# From "Is" to "Ought":
# Faith and Reason Reunited

How do we know what we ought to do? In other words, how do we know what is moral? It is easy to say that something is "right" or "wrong," but much harder to provide reasons for saying so. Some philosophers have even maintained that reasoning about morality is impossible. The modern era of philosophy made a detailed and invested effort to try to structure a morality that was not based on a religious faith or on authorities other than the self; it endeavored to trust no one. But these efforts may have been in vain, and in the end, nothing but a detour; now, a growing school of thought believes that the separation of faith and reason is not the answer to our philosophical dilemmas. Faith and reason should not be relegated to separate spheres of thought. Doing so is not only detrimental to our thinking about morality, but it diminishes our humanness.

Aristotle, one of the first respected moral philosophers, did not separate faith and reason. In fact, it probably didn't even occur to him to do so. There was no reason to: Aristotle's ethic was a virtue ethic. His idea of morality was, simply, a person being virtuous. He had no specific prescription for behavior in certain situations; rather, a person was to strive for a particular quality of character. This teleological view of the person is one that calls for faith in a particular worldview in order to make actions valuable. One must believe that the virtues Aristotle describes are, in fact, good, in order to want to act in such a

manner.

Moreover, Aristotle apparently did not see a need to base morality in empiricism, because he didn't: his virtues are not each built from scratch, so to speak, but are taken from the culture around him. Neither are his virtues arbitrary, however; they do have a definite pattern and are very reasonable. They seem to aim towards a similar goal—namely, a happy, whole person. In addition, reason and intellect are very important to Aristotle. Intellect is, in fact, one of his highest virtues. But even though reason is so important for him, virtue is equally important, and the virtues are derived not just from reason but also from tradition. Thus, Aristotle did not—in fact, could not, and saw no cause to—separate faith and reason.

Aristotle's ideas reigned supreme in the world for many centuries. Eventually, however, something new happened in philosophical thought: authority was brought into question. Until perhaps the seventeenth century, everyone had been fairly happy accepting the authority of the church, of their traditions, of Aristotle—in fact, pretty much any authority they perceived as legitimate. However, when René Descartes began to question the authority of *everything*, people took notice. His was a brilliant and disturbing thought: What if we're wrong to trust authority? What if we've been taken in?

Descartes' idea was, simply, to start from scratch. With the premise that nobody was trustworthy, he set out to find something that he could believe in. Discarding religion, history, tradition, and even his own experience of the world (what if there were a cruel and

deceptive god who was distorting his senses?), he finally arrived at one sure thing: If he was thinking these things, he had to exist. But if existence was all we could be sure of, that wasn't much to base a world on. Thus started the Enlightenment Project, also known as modernity.

Descartes having torn the usual fabric of human life to bits with his quest, other philosophers of the time set out to reweave that fabric with what was left to them. Different philosophers had different ideas about how to do that, however, and they also differed on exactly what was left to work with. The biggest question was how to get from what *is* to what *ought to be*: that is, where does morality come from when all we have left is empiricism?

One philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, began with the assumption that humans were by nature brutal and corrupted, and that everybody was only out for their own good. Life in nature was, simply, every man for himself. Because such a tense environment would be impossible to live in, something had to be done. According to Hobbes' social contract theory, everyone voluntarily gave up a portion of their individual power and invested it in a central governing power. This power imposed and enforced morality.

Hobbes did not invoke traditional authorities for morality, but he did invoke an authority—namely, government—and he did end up with a traditional morality. Even though he gave a reason for government's legitimacy, some other philosophers didn't accept his reasoning; such a picture of humanity was too disheartening, too grim, and they

didn't like monarchies anyway. Immanuel Kant had his own ideas. He reasoned that the correct starting place was not human nature, but the only "unqualifiedly good thing": a good will. From this beginning, he proceeded to explain that actions done from a sense of duty are the most moral actions. He also formulated his Categorical Imperative: Act only on maxims that you would want as universal laws. So Kant's morality is one of duty and moral laws based on reason. Still, not everyone agreed with Kant. Duty is not a particularly attractive or humanitarian motive, and it is far from certain that everyone will arrive at the same moral laws acting on Kant's maxim.

Sören Kierkegaard did something different with the separation of faith and reason. Instead of discarding faith entirely, as many were doing, he kept it well in the picture. He maintained that although reason and faith were incompatible, people still could not reach the highest levels of morality without faith. Between his three stages of life (aesthetic, ethical, and religious), leaps of faith are required. Dissatisfaction with the current stage leads to a choice: stay or jump blindly. Kierkegaard's theories were perceptive; however, blind faith was not a quality high on most philosophers' agendas.

By the nineteenth century, moral philosophy was becoming decidedly less traditional, and philosophers were working Descartes' skepticism for all it was worth. John Stuart Mill was a famous advocate of utilitarianism, an ideology that advocated the greatest good for the greatest number. For example, if an action made a great number of people happy, and hurt no one, it qualified as a good action. If, on the other hand, it resulted in little happiness

and much hurt, it was a bad action. Mill tried to make the practice of utilitarianism result in a traditional morality, but in this he was not completely successful; there were many possible loopholes that were hard to stop up. Moreover, it was entirely too difficult to make the calculations necessary for true utilitarianism. How does one measure pain and pleasure?

Another even less traditional nineteenth-century moralist was Friedrich Nietzsche. Despairing of a reasonable solution to the search for a morality, he simply concluded that those who had power were right, and those who didn't were wrong. His so-called "hero morality" upheld the powerful, strong, and cruel: those who were able and willing to exercise authority over others. He criticized those who were weak and who defensively justified their weakness, promoting it into a virtue. Nietzsche's view was not particularly popular at the time, but it still became well known. "Might makes right" is a questionable premise, but a powerful one.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, some philosophers were beginning to give up any hope they may have had that the Enlightenment Project was going to succeed in providing a logical basis for morality. So they began forays into new territory, leaving traditional ideas of reason behind. A.J. Ayer, for example, took the saying "There's no disputing taste" to an extreme with his radical empiricist hypothesis. He claimed that any statements but those about logic, mathematics, and matters of fact, were meaningless. Therefore, moral claims had no actual meaning; they were merely emotive. Saying something was bad or wrong meant only that you happened to not like it; it said nothing

about the thing itself. Such a theory meant that moral claims were impossible to argue about. You could disagree with someone, but you couldn't properly contradict them; everything was a matter of taste, nothing more.

Jean-Paul Sartre took personal opinion in a slightly different direction with his existentialism. His idea, simply stated, was that everyone ought to create their own "essence"—that is, their own purpose and ideals for life. In fact, if you *didn't* do so—if you trusted somebody else's prescription for your life—you were actually acting in bad faith. Sartre's position automatically discards any traditional positions one might take on morality; although such positions are not ruled out, they must be arrived at independently, without advice or assistance from outside sources.

Richard Rorty, rather than being put off by the absence of a visible resolution to the morality dilemma, took his shoes off and wallowed in the muck. If philosophy hadn't found an answer to the problem yet, he said, there wasn't one. So, as if Sartre's existentialism weren't extreme enough, Rorty extended it almost past recognition. Although Sartre had claimed that each person must act as if they were responsible for everyone, in Rorty's view, no one needed to justify the way they acted at all. There were no universal principles; everyone had to create their own universe, so to speak. In making such relativistic claims, Rorty was attempting to distance himself from any debates about morality. He was, in fact, asserting that such arguments were nonsensical, since they could never be resolved. Rorty even went so far as to describe his ideal society, although why he

thought the rest of us should adopt his ideal, when we each must create our own ideals, is

not very clear.

By now, it should be obvious that philosophy has become very muddled and bogged

down. The combination of science and relativism as two very significant concepts in the

twentieth century has helped instigate this floundering. Science appears to dispose of the

necessity of God and other explanations, while relativism neatly relieves us of the

apparently mistaken opinion that somebody's right about something. And so betwixt the

both of them, they lick the platter clean, and we really don't need philosophy anymore. For

if logic doesn't get us all to the same place, why bother with it? Why bother with anything

but our scientific observations and our relativistic opinions?

Why, indeed? Let's go back now to before Descartes stepped in with his skepticism

and started things off on an interesting, if unproductive, tangent. Before him, faith and

reason were still interrelated, and no one questioned such a relationship. Now, however,

that relationship is not merely questionable; it's almost unthinkable. For those schooled in

the modern era, it is at first very difficult to see how faith and reason could possibly fit

together. They seem, in fact, to be mutually exclusive: if you have a reason for something,

it's not faith; if you have faith in something, it's can't be reasonable.

But is that really the case? Another twentieth-century philosopher would say it is

decidedly not. Alisdair MacIntyre, in his book *After Virtue*, began the process of picking up

where Aristotle left off. Aristotle's ethics were based on virtues, and until MacIntyre, virtue

ethics was rather overlooked during the Enlightenment Project. Everyone was too busy off chasing more substantial-seeming fish. Virtue ethics, after all, cannot be empirically "proven." Instead, they are built on a somewhat different foundation.

According to MacIntyre, when Aristotle was rejected, some key ideas went with him. These ideas were authority (including community and tradition), telos (an aim or end), and a functional concept of man. Without these ideas, morality collapses, as it so obviously did. MacIntyre's goal, then, is to put morality back into a teleological framework. Within such a framework, it is once again possible to get from "is" to "ought." How is this so?

Well, first, a teleological framework provides a goal for man to aim towards. Although he may never reach his ideal, at least he has something to measure himself against. Also, if he has a functional concept of himself, he can have some idea of how *well* he is functioning. Thus it is possible to ask the question, "Am I a good person?" This is equivalent to (although much more complicated than) asking, "Is this a good watch?" The answer to the second question is yes, if the watch tells time accurately. The answer to the first question is harder to come by, but could involve such qualifications as how well the person is fulfilling their roles (say, as a father, businessman, brother, church member, etc.) or whether they are producing something worthwhile. Within this framework, what *is* is perhaps not what *ought to be*, and we can logically and reasonably support such a statement.

In addition, man may now be measured against the community and traditions

surrounding him. He cannot simply disregard the standards that these institutions uphold; to do so would be to reject himself, because those things are a fundamental part of him. And if the standards are rejected, chaos ensues; we are back to the modern moral dilemma.

How does this relate to faith and reason? If we are to accept the traditions surrounding us, we must first have a measure of faith, for we cannot prove for ourselves everything that is presented to us. On the other hand, we would not accept anything that seemed immediately untrustworthy. We routinely support and check our faith against our reason.

So the answer to the question of how faith and reason fit together is that faith is not unreasonable. Rather, it is based on observation of our world and based on tradition, what we hear and trust. Faith is believing something that hasn't been proven to us. Moreover, reason doesn't mean that we have to start from scratch; in fact, we'd be in trouble if we tried to do so. Almost unbelievably for the modern-bred thinker, here come faith and reason walking hand in hand—so obvious that we nearly missed them.

Life is actually impossible without faith and reason working together. For example, if we were to throw away faith and attempt to use only reason during our everyday lives, what would happen? We would be forced to mistrust many things we take for granted: for example, the government, policemen, our family, storekeepers, scientists, news reporters—all these would be untrustworthy sources. If we had to discount everything that we couldn't verify with our own senses, we would quickly become nonfunctional.

Transferring this analogy to moral reasoning, that's what has actually happened. Mistrustful of everyone and everything with anything to say about morality, modern philosophers quickly became morally nonfunctional. Their mistake was to believe that to reason meant to begin from scratch, with no one else to help. Beginning from scratch, they found it impossible to progress beyond a morally infantile level, just as we would find it impossible to know more than infants do if we mistrusted everyone we knew about everyday events.

The great step of mankind, and one thing that makes us human, is that we are able to transfer knowledge across generations. It is no longer limited to one place and time; we have the unique ability to communicate across gaps. By putting faith and reason in two separate categories, quarantining them from each other, we throw away that ability to transfer knowledge, because we can no longer trust what is transmitted to us. In doing so, we throw away a very important part of our humanity.

The Enlightenment Project has failed. Modern and postmodern philosophers both have been unable to build anything upon the slippery foundation of their own intellects, and the road to relativism is clearly not one that can be traveled together. The only human alternative, it seems, is to take faith and reason from the separate boxes in which they have so long been stored, and reunite them in our thinking. Only with both together will philosophy once again be a useful tool, and will we once again be able to move from an "is" to an "ought."