if these were universal, and in so doing they seek surreptitiously to impose their values on others and hence steer the wider culture in a particular direction. For want of reflection and observation, they consider their own priorities to reflect faithfully the common stock of values, assuming that we share more than we do.

Ways of imposing one's values on others are multifarious, ingenious, disingenuous.

One of the favourite ploys, much in vogue in business ethics and politics, is indeed loose talk of values itself. Values this, and values that. But what does it mean to talk of values? At best – but most do not even get this far – one can make a list of abstract nouns: *Integrity* and *solidarity*, *sustainability* and *inclusion*, *tolerance* and *dialogue*, *acknowledgement of rights and of past wrongs*, *respect & dignity*, and so on.

What is seldom conceded is that these principles may conflict with each other, indeed must at the limits come into conflict. On the contrary, the advocates of the consensus – the advocates of consensus – maintain the pretence that dialogue, if only pursued long and hard enough, will remove our differences.

Suppose instead that ethics is the continuation of politics with different means; that it is not a court to be appealed to, that it is not common ground, but itself a ground beset with snares, inconsistencies and open-endedness.

None of this is to maintain that a coherent discourse about ethics is impossible. But this may be more taxing and complex than meets the eye. *Complex*, rather than *complicated*, understanding complication as a tactic deployed to confuse and procrastinate. But intricate, requiring the skills otherwise required to make a mechanical watch, or to come through a minefield unscathed.

Better understand how biographically in each – or most – of us ethics become embedded. Embedded in countless layers. Habits, ways of being, seeing and responding, assumptions, learnt and then extinguished from conscious memory over the years of growing up. Occasionally something gets spelt out in the form of a rule, but this is the exception. And what is crucial about the rules are the exceptions. Serious ethics, i.e. critical reflection on how

best to conduct one's life and that of the community, commences when the rules fail.

Religion at best is a diversion, the meat of one man but poison for another. Appeal to something inherently obscure and mysterious can only interfere and confound, or, less contentiously, it is only bad religion that meddles and muddles, but most religion proves to be impoverished. Degenerate faith of a bygone epoch. The appeal to God the last resort of the bankrupt intellect.

As every archaeologist and geologist knows, the layers get disrupted. Some ancient strata come to the surface, more recent ones subside. Fogs in the mists of time. No wonder moral philosophers have mostly preferred to model themselves on architects, constructing an elegant edifice with which to edify.

Any society needs different types of people. Otherwise there would be no need for society, and we could live like hermits, or wolves. But there are some human types we need very few of, similar to, in chemical processes, certain catalysts that are helpful only when present in the tiniest quantities, and otherwise lethal.

A society where we all followed the same rules (or maybe just two sets of rules, say, one for men and one for women) would cease to function. Or at least, there is a problem about the nature of following a rule, or more grandly, a principle, which is merely a rule about rules.

There is also the issue of motivation, too often bracketed out in discussions of ethics. We are, it has been supposed remarkably, not meant to ask why we should behave ethically. Much of the motivation comes in fact from force of habit, i.e. the momentum of engrained ways of behaving. Importantly, part comes too, for those of us who are not opportunistic, from the breadth of our sense of self. People who see themselves mainly as forming a union with others, i.e. whose concept of self pulsates to include one or two or more of the people closest to them or, sporadically, even many of those around them – these people will be differently motivated than those whose concept of self is restricted to a collection of pleasurable private experiences and self-musings. A different constellation, but then lethal, occurs when the sense of self is wholly dependent on how others seem to perceive the subject, i.e. when there is no self at the centre secure in itself.

Leaving aside those whose motivation in engaging in moral discourse is to exercise power, or to conform, or pursue the indulgence of self-righteousness, and addressing those who, imbued with excessive sincerity and burdened, maybe, with a puritanical turn of mind, there is one sound reason for thinking hard about ethics that is generally neglected, ignored, passed over in silence: It is that much harm is done not only by those who are wicked, or by those who are opportunistic, but by those who strive too much to get it right, and, in their eagerness, cling to precepts that are out of place. Perhaps, indeed, the greater part of harm

in the world is done by misplaced loyalties and the effort to go the extra mile for those unworthy of an inch.

There is indeed a natural limit to how good you can usefully be, and this limit is governed by the setting. If the demands you make of yourself and others exceed a certain point, not only will you drain yourself needlessly of your last strength, but many less magnanimous souls will be inspired, not to emulate, but to seek instead, at the least, excuse to thwart you. All you can do, in this situation, is to seek out a better context, that is, one where your integrity can be fertile instead of being possibly worse than useless.

This is not the same as relativism. There is something of an absolute (if poorly definable and abstract) moral standard in the intuition of a flourishing human society, with many varieties of good people, and the proper place of an individual within such a society. Or, if you find even this too utopian, in the intuition of life as good and a preference for complex, rather than simple, life forms. In practice, generalisations do not get us very far, which is why some who are called on to concur with a moral generalisation might respond "It all depends". This call for more precision is easily misinterpreted as a refusal to speak out, to take up position, and so opens the apparent ditherer to the charge of relativism. But there is a world of difference between refusing to affirm an empty generalisation and a refusal to form a definite judgement when provided with secure knowledge of the facts in a particular case.

Ethics addresses not only our personal behaviour (especially as it affects others) but also how we judge the behaviour of others. One of the great defects of parts of the Christian tradition, if not of other religions, is the emphasis on individual salvation, and a concomitant refusal to engage with others as persons and therefore to pass judgement. Of course, when exercised, judgement is often done too zealously and against a background of ignorance, some of it wilful. But as social, articulate, animals we cannot escape forming judgements about each other, or avoid acting on those judgements. It is moreover the case that failure to form a judgement, refusal to censure or intervene, are all on occasion worse than any opprobrium later incurred because the intervention went awry. This is a variety of moral luck. Not infrequently we are faced with a choice of evils, and must risk facing damnation in the eyes of our peers or in the light of future events, or both. Taking this risk of opprobrium involves not physical, but moral courage, the acknowledgement of this virtue being, arguably, a defining feature and outstanding strength of the West. Shame cultures cannot handle moral courage.

In order to cut through the fog of moral rhetoric we must be willing to identify enemies and, on occasion, spurn consensus. There is no virtue in being tolerant of those who procrastinate, delay, complicate, introduce spurious considerations or abuse language under the guise of being profound or creative. Once confronted, such casuists will soon cede ground and withdraw from the debate. These people are not hard to distinguish from those who are

genuinely sensitive to nuances (the fog is not impenetrable). As for countering the others, fundamentalists who make things too simple and refuse to countenance subtlety, the time-honoured tactic is to entangle them in their own contradictions.

This essay has dealt with the fog of moral rhetoric and presented briefly an understanding of ethics with which to see the fog and the rhetoric for what they are. It has not dealt with productive moral discourse as may occur between individuals and groups who share a well-defined tradition, or indeed among individual thinkers from different traditions who are consciously seeking genuine dialogue. Here progress may be slow, but there is no fog nor need for war by other means.