

PREFACE

For thousands of years, people have discussed and debated the nature of moral right and wrong. The reflections in this book are my contribution to this debate. Must morality be based upon religious faith or belief in God? Is morality equivalent with following “the rules” and respecting law and order? Is unselfishness merely a naive illusion which fosters neurotic and self-destructive behavior? Are we even capable of acting unselfishly? Is moral truth like beauty, existing only in the eyes of the beholder? Are there universal moral standards, or are moral “facts” always relative to the culture in which you happen to live? Is it in our rational self-interest to live morally, or would we be better off living a life of calculated deception and manipulation, using others only as means to our ends? Are we free agents who are personally responsible for our good and bad deeds, or are we the complex products of our biological, physical, and social environments? These are the issues we will explore.

I began writing this book in 1979, spurred on by several trends of the post-1960s. One of these trends was a turning away from “social consciousness” and activism to a preoccupation with the self. The activism of the 1960s, the long non-victorious war against Vietnam, and the Watergate scandal had severely demoralized the American psyche. Americans longed desperately to feel good about themselves and their nation. In their rush to make themselves feel good, Americans moved in an unhealthy direction, leaping from the frying pan into the fire (though heavily sedated against the pain of this fire). Another trend continued among college youth and segments of the faculty: a widespread disdain of objectivity, accompanied by the belief that all truth and values were culturally relative or the creation of our minds. Being from the 1960s, and being a young college teacher during the 1970s, I was all-too-familiar with this phenomenon. While I understood and had sympathy for this outpouring of relativism, I was convinced that this trend was an unhealthy development. Would the social fabric of morality come unravelled if we wove into it the following convictions?

1. Moral right is determined by individual preferences.
2. Objectivity of values is impossible; it is an illusion.
3. The individual is all-important.

It struck me that in this bag of convictions a crisis was brewing for modern morality.

Twenty-five hundred years ago Plato had written his *Republic* in response to turbulence in his society of Athens. In his city-state

the warriors and merchants had brought home news of “civilizations” (barbarians to many Greek minds) whose customs and laws were quite different from theirs. Athens had waged and lost a thirty-year war with Sparta, provoking grave self-doubts among Athenians about whether Athens was god-blessed and whether Athens’ ways were the right ways. Prominent intellectuals taught that no absolute values existed and that all truth was relative to individual perspectives. Plato was greatly disturbed by the growing influence of such views. The *Republic* was his literary defense of the existence of value standards which are constant and his defense of the objectivity of moral (and other) knowledge. It represented his intellectual battle with the subjectivity and intellectual anarchy he found rampant in Athens.

As I see it, the *Republic* was not so much a decisive refutation of the opposing schools of thought as it was the construction of a coherent alternative to value subjectivism and relativism. In the late 1970s in America, I felt it imperative to do something similar. With no illusions that my effort could approximate Plato’s creativity or genius, I set about to defend morality against various sorts of cultural and intellectual challenges.

Consider the cultural climate of the 1970s. There was a rapid movement away from the social activism which had been inspired by visions of justice for minority groups and women. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, visions of a far more humane world had energized large segments of the nation through the Peace Corps, VISTA, hippy flower-power, the civil rights movement, the student movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, the black power movement, the American Indian movement, etc. Around the world, citizen Davids struggled against institutional Goliaths. The U.S.-U.S.S.R. competition to explore space and U.S. astronauts landing on the moon captured people’s imagination and made them believe that anything was possible. Among the young, the conviction flourished that the radically better world they struggled for could be achieved within their lifetimes. The new music, alternative lifestyles, and activism were filled with the joyful conviction that each of us truly is our brothers’ (and sisters’) keeper.

By the late 1970s such visions and idealistic activism had largely vanished, and many in our society were quite happy to proclaim the demise of the 1960s. The new attitude was that the activism and rebellion of the 1960s had been bad news, an aberration born of the spasms of immature and self-destructive youth. A

predominant image of the 1960s activist (like that of the Vietnam veteran) was of an angry and anti-social person, doped-up and burned-out. The profile of the 1960s generation was one of failure, a lost generation which the nation should do its utmost to see was never repeated. Behind their idealistic slogans and banners, these cultural lepers really signified violence, anarchy, and anti-patriotism. No wonder that in the late 1970s the only remnants of 1960s activism were feminism and a struggling environmental movement.

In the place of 1960s values, best-selling books proclaimed a new ethic—the virtues of being selfish and of “looking out for number one.” Instead of hippies or yuppies, the new ideal was the yuppie who stood for the passionate pursuit of career success and material prosperity... and *within* the Established Order of business and politics. The new message was that the System was the solution. We were urged to immerse ourselves in ourselves. Magazines like *People* were followed by *Us* and *Self*. Would the next magazine be *Me*, which each of us (who could afford to) would promote, and which would feature our own autobiography up to that point, told in a flattering way and containing lots of photos? The political “isms” of the 1960s had been quickly replaced with “Me-ism.” The Me-Generation had arrived.

We were on the brink of the Reagan-Bush era of national politics. The Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution was defeated and conservatives hailed the return to traditional values of family, religion, and patriotism. Americans were fed up with the negative news and trauma they associated with Watergate and the Vietnam war. They were fed up with feeling picked on, humiliated, and impotent at the hands of “fifth-rate countries” like Iran. Americans felt insecure and vulnerable; they longed to feel strong again, to feel good about themselves. Waiting in the wings was Ronald Reagan, who was eager to restore our military might and to emphasize the goodness and God-blessed nature of America in the midst of evil forces in the world. It was not long before Americans would recapture their feeling of Manifest Destiny, the faith that we are a special people of a special country destined by God to greatness in the affairs of nations. Along with the Me-Generation had arrived the Great Communicator.

But why did we feel good about ourselves? Was *this feeling* good... good for us? Alcohol and other drugs can make us feel serene, euphoric, or invincible, but is the pretty illusion of the high worth it? There are many types of addictions, compulsions,

and delusions. In no case does the person's feeling good indicate good health or a sound frame of mind. Christopher Lasch¹ was probably right that America is dominated by narcissistic personalities. "Narcissism" here does not just mean a vain, admiration of yourself, but points to severe insecurity and deep ambivalence about your self-worth.² Sometimes the narcissist feels as if he or she is utterly charming and God's gift to the world; other times the feeling is of being utterly worthless and unlovable. Narcissists cope with their sense of extreme vulnerability and low self-worth by constantly projecting the appearance of being charming and lovable. They are eager to accept positive and flattering reports about themselves from others and equally ready to reject or downplay any hints that they are uncharming or unlovable. Such negative news feels too threatening to their eggshell sense of self-worth. They are wholly self-absorbed and devote most of their energy to soliciting evidence that they are charming and deflecting evidence to the contrary. They are the P-R (Public Relations) prototype *par excellence*.

Such I feared were the moral red flags of the late 1970s. Unable or unwilling to confront our real problems (personal and societal), Americans were retreating into a reassuring bubble world. Consequently, the highest priority was assigned to personal ambitions (careerism), meditational bliss, New Age elevator music, and maintaining a positive attitude toward oneself. As a teacher, I was often reminded of my students' attraction to "me-ism" and various versions of subjectivism and relativism. There was, for example, the appeal of Richard Bach's best-selling *Illusions*,³ a book bound to strike a chord with young people's turbulent insecurity and their desire to empower their lives. In that book's tale of "the reluctant messiah" (from the heartland of Indiana), the protagonist maintains that we construct "reality" for ourselves. No limitations apply to us save those which we consciously or unconsciously place upon ourselves. Furthermore, our wills are like magnets so that we attract and are responsible for whatever good or bad that comes our way. But when constructively mobilized, our unlimited will-power is able to transform "reality" however we wish. Indeed, this reluctant messiah confesses that he has found the way to move through earth as if it were water (pure mind over matter).

The irony of the book's title did not escape me. What kind of illusions were being created or played to? This reluctant messiah was just the latest (psychologized) version of one of America's

most powerful myths: Superman, Superwoman, Superboy, or Supergirl. Instead of leaping buildings with a single bound, this psychic superman leaps obstacles with a single burst of psychic power. This character's charm lay precisely in his appeal to our infantile fantasies of being at the center of the world and of exercising absolute control. This character was just the latest version of the American mythical hero (usually male) who "pulls himself up by his own bootstraps."

In my view (and also in the traditional view) morality involves learning to recognize limitations, ours and others'. It also involves an abiding commitment to respect other people's needs as coequal with our needs—hence to acknowledge that we are not the center of the world. These I would call the basic conditions of humility, an attitude vital to moral commitment as the world has known it. The cultural climate of the late 1970s was a denial of the need for humility. If 1960s idealism was based largely on fantasies of how rapidly and substantially the world could be improved, if they tended toward destructive results—it was hard to see how the new fantasies of the late 1970s constituted an improvement. Indeed, their potential for causing damage was greater than the 1960s values they were meant to repudiate.

My purpose in writing this book has been to address some of the key theoretical issues of ethics, both for our time and for all times. Two issues I have given emphasis to are the questions of whether morality is best construed as (1) subjective or objective, and (2) as relative or absolute. In Chapter One, I raise these issues through a fictional dialogue. The point there is to draw the tensions between the opposing views as intensely as possible and to introduce some of the key arguments on both sides. The narrator of that story is meant to be portrayed as insightful. Thus, my bias in favor of an objectivist view of morality emerges early in the book. No doubt my bias is also revealed if it appears to the reader that the narrator's intellectual adversary is painted in superficial or drab colors. In the struggle for the readers' hearts and minds, I prefer to think of this as poetic license.

I wrote Chapters Two and Five to make credible the case for the objective and absolute aspects of morality. Chapter Two examines tempting misconceptions about the nature of moral judgments. For example, people often associate morality with the stern authoritarianism of religion, or with the view that elites are entitled to force us to accept their judgment of what we should do or believe. This hierarchical and quasi-fascist view is rightfully

repugnant to many of us. Identifying it with morality conceals from us the democratic nature of moral values. As a consequence of this misconception, many people may become so disillusioned with “moralizing” that they would rather pronounce morality hopelessly subjective or relative rather than accept such a harsh model of right and wrong. Their misunderstanding drives them to reject one extreme in favor of another extreme.

Having said a great deal about what morality is *not*, I begin to state my view of what it *is*. In Chapter Three I argue that a key element of moral behavior is unselfish action. I also argue this does not mean we must always sacrifice concern for ourselves in order to protect others’ well-being. Distinguishing healthy self-concern from selfish behavior, I argue against the view that says we have no choice but to act selfishly. Moral action, I argue, means striking a balance between thinking too much about yourself and thinking too much about others. Selfish actions are wrong, but so too is self-neglect.

In Chapter Four I present my view of free choice and moral responsibility. These two ideas have played a mighty role in the tradition of Western morality. We would think of morality quite differently, and we would think of people quite differently, if we did not suppose that people usually are morally responsible for their choices. If we thought people never made free choices, we would probably abandon the idea that we are morally responsible beings. Although some thinkers have argued that free will and moral responsibility are only cultural fictions, I defend human free will and responsibility. In this defense, I challenge two suppositions of the traditional attack on free will and moral responsibility. These suppositions are (1) having free will and responsibility depends on our choices *not* being determined, and (2) the overwhelming evidence is that our choices are determined.

Against supposition (1), I argue that our freedom and responsibility are not wed to the falsehood of the doctrine of determinism. Instead, I argue that our freedom and responsibility depend on the kinds of circumstances surrounding our choices, including the kinds of things which cause us to act as we do. This position I call “compatibilism.” Against supposition (2), I argue that the evidence for determinism is underwhelming and will remain so. Thus, it is just as reasonable to believe in some form of indeterminism. But if we cannot resolve the question of human free will and responsibility in a straightforward investigation of the truth of determinism, I claim we should turn to other sorts of relevant

questions. Would human self-esteem and happiness be gravely damaged if we abandoned the supposition of determinism? Would our self-esteem and happiness be gravely damaged if we abandoned our belief in free will and moral responsibility? The answer to the first question is “no,” and the answer to the second is “yes.” In conclusion, I argue that *if* our belief in free will and responsibility would be destroyed by believing in the determinism of human choices, we ought to reject such determinism. I call this position “pragmatic compatibilism.”

The chapters on egoism and free will are more closely related to the issue of moral subjectivism than you might think. Consider these two assertions: (1) We always act selfishly, (2) Free will and moral responsibility are fictions. If we accept (1) and (2), how much room is left us to consider morality as objective? The answer is “not much.” True, objectivist views like utilitarianism would still be possible, but few people are attracted to utilitarianism, and many of us find it distinctly unpalatable.

If so many of us can be so wrong in our thinking that we strongly disagree with both (1) and (2), we should wonder whether we have any grip at all on the true nature of morality! Thus, the views I reject in Chapters Three and Four are a substantial part of the overall attack against viewing moral right and wrong as objective matters of fact. If we were to accept these attacks on unselfishness and free will as simply the most recent results of intellectual progress, we would only contribute to the further balkanization of the moral community... as we each withdraw further into moral subjectivism or relativism. One of my purposes is to offer intellectual resistance to such moral splintering and disenchantment.

In Chapter Five I try to make plausible the existence of an objective common ground for the moral community. I examine various objectivist theories of morality, and I put forward my objectivist theory. I say we ought to do whatever will best promote healthy personal development within the context of justice. My view is eclectic and does not fall neatly into the traditional categories used to classify ethical theories.

My position is that health in general, and healthy self-development in particular, are moral goods. In contrast, sickness and poor self-development are moral evils. Doing what you please when you please is not healthy self-development, but a cancerous growth. Such unrestrained growth is self-destructive and other-destructive. Furthermore, justice requires that we all be

permitted as much personal growth (to speak broadly) as is compatible with the healthy growth of others. Promoting human happiness and accepting the obligations implied by justice are cornerstones of morality as I see it. Thus, I argue that everyone's self-interest is to encourage justice in society. A society which is dominated by injustice will be a threat to everyone's health and self-development. There must be honor even "among thieves," or the thieves will regret it.

I attempt to refute common objections against the objectivity and absolute nature of some moral standards. Such objections, I argue, are indecisive in each case, and in some instances these subjectivist and relativist objections undermine the objectivity of all values.

I respond to the objection that in no credible way can we conceive of our knowing moral qualities in an objective manner. To this, I propose that such objective knowledge could occur in one of two ways. (1) We can suppose that moral qualities are abstract qualities which really exist in the world, and that we are able to perceive them through the operation of our brain. On this view, the brain is conceived of as more than a computing and storage mechanism, dependent on data about the external world on the delivery systems of our five senses. Instead, the brain is also thought of as a sixth sense-organ, like the eyes, ears, nose, etc. In other words, the brain *perceives* abstract real properties, including moral properties, while the other sense-organs transmit more concrete data to the brain. (2) It could be that moral concepts are objective simply because they are part of the way our species *understands* the experience we gain from our five senses. Following Kant's lead, we could say that just as we categorize our experience in the categorical terms of cause and effect and truth-versus-falsehood, so too we order our experience in terms of moral right versus wrong. On this view, the objectivity of moral judgments means that their truth or falseness is not affected by individual whims or beliefs. But the standard of their truth would not be something *in* the external world. Instead, it would be something about us as human beings: the structure of our conceptual network.

For those who judge a theory's adequacy by how well it fits into current scientific theory, the second of these two theories is bound to seem more credible. It doesn't seem to contradict anything basic to psychology, anthropology or physiology. The first theory, however, does not fit easily into current scientific theory

about how we know qualities in the world. Though it is more radical in this respect, it is not beyond the pale of contemporary science. If we are willing to postulate the existence of abstract properties outside of the mind (as Plato and Aristotle⁴ did), neurophysiologists and psychologists would only need to hypothesize the existence of corresponding neural mechanisms in our brain which allow us to know such properties. In principle, this is no odder than assuming some brain function which while always receiving “upside-down” visual images of external objects from our eyes’ retinas, somehow manages to interpret them as being “rightside-up.” If, therefore, science is our contemporary guide to what really exists, I would say that the theory of moral objectivism can be underwritten by science.

In philosophy we speak of a possible doctrine called “solipsism.” Variations on its exact meaning occur, but it usually connotes the view that, “So far as I know (with certainty), I am the only conscious thing in existence. Indeed, I might well be the only thing in existence.” Let me paraphrase this view as “So far as I know, I am the center of everything.” No philosopher I am aware of has viewed solipsism as anything more than a radical skepticism to be ridiculed or refuted.

Psychologists will note how much this doctrine resembles narcissism, an emotional disturbance in which people waiver between euphoria over their supposed extreme charm and the black hole of feeling utterly wretched and unlovable. This book is addressed to a phenomenon related to narcissism: moral solipsism. The moral solipsist is one who believes, or is tempted to believe, that his or her perspective on moral right and wrong is the only perspective which needs to be taken seriously. Such a solipsist may be a narcissist, but typically arrives at this view out of laziness, frustration, or disillusionment. Moral solipsists want to believe morality is objective and shared, but their sad experience and reasoning convinces them that no reliable external standards of right and wrong exist. Thus, they withdraw into the shelter of their own moral perspective.

We are not yet a society of moral solipsists, but we are headed in that direction. Many forces in the world push people to lose their faith in moral community. The movement toward moral solipsism is profoundly unhealthy and to be resisted just as much as the intolerance and cruelty of moral imperialism and religious absolutism. In this book I seek to challenge and undermine the intellectual justifications of moral solipsism. This is necessary if

we are to forestall the deconstruction of the moral community. Once we lose faith in the moral common ground, the barbarians who destroy our civilization will be us.

This project began over a decade ago, and I am grateful to many people for their help in preparing the evolving manuscript for publication. For their typing assistance, I thank Helen Molina, Nathalie Moore, Wendy Eidenmuller, Marie Goodenow, Norma Hartmer, Karen Lackovic, Lisa Drake, Carrie James, and especially Diane Harpst. For their review and commentary on selected chapters, I am grateful to my colleagues at Edinboro University: Lucy Bohne, Ed Abegg, and Richard Double. Two people are owed a special thanks. One is Thomas Atwater of Cameron University, who reviewed the entire manuscript and gave both encouragement and helpful critique. The other is my editor, Robert Ginsberg. I thank him for his advice and encouragement, but especially for judging my work to be a worthy contribution to the Value Inquiry Book Series. I am indebted to Edinboro University for the technical assistance which permitted the final preparation of this manuscript.