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1

INESCAPABLE FRAMEWORKS

1.1

I want to explore various facets of what I will call the 'modern identity'. To give a good first approximation of what this means would be to say that it involves tracing various strands of our modern notion of what it is to be a human agent, a person, or a self. But pursuing this investigation soon shows that you can't get very clear about this without some further understanding of how our pictures of the good have evolved. Selfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes.

In this first part, I want to say something about this connection, before in Parts II–V plunging into the history and analysis of the modern identity. But another obstacle rises in the way even of this preliminary task. Much contemporary moral philosophy, particularly but not only in the English-speaking world, has given such a narrow focus to morality that some of the crucial connections I want to draw here are incomprehensible in its terms. This moral philosophy has tended to focus on what it is right to do rather than on what it is good to be, on defining the content of obligation rather than the nature of the good life; and it has no conceptual place left for a notion of the good as the object of our love or allegiance or, as Iris Murdoch portrayed it in her work, as the privileged focus of attention or will.[1] This philosophy has accredited a cramped and truncated view of morality in a narrow sense, as well as of the whole range of issues involved in the attempt to live the best possible life, and this not only among professional philosophers, but with a wider public.

So much of my effort in Part I will be directed towards enlarging our range of legitimate moral descriptions, and in some cases retrieving modes of thought and description which have misguidedly been made to seem problematic. In particular, what I want to bring out and examine is the richer background languages in which we set the basis and point of the moral obligations we acknowledge. More broadly, I want to explore the background picture of our spiritual nature and predicament which lies behind some of the

moral and spiritual intuitions of our contemporaries. In the course of doing so, I shall also be trying to make clearer just what a background picture is, and what role it plays in our lives. Here is where an important element of retrieval comes in, because much contemporary philosophy has ignored this dimension of our moral consciousness and beliefs altogether and has even seemed to dismiss it as confused and irrelevant. I hope to show, contrary to this attitude, how crucial it is.

I spoke in the previous paragraph about our 'moral and spiritual' intuitions. In fact, I want to consider a gamut of views a bit broader than what is normally described as the 'moral'. In addition to our notions and reactions on such issues as justice and the respect of other people's life, well-being, and dignity, I want also to look at our sense of what underlies our own dignity, or questions about what makes our lives meaningful or fulfilling. These might be classed as moral questions on some broad definition, but some are too concerned with the self-regarding, or too much a matter of our ideals, to be classed as moral issues in most people's lexicon. They concern, rather, what makes life worth living.

What they have in common with moral issues, and what deserves the vague term 'spiritual', is that they all involve what I have called elsewhere 'strong evaluation',[2] that is, they involve discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged. So while it may not be judged a moral lapse that I am living a life that is not really worthwhile or fulfilling, to describe me in these terms is nevertheless to condemn me in the name of a standard, independent of my own tastes and desires, which I ought to acknowledge.

Perhaps the most urgent and powerful cluster of demands that we recognize as moral concern the respect for the life, integrity, and well-being, even flourishing, of others. These are the ones we infringe when we kill or maim others, steal their property, strike fear into them and rob them of peace, or even refrain from helping them when they are in distress. Virtually everyone feels these demands, and they have been and are acknowledged in all human societies. Of course the scope of the demand notoriously varies: earlier societies, and some present ones, restrict the class of beneficiaries to members of the tribe or race and exclude outsiders, who are fair game, or even condemn the evil to a definitive loss of this status. But they all feel these demands laid on them by some class of persons, and for most contemporaries this class is coterminous with the human race (and for believers in animal rights it may go wider).

We are dealing here with moral intuitions which are uncommonly deep, powerful, and universal. They are so deep that we are tempted to think of them as rooted in instinct, in contrast to other moral reactions which seem very much the consequence of upbringing and education. There seems to be a natural, inborn compunction to inflict death or injury on another, an inclination to come to the help of the injured or endangered. Culture and upbringing may help to define the boundaries of the relevant 'others', but they don't seem to create the basic reaction itself. That is why eighteenth-century thinkers, notably Rousseau, could believe in a natural susceptibility to feel sympathy for others.

The roots of respect for life and integrity do seem to go as deep as this, and to be connected perhaps with the almost universal tendency among other animals to stop short of the killing of conspecifics. But like so much else in human life, this 'instinct' receives a variable shape in culture, as we have seen. And this shape is inseparable from an account of what it is that commands our respect. The account seems to articulate the intuition. It tells us, for instance, that human beings are creatures of God and made in his image, or that they are immortal souls, or that they are all emanations of divine fire, or that they are all rational agents and thus have a dignity which transcends any other being, or some other such characterization; and that *therefore* we owe them respect. The various cultures which restrict this respect do so by denying the crucial description to those left outside: they are thought to lack souls, or to be not fully rational, or perhaps to be destined by God for some lower station, or something of the sort.

So our moral reactions in this domain have two facets, as it were. On one side, they are almost like instincts, comparable to our love of sweet things, or our aversion to nauseous substances, or our fear of falling; on the other, they seem to involve claims, implicit or explicit, about the nature and status of human beings. From this second side, a moral reaction is an assent to, an affirmation of, a given ontology of the human.

An important strand of modern naturalist consciousness has tried to hive this second side off and declare it dispensable or irrelevant to morality. The motives are multiple: partly distrust of all such ontological accounts because of the use to which some of them have been put, e.g., justifying restrictions or exclusions of heretics or allegedly lower beings. And this distrust is strengthened where a primitivist sense that unspoiled human nature respects life by instinct reigns. But it is partly also the great epistemological cloud under which all such accounts lie for those who have followed empiricist or rationalist theories of knowledge, inspired by the success of modern natural science.

The temptation is great to rest content with the fact that we have such reactions, and to consider the ontology which gives rational articulation to them to be so much froth, nonsense from a bygone age. This stance may go along with a sociobiological explanation for our having such reactions, which

can be thought to have obvious evolutionary utility and indeed have analogues among other species, as already mentioned.

But this neat division cannot be carried through. Ontological accounts offer themselves as correct articulations of our 'gut' reactions of respect. In this they treat these reactions as different from other 'gut' responses, such as our taste for sweets or our nausea at certain smells or objects. We don't acknowledge that there is something there to articulate, as we do in the moral case. Is this distinction illegitimate? A metaphysical invention? It seems to turn on this: in either case our response is to an object with a certain property. But in one case the property marks the object as one *meriting* this reaction; in the other the connection between the two is just a brute fact. Thus we argue and reason over what and who is a fit object of moral respect, while this doesn't seem to be even possible for a reaction like nausea. Of course we can reason that it might be useful or convenient to alter the boundaries of what we feel nausea at; and we might succeed, with training, in doing so. But what seems to make no sense here is the supposition that we might articulate a description of the nauseating in terms of its intrinsic properties, and then argue from this that certain things which we in fact react to that way are not really fit objects for it. There seems to be no other criterion for a concept of the nauseating than our in fact reacting with nausea to the things which bear the concept. As against the first kind of response, which relates to a proper object, this one could be called a brute reaction.

Assimilating our moral reactions to these visceral ones would mean considering all our talk about fit objects of moral response to be utterly illusory. The belief that we are discriminating real properties, with criteria independent of our de facto reactions, would be declared unfounded. This is the burden of the so-called 'error theory' of moral values which John Mackie espoused.[3] It can combine easily with a sociobiological standpoint, in which one acknowledges that certain moral reactions had (and have) obvious survival value, and one may even propose to fine-tune and alter our reactions so as to increase that value, as above we imagined changing what we feel nausea at. But this would have nothing to do with a view that certain things and not others, just in virtue of their nature, were fit objects of respect.

Now this sociobiological or external standpoint is utterly different from the way we in fact argue and reason and deliberate in our moral lives. We are all universalists now about respect for life and integrity. But this means not just that we happen to have such reactions or that we have decided in the light of the present predicament of the human race that it is useful to have such reactions (though some people argue in this way, urging that, for instance, it is in our own interest in a shrinking world to take account of Third World poverty). It means rather that we believe it would be utterly wrong and unfounded to draw the boundaries any narrower than around the whole human race.

Should anybody propose to do so, we should immediately ask what distinguished those within from those left out. And we should seize on this distinguishing characteristic in order to show that it had nothing to do with commanding respect. This is what we do with racists. Skin colour or physical traits have nothing to do with that in virtue of which humans command our respect. In fact, no ontological account accords it this. Racists have to claim that certain of the crucial moral properties of human beings are genetically determined: that some races are less intelligent, less capable of high moral consciousness, and the like. The logic of the argument forces them to stake their claim on ground where they are empirically at their weakest. Differences in skin colour are undeniable. But all claims about innate cultural differences are unsustainable in the light of human history. The logic of this whole debate takes intrinsic description seriously, that is, descriptions of the objects of our moral responses whose criteria are independent of our de facto reactions.

Can it be otherwise? We feel the demand to be consistent in our moral reactions. And even those philosophers who propose to ignore ontological accounts nevertheless scrutinize and criticize our moral intuitions for their consistency or lack of it. But the issue of consistency presupposes intrinsic description. How could anyone be accused of being inconsistently nauseated? Some description could always be found covering all the objects he reacts to that way, if only the relative one that they all awake his disgust. The issue of consistency can only arise when the reaction is related to some independent property as its fit object.

The whole way in which we think, reason, argue, and question ourselves about morality supposes that our moral reactions have these two sides: that they are not only 'gut' feelings but also implicit acknowledgements of claims concerning their objects. The various ontological accounts try to articulate these claims. The temptations to deny this, which arise from modern epistemology, are strengthened by the widespread acceptance of a deeply wrong model of practical reasoning,[4] one based on an illegitimate extrapolation from reasoning in natural science.

The various ontological accounts attribute predicates to human beings—like being creatures of God, or emanations of divine fire, or agents of rational choice—which seem rather analogous to theoretical predicates in natural science, in that they (a) are rather remote from our everyday descriptions by which we deal with people around us and ourselves, and (b) make reference to our conception of the universe and the place we occupy in it. In fact, if we go back before the modern period and take the thought of Plato, for example, it is clear that the ontological account underlying the morality of just

treatment was identical with his 'scientific' theory of the universe. The theory of Ideas underlay one and the other.

It seems natural to assume that we would have to establish these ontological predicates in ways analogous to our supporting physical explanations: starting from the facts identified independently of our reactions to them, we would try to show that one underlying explanation was better than others. But once we do this, we have lost from view what we're arguing about. Ontological accounts have the status of articulations of our moral instincts. They articulate the claims implicit in our reactions. We can no longer argue about them at all once we assume a neutral stance and try to describe the facts as they are independent of these reactions, as we have done in natural science since the seventeenth century. There is such a thing as moral objectivity, of course. Growth in moral insight often requires that we neutralize some of our reactions. But this is in order that the others may be identified, unmixed and unscreened by petty jealousy, egoism, or other unworthy feelings. It is never a question of prescinding from our reactions altogether.

Moral argument and exploration go on only within a world shaped by our deepest moral responses, like the ones I have been talking about here; just as natural science supposes that we focus on a world where all our responses have been neutralized. If you want to discriminate more finely what it is about human beings that makes them worthy of respect, you have to call to mind what it is to feel the claim of human suffering, or what is repugnant about injustice, or the awe you feel at the fact of human life. No argument can take someone from a neutral stance towards the world, either adopted from the demands of 'science' or fallen into as a consequence of pathology, to insight into moral ontology. But it doesn't follow from this that moral ontology is a pure fiction, as naturalists often assume. Rather we should treat our deepest moral instincts, our ineradicable sense that human life is to be respected, as our mode of access to the world in which ontological claims are discernible and can be rationally argued about and sifted.

1.2

I spoke at the outset about exploring the 'background picture' lying behind our moral and spiritual intuitions. I could now rephrase this and say that my target is the moral ontology which articulates these intuitions. What is the picture of our spiritual nature and predicament which makes sense of our responses? 'Making sense' here means articulating what makes these responses appropriate: identifying what makes something a fit object for them and correlatively formulating more fully the nature of the response as well as spelling out what all this presupposes about ourselves and our situation in the

world. What is articulated here is the background we assume and draw on in any claim to rightness, part of which we are forced to spell out when we have to defend our responses as the right ones.

This articulation can be very difficult and controversial. I don't just mean this in the obvious sense that our contemporaries don't always agree in moral ontology. This is clear enough: many people, if asked to give their grounds for the reactions of respect for life discussed above, would appeal to the theistic account I referred to and invoke our common status as God's creatures; others would reject this for a purely secular account and perhaps invoke the dignity of rational life. But beyond this, articulating any particular person's background can be subject to controversy. The agent himself or herself is not necessarily the best authority, at least not at the outset.

This is the case first of all because the moral ontology behind any person's views can remain largely implicit. Indeed, it usually does, unless there is some challenge which forces it to the fore. The average person needs to do very little thinking about the bases of universal respect, for instance, because just about everyone accepts this as an axiom today. The greatest violators hide behind a smoke screen of lies and special pleading. Even racist regimes, like the one in South Africa, present their programmes in the language of separate but equal development; while Soviet dissidents are jailed on various trumped-up charges or hospitalized as 'mentally ill', and the fiction is maintained that the masses elect the regime. Whether one has a theistic or secular foundation rarely comes up, except in certain very special controversies, like that about abortion.

So over wide areas, the background tends to remain unexplored. But beyond this, exploration may even be resisted. That is because there may be—and I want to argue, frequently is—a lack of fit between what people as it were officially and consciously believe, even pride themselves on believing, on one hand, and what they need to make sense of some of their moral reactions, on the other. A gap like this surfaced in the discussion above, where some naturalists propose to treat all moral ontologies as irrelevant stories, without validity, while they themselves go on arguing like the rest of us about what objects are fit and what reactions appropriate. What generally happens here is that the reductive explanation itself, often a sociobiological one, which supposedly justifies this exclusion, itself takes on the role of moral ontology. That is, it starts to provide the basis for discriminations about appropriate objects or valid responses. What starts off in chapter 1 as a hard-nosed scientific theory justifying an error theory of morality becomes in the conclusion the basis for a new 'scientific' or 'evolutionary' ethic.[5] Here, one is forced to conclude, there reigns an ideologically induced illusion about the nature of the moral ontology that the thinkers concerned actually rely on. There is a very controversial but very important job of articulation to be done

here, in the teeth of the people concerned, which can show to what extent the real spiritual basis of their own moral judgements deviates from what is officially admitted.

It will be my claim that there is a great deal of motivated suppression of moral ontology among our contemporaries, in part because the pluralist nature of modern society makes it easier to live that way, but also because of the great weight of modern epistemology (as with the naturalists evoked above) and, behind this, of the spiritual outlook associated with this epistemology. So the work I am embarked upon here could be called in large degree an essay in retrieval. Much of the ground will have to be fought for, and I will certainly not convince everybody.

But besides our disagreements and our temptations to suppress, this articulation of moral ontology will be very difficult for a third reason: the tentative, searching, uncertain nature of many of our moral beliefs. Many of our contemporaries, while they remain quite unattracted by the naturalist attempt to deny ontology altogether, and while on the contrary they recognize that their moral reactions show them to be committed to some adequate basis, are perplexed and uncertain when it comes to saying what this basis is. In our example above, many people, when faced with both the theistic and the secular ontologies as the grounds for their reactions of respect, would not feel ready to make a final choice. They concur that through their moral beliefs they acknowledge some ground in human nature or the human predicament which makes human beings fit objects of respect, but they confess that they cannot subscribe with complete conviction to any particular definition, at least not to any of the ones on offer. Something similar arises for many of them on the question of what makes human life worth living or what confers meaning on their individual lives. Most of us are still in the process of groping for answers here. This is an essentially modern predicament, as I shall try to argue below.

Where this is so, the issue of articulation can take another form. It is not merely formulating what people already implicitly but unproblematically acknowledge; nor is it showing what people really rely on in the teeth of their ideological denials. Rather it could only be carried forward by showing that one or another ontology is in fact the only adequate basis for our moral responses, whether we recognize this or not. A thesis of this kind was invoked by Dostoyevsky and discussed by Leszek Kołakowski in a recent work:[6] "If God does not exist, then everything is permitted". But this level of argument, concerning what our commitments really amount to, is even more difficult than the previous one, which tries to show, in the face of naturalist suppression, what they already are. I will probably not be able to venture very far out on this terrain in the following. It would be sufficient, and very valuable, to be able to show something about the tentative, hesitating, and

fuzzy commitments that we moderns actually rely on. The map of our moral world, however full of gaps, erasures, and blurrings, is interesting enough.

1.3

The moral world of moderns is significantly different from that of previous civilizations. This becomes clear, among other places, when we look at the sense that human beings command our respect. In one form or another, this seems to be a human universal; that is, in every society, there seems to be some such sense. The boundary around those beings worthy of respect may be drawn parochially in earlier cultures, but there always is such a class. And among what we recognize as higher civilizations, this always includes the whole human species.

What is peculiar to the modern West among such higher civilizations is that its favoured formulation for this principle of respect has come to be in terms of rights. This has become central to our legal systems—and in this form has spread around the world. But in addition, something analogous has become central to our moral thinking.

The notion of a right, also called a 'subjective right', as this developed in the Western legal tradition, is that of a legal privilege which is seen as a quasi-possession of the agent to whom it is attributed. At first such rights were differential possessions: some people had the right to participate in certain assemblies, or to give counsel, or to collect tolls on this river, and so on. The revolution in natural law theory in the seventeenth century partly consisted in using this language of rights to express the universal moral norms. We began to speak of "natural" rights, and now to such things as life and liberty which supposedly everyone has.

In one way, to speak of a universal, natural right to life doesn't seem much of an innovation. The change seems to be one of form. The earlier way of putting it was that there was a natural law against taking innocent life. Both formulations seem to prohibit the same things. But the difference lies not in what is forbidden but in the place of the subject. Law is what I must obey. It may confer on me certain benefits, here the immunity that my life, too, is to be respected; but fundamentally I am *under* law. By contrast, a subjective right is something which the possessor can and ought to act on to put it into effect. To accord you an immunity, formerly given you by natural law, in the form of a natural right is to give you a role in establishing and enforcing this immunity. Your concurrence is now necessary, and your degrees of freedom are correspondingly greater. At the extreme limit of these, you can even waive a right, thus defeating the immunity. This is why Locke, in order to close off this possibility in the case of his three basic rights, had to introduce the notion of 'inalienability'. Nothing like this was necessary on the earlier natural law

formulation, because that language by its very nature excludes the power of waiver.

To talk of universal, natural, or human rights is to connect respect for human life and integrity with the notion of autonomy. It is to conceive people as active cooperators in establishing and ensuring the respect which is due them. And this expresses a central feature of the modern Western moral outlook. This change of form naturally goes along with one in content, with the conception of what it is to respect someone. Autonomy is now central to this. So the Lockean trinity of natural rights includes that to liberty. And for us respecting personality involves as a crucial feature respecting the person's moral autonomy. With the development of the post-Romantic notion of individual difference, this expands to the demand that we give people the freedom to develop their personality in their own way, however repugnant to ourselves and even to our moral sense—the thesis developed so persuasively by J. S. Mill.

Of course not everyone agrees with Mill's principle, and its full impact on Western legislation has been very recent. But everyone in our civilization feels the force of this appeal to accord people the freedom to develop in their own way. The disagreement is over the relation of such things as pornography, or various kinds of permissive sexual behaviour, or portrayals of violence, to legitimate development. Does the prohibition of the former endanger the latter? No one doubts that if it does, this constitutes a reason, though perhaps not an ultimately decisive one, to relax social controls.

So autonomy has a central place in our understanding of respect. So much is generally agreed. Beyond this lie various richer pictures of human nature and our predicament, which offer reasons for this demand. These include, for instance, the notion of ourselves as disengaged subjects, breaking free from a comfortable but illusory sense of immersion in nature, and objectifying the world around us; or the Kantian picture of ourselves as pure rational agents; or the Romantic picture just mentioned, where we understand ourselves in terms of organic metaphors and a concept of self-expression. As is well known, the partisans of these different views are in sharp conflict with each other. Here again, a generalized moral consensus breaks into controversy at the level of philosophical explication.

I am not at all neutral on this controversy, but I don't feel at this stage in a position to contribute in a helpful way to it. I would rather try now to round out this picture of our modern understanding of respect by mentioning two other, connected features.

The first is the importance we put on avoiding suffering. This again seems to be unique among higher civilizations. Certainly we are much more sensitive on this score than our ancestors of a few centuries ago—as we can readily see if we consider the (to us) barbarous punishments they inflicted.

Once again, the legal code and its practices provide a window into broader movements of culture. Think of the horrifying description of the torture and execution of a man who had attempted regicide in mid-eighteenth-century France, which opens Michel Foucault's *Surveiller et punir.*[7] It's not that comparable horrors don't occur in the twentieth-century West. But they are now seen as shocking aberrations, which have to be hidden. Even the "clean" legal executions, where the death penalty is still in force, are no longer carried out in public, but deep within prison walls. It's with a shudder that we learn that parents used to bring small children to witness such events when they were offered as public spectacles in earlier times. We are much more sensitive to suffering, which we may of course just translate into not wanting to hear about it rather than into any concrete remedial action. But the notion that we ought to reduce it to a minimum is an integral part of what respect means to us today—however distasteful this has been to an eloquent minority, most notably to Nietzsche.

Part of the reason for this change is negative. Compared for instance to the executioners of Damiens in the eighteenth century, we don't see any point in ritually undoing the terrible crime in an equally terrible punishment. The whole notion of a cosmic moral order, which gave this restoral its sense, has faded for us. The stress on relieving suffering has grown with the decline of this kind of belief. It is what is left over, what takes on moral importance, after we no longer see human beings as playing a role in a larger cosmic order or divine history. This was part of the negative thrust of the utilitarian Enlightenment, protesting against the needless, senseless suffering inflicted on humans in the name of such larger orders or dramas.

But of course this stress on human welfare of the most immediate kind also has religious sources. It springs from the New Testament and is one of the central themes of Christian spirituality. Modern utilitarianism is one of its secularized variants. And as such it connects with a more fundamental feature to Christian spirituality, which comes to receive new and unprecedented importance at the beginning of the modern era, and which has also become central to modern culture. I want to describe this as the affirmation of ordinary life. This last is a term of art, meant roughly to designate the life of production and the family.

According to traditional, Aristotelian ethics, this has merely infrastructural importance. 'Life' was important as the necessary background and support to 'the good life' of contemplation and one's action as a citizen. With the Reformation, we find a modern, Christian-inspired sense that ordinary life was on the contrary the very centre of the good life. The crucial issue was how it was led, whether worshipfully and in the fear of God or not. But the life of the God-fearing was lived out in marriage and their calling. The previous 'higher' forms of life were dethroned, as it were. And along with this

went frequently an attack, covert or overt, on the elites which had made these forms their province.

I believe that this affirmation of ordinary life, although not uncontested and frequently appearing in secularized form, has become one of the most powerful ideas in modern civilization. It underlies our contemporary "bourgeois" politics, so much concerned with issues of welfare, and at the same time powers the most influential revolutionary ideology of our century, Marxism, with its apotheosis of man the producer. This sense of the importance of the everyday in human life, along with its corollary about the importance of suffering, colours our whole understanding of what it is truly to respect human life and integrity. Along with the central place given to autonomy, it defines a version of this demand which is peculiar to our civilization, the modern West.

1.4

Thus far I have been exploring only one strand of our moral intuitions, albeit an extremely important one. These are the moral beliefs which cluster around the sense that human life is to be respected and that the prohibitions and obligations which this imposes on us are among the most weighty and serious in our lives. I have been arguing that there is a peculiarly modern sense of what respect involves, which gives a salient place to freedom and self-control, places a high priority on avoiding suffering, and sees productive activity and family life as central to our well-being. But this cluster of moral intuitions lies along only one of the axes of our moral life. There are others to which the moral notions that I have been discussing are also relevant.

'Morality', of course, can be and often is defined purely in terms of respect for others. The category of the moral is thought to encompass just our obligations to other people. But if we adopt this definition, then we have to allow that there are other questions beyond the moral which are of central concern to us, and which bring strong evaluation into play. There are questions about how I am going to live my life which touch on the issue of what kind of life is worth living, or what kind of life would fulfill the promise implicit in my particular talents, or the demands incumbent on someone with my endowment, or of what constitutes a rich, meaningful life—as against one concerned with secondary matters or trivia. These are issues of strong evaluation, because the people who ask these questions have no doubt that one can, following one's immediate wishes and desires, take a wrong turn and hence fail to lead a full life. To understand our moral world we have to see not only what ideas and pictures underlie our sense of respect for others but also those which underpin our notions of a full life. And as we shall see, these are not two quite separate orders of ideas. There is a substantial overlap or,

rather, a complex relation in which some of the same basic notions reappear in a new way. This is particularly the case for what I called above the affirmation of ordinary life.

In general, one might try to single out three axes of what can be called, in the most general sense, moral thinking. As well as the two just mentioned—our sense of respect for and obligations to others, and our understandings of what makes a full life—there is also the range of notions concerned with dignity. By this I mean the characteristics by which we think of ourselves as commanding (or failing to command) the respect of those around us. Here the term 'respect' has a slightly different meaning than in the above. I'm not talking now about respect for rights, in the sense of non-infringement, which we might call 'active' respect, but rather of thinking well of someone, even looking up to him, which is what we imply when we say in ordinary speech that he has our respect. (Let's call this kind 'attitudinal'.)

Our 'dignity', in the particular sense I am using it here, is our sense of ourselves as commanding (attitudinal) respect. The issue of what one's dignity consists in is no more avoidable than those of why we ought to respect others' rights or what makes a full life, however much a naturalist philosophy might mislead us into thinking of this as another domain of mere 'gut' reactions, similar to those of baboons establishing their hierarchy. And in this case, its unavoidability ought to be the more obvious in that our dignity is so much woven into our very comportment. The very way we walk, move, gesture, speak is shaped from the earliest moments by our awareness that we appear before others, that we stand in public space, and that this space is potentially one of respect or contempt, of pride or shame. Our style of movement expresses how we see ourselves as enjoying respect or lacking it, as commanding it or failing to do so. Some people flit through public space as though avoiding it, others rush through as though hoping to sidestep the issue of how they appear in it by the very serious purpose with which they transit through it; others again saunter through with assurance, savouring their moments within it; still others swagger, confident of how their presence marks it: think of the carefully leisurely way the policeman gets out of his car, having stopped you for speeding, and the slow, swaying walk over as he comes to demand your licence.[8]

Just what do we see our dignity consisting in? It can be our power, our sense of dominating public space; or our invulnerability to power; or our self-sufficiency, our life having its own centre; or our being liked and looked to by others, a centre of attention. But very often the sense of dignity can ground in some of the same moral views I mentioned above. For instance, my sense of myself as a householder, father of a family, holding down a job, providing for my dependants; all this can be the basis of my sense of dignity. Just as its absence can be catastrophic, can shatter it by totally undermining

my feeling of self-worth. Here the sense of dignity is woven into this modern notion of the importance of ordinary life, which reappears again on this axis.

Probably something like these three axes exists in every culture. But there are great differences in how they are conceived, how they relate, and in their relative importance. For the warrior and honour ethic that seems to have been dominant among the ruling strata of archaic Greece, whose deeds were celebrated by Homer, this third axis seems to have been paramount, and seems even to have incorporated the second axis without remainder. The '*agathos*' is the man of dignity and power.[9] And enough of this survives into the classical period for Plato to have depicted an ethic of power and self-aggrandizement as one of his major targets, in figures like Callicles and Thrasymachus. For us, this is close to inconceivable. It seems obvious that the first axis has paramountcy, followed by the second. Connected with this, it would probably have been incomprehensible to the people of that archaic period that the first axis should be conceived in terms of an ethic of general principles, let alone one founded on reason, as against one grounded in religious prohibitions which brooked no discussion.

One of the most important ways in which our age stands out from earlier ones concerns the second axis. A set of questions make sense to us which turn around the meaning of life and which would not have been fully understandable in earlier epochs. Moderns can anxiously doubt whether life has meaning, or wonder what its meaning is. However philosophers may be inclined to attack these formulations as vague or confused, the fact remains that we all have an immediate sense of what kind of worry is being articulated in these words.

We can perhaps get at the point of these questions in the following way. Questions along the second axis can arise for people in any culture. Someone in a warrior society might ask whether his tale of courageous deeds lives up to the promise of his lineage or the demands of his station. People in a religious culture often ask whether the demand of conventional piety are sufficient for them or whether they don't feel called to some purer, more dedicated vocation. Figures of this kind have founded most of the great religious orders in Christendom, for instance. But in each of these cases, some framework stands unquestioned which helps define the demands by which they judge their lives and measure, as it were, their fulness or emptiness: the space of fame in the memory and song of the tribe, or the call of God as made clear in revelation, or, to take another example, the hierarchical order of being in the universe.

It is now a commonplace about the modern world that it has made these frameworks problematic. On the level of explicit philosophical or theological doctrine, this is dramatically evident. Some traditional frameworks are discredited or downgraded to the status of personal predilection, like the

space of fame. Others have ceased to be credible altogether in anything like their original form, like the Platonic notion of the order of being. The forms of revealed religion continue very much alive, but also highly contested. None forms the horizon of the whole society in the modern West.

This term 'horizon' is the one that is frequently used to make this point. What Weber called 'disenchantment', the dissipation of our sense of the cosmos as a meaningful order, has allegedly destroyed the horizons in which people previously lived their spiritual lives. Nietzsche used the term in his celebrated "God is dead" passage: "How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon?"[10] Perhaps this way of putting it appeals above all to the intellectuals, who put a lot of stock in the explicit doctrines that people subscribe to, and anyway tend to be unbelievers. But the loss of horizon described by Nietzsche's fool undoubtedly corresponds to something very widely felt in our culture.

This is what I tried to describe with the phrase above, that frameworks today are problematic. This vague term points towards a relatively open disjunction of attitudes. What is common to them all is the sense that no framework is shared by everyone, can be taken for granted as *the* framework tout court, can sink to the phenomenological status of unquestioned fact. This basic understanding refracts differently in the stances people take. For some it may mean holding a definite traditionally defined view with the self-conscious sense of standing against a major part of one's compatriots. Others may hold the view but with a pluralist sense that it is one among others, right for us but not necessarily binding on them. Still others identify with a view but in the somewhat tentative, semi-provisional way I described above in section 1.2. This seems to them to come close to formulating what they believe, or to saying what for them seems to be the spiritual source they can connect their lives with; but they are aware of their own uncertainties, of how far they are from being able to recognize a definitive formulation with ultimate confidence. There is alway something tentative in their adhesion, and they may see themselves, as, in a sense, seeking. They are on a 'quest', in Alasdair MacIntyre's apt phrase.[11]

With these seekers, of course, we are taken beyond the gamut of traditionally available frameworks. Not only do they embrace these traditions tentatively, but they also often develop their own versions of them, or idiosyncratic combinations of or borrowings from or semi-inventions within them. And this provides the context within which the question of meaning has its place.

To the extent that one sees the finding of a believable framework as the object of a quest, to that extent it becomes intelligible that the search might fail. This might happen through personal inadequacy, but failure might also come from there being no ultimately believable framework. Why speak of

this in terms of a loss of meaning? Partly because a framework is that in virtue of which we make sense of our lives spiritually. Not to have a framework is to fall into a life which is spiritually senseless. The quest is thus always a quest for sense.

But the invocation of meaning also comes from our awareness of how much the search involves articulation. We find the sense of life through articulating it. And moderns have become acutely aware of how much sense being there for us depends on our own powers of expression. Discovering here depends on, is interwoven with, inventing. Finding a sense to life depends on framing meaningful expressions which are adequate. There is thus something particularly appropriate to our condition in the polysemy of the word 'meaning': lives can have or lack it when they have or lack a point; while it also applies to language and other forms of expression. More and more, we moderns attain meaning in the first sense, when we do, through creating it in the second sense.

The problem of the meaning of life is therefore on our agenda, however much we may jibe at this phrase, either in the form of a threatened loss of meaning or because making sense of our life is the object of a quest. And those whose spiritual agenda is mainly defined in this way are in a fundamentally different existential predicament from that which dominated most previous cultures and still defines the lives of other people today. That alternative is a predicament in which an unchallengeable framework makes imperious demands which we fear being unable to meet. We face the prospect of irretrievable condemnation or exile, of being marked down in obloquy forever, or being sent to damnation irrevocably, or being relegated to a lower order through countless future lives. The pressure is potentially immense and inescapable, and we may crack under it. The form of the danger here is utterly different from that which threatens the modern seeker, which is something close to the opposite: the world loses altogether its spiritual contour, nothing is worth doing, the fear is of a terrifying emptiness, a kind of vertigo, or even a fracturing of our world and body-space.

To see the contrast, think of Luther, in his intense anguish and distress before his liberating moment of insight about salvation through faith, his sense of inescapable condemnation, irretrievably damning himself through the very instruments of salvation, the sacraments. However one might want to describe this, it was not a crisis of meaning. This term would have made no sense to Luther in its modern use that I have been describing here. The 'meaning' of life was all too unquestionable for this Augustinian monk, as it was for his whole age.[12]

The existential predicament in which one fears condemnation is quite different from the one where one fears, above all, meaninglessness. The dominance of the latter perhaps defines our age.[13] But even so, the former still

exists for many, and the contrast may help us understand different moral stances in our society: the contrast between the moral majority of born-again evangelicals in the contemporary American West and South, on one hand, and their middle-class urban compatriots on the East Coast, on the other.

In a way which we cannot yet properly understand, the shift between these two existential predicaments seems to be matched by a recent change in the dominant patterns of psychopathology. It has frequently been remarked by psychoanalysts that the period in which hysterics and patients with phobias and fixations formed the bulk of their clientele, starting in their classical period with Freud, has recently given way to a time when the main complaints centre around "ego loss", or a sense of emptiness, flatness, futility, lack of purpose, or loss of self-esteem.[14] Just what the relation is between these styles of pathology and the non-pathological predicaments which parallel them is very unclear. In order even to have a serious try at understanding this, we would have to gain a better grasp of the structures of the self, something I want to attempt below. But it seems overwhelmingly plausible a priori that there is some relation; and that the comparatively recent shift in style of pathology reflects the generalization and popularization in our culture of that "loss of horizon", which a few alert spirits were foretelling for a century or more.

1.5

Of course, the same naturalist temper that I mentioned above, which would like to do without ontological claims altogether and just make do with moral reactions, is very suspicious of this talk of meaning and frameworks. People of this bent would like to declare this issue of meaning a pseudo-question and brand the various frameworks within which it finds an answer as gratuitous inventions. Some find this tempting for epistemological reasons: the stripped-down ontology which excludes these frameworks seems to them more in keeping with a scientific outlook. But there are also reasons deep in a certain moral outlook common in our time which push people in this direction. I hope to explain this more clearly below.

But just as with the ontological claims above underlying our respect for life, this radical reduction cannot be carried through. To see why is to understand something important about the place of these frameworks in our lives.

What I have been calling a framework incorporates a crucial set of qualitative distinctions. To think, feel, judge within such a framework is to function with the sense that some action, or mode of life, or mode of feeling is incomparably higher than the others which are more readily available to us. I am using 'higher' here in a generic sense. The sense of what the difference

consists in may take different forms. One form of life may be seen as fuller, another way of feeling and acting as purer, a mode of feeling or living as deeper, a style of life as more admirable, a given demand as making an absolute claim against other merely relative ones, and so on.

I have tried to express what all these distinctions have in common by the term 'incomparable'. In each of these cases, the sense is that there are ends or goods which are worthy or desirable in a way that cannot be measured on the same scale as our ordinary ends, goods, desirabilia. They are not just *more* desirable, in the same sense though to a greater degree, than some of these ordinary goods are. Because of their special status they command our awe, respect, or admiration.

And this is where incomparability connects up with what I have been calling 'strong evaluation': the fact that these ends or goods stand independent of our own desires, inclinations, or choices, that they represent standards by which these desires and choices are judged. These are obviously two linked facets of the same sense of higher worth. The goods which command our awe must also function in some sense as standards for us.

Looking at some common examples of such frameworks will help to focus the discussion. One of the earliest in our civilization, and which is still alive for some people today, is that associated with the honour ethic. The life of the warrior, or citizen, or citizen-soldier is deemed higher than the merely private existence, devoted to the arts of peace and economic well-being. The higher life is marked out by the aura of fame and glory which attaches to it, or at least to signal cases, those who succeed in it brilliantly. To be in public life or to be a warrior is to be at least a candidate for fame. To be ready to hazard one's tranquility, wealth, even life for glory is the mark of a real man; and those who cannot bring themselves to this are judged with contempt as "womanish" (this outlook seems to be inherently sexist).

Against this, we have the celebrated and influential counter-position put forward by Plato. Virtue is no longer to be found in public life or in excelling in the warrior *agōn*. The higher life is that ruled by reason, and reason itself is defined in terms of a vision of order, in the cosmos and in the soul. The higher life is one in which reason—purity, order, limit, the unchanging—governs the desires, with their bent to excess, insatiability, fickleness, conflict.

Already in this transvaluation of values, something else has altered in addition to the content of the good life, far-reaching as this change is. Plato's ethic requires what we might call today a theory, a reasoned account of what human life is about, and why one way is higher than the others. This flows inescapably from the new moral status of reason. But the framework within which we act and judge doesn't need to be articulated theoretically. It isn't, usually, by those who live by the warrior ethic. They share certain discriminations: what is honourable and dishonouring, what is admirable, what is

done and not done. It has often been remarked that to be a gentleman is to know how to behave without ever being told the rules. (And the "gentlemen" here are the heirs of the former warrior nobility.)

That is why I spoke above of acting within a framework as functioning with a 'sense' of a qualitative distinction. It can be only this; or it can be spelled out in a highly explicit way, in a philosophically formulated ontology or anthropology. In the case of some frameworks it may be optional whether one formulates them or not. But in other cases, the nature of the framework demands it, as with Plato, or seems to forbid it, as with the warrior-citizen ethic he attacked: this does seem to be refractory to theoretical formulation. Those who place a lot of importance on this latter tend to downplay or denigrate the role and powers of theory in human life.

But I want to mention this distinction here partly in order to avoid an error we easily fall victim to. We could conclude from the fact that some people operate without a philosophically defined framework that they are quite without a framework at all. And that might be totally untrue (indeed, I want to claim, always is untrue). For like our inarticulate warriors, their lives may be entirely structured by supremely important qualitative distinctions, in relation to which they literally live and die. This will be evident enough in the judgement calls they make on their own and others' action. But it may be left entirely to us, observers, historians, philosophers, anthropologists, to try to formulate explicitly what goods, qualities, or ends are here discriminated. It is this level of inarticulacy, at which we often function, that I try to describe when I speak of the 'sense' of a qualitative distinction.

Plato's distinction stands at the head of a large family of views which see the good life as a mastery of self which consists in the dominance of reason over desire. One of the most celebrated variants in the ancient world was Stoicism. And with the development of the modern scientific world-view a specifically modern variant has developed. This is the ideal of the disengaged self, capable of objectifying not only the surrounding world but also his own emotions and inclinations, fears and compulsions, and achieving thereby a kind of distance and self-possession which allows him to act 'rationally'. This last term has been put in quotes, because obviously its meaning has changed relative to the Platonic sense. Reason is no longer defined in terms of a vision of order in the cosmos, but rather is defined procedurally, in terms of instrumental efficacy, or maximization of the value sought, or self-consistency.

The framework of self-mastery through reason has also developed theistic variants, in Jewish and Christian thought. Indeed, it is one of them which first spawned the ideal of disengagement. But the marriage with Platonism, or with Greek philosophy in general, was always uneasy; and another, specifically Christian, theme has also been very influential in our civilization. This is the understanding of the higher life as coming from a transformation of the

will. In the original theological conception, this change is the work of grace, but it has also gone through a number of secularizing transpositions. And variants of both forms, theological and secular, structure people's lives today. Perhaps the most important form of this ethic today is the ideal of altruism. With the decline of the specifically theological definition of the nature of a transformed will, a formulation of the crucial distinction of higher and lower in terms of altruism and selfishness comes to the fore. This now has a dominant place in modern thought and sensibility about what is incomparably higher in life. Real dedication to others or to the universal good wins our admiration and even in signal cases our awe. The crucial quality which commands our respect here is a certain direction of the will. This is very different from the spirit of Platonic self-mastery, where the issue turns on the hegemony of reason, however much that spirit may overlap in practice with altruism (and the overlap is far from complete). And for all its obvious roots in Christian spirituality, and perfect compatibility with it, the secular ethic of altruism has discarded something essential to the Christian outlook, once the love of God no longer plays a role.

Alongside ethics of fame, of rational mastery and control, of the transformation of the will, there has grown up in the last two centuries a distinction based on vision and expressive power. There is a set of ideas and intuitions, still inadequately understood, which makes us admire the artist and the creator more than any other civilization ever has; which convinces us that a life spent in artistic creation or performance is eminently worthwhile. This complex of ideas itself has Platonic roots. We are taking up a semi-suppressed side of Plato's thought which emerges, for instance, in the *Phaedrus,* where he seems to think of the poet, inspired by mania, as capable of seeing what sober people are not. The widespread belief today that the artist sees farther than the rest of us, attested by our willingness to take seriously the opinions about politics expressed by painters or singers, even though they may have no more special expertise in public affairs than the next person, seems to spring from the same roots. But there is also something quintessentially modern in this outlook. It depends on that modern sense, invoked in the previous section, that what meaning there is for us depends in part on our powers of expression, that discovering a framework is interwoven with inventing.

But this rapid sketch of some of the most important distinctions which structure people's lives today will be even more radically incomplete if I do not take account of the fact with which I started this section: that there is a widespread temper, which I called 'naturalist', which is tempted to deny these frameworks altogether. We see this not only in those enamoured of reductive explanations but in another way in classical utilitarianism. The aim of this philosophy was precisely to reject all qualitative distinctions and to construe all human goals as on the same footing, susceptible therefore of common quantification and calculation according to some common 'currency'. My thesis here is that this idea is deeply mistaken. But as I said above, it is motivated itself by moral reasons, and these reasons form an essential part of the picture of the frameworks people live by in our day.

This has to do with what I called in section 1.3 the 'affirmation of ordinary life'. The notion that the life of production and reproduction, of work and the family, is the main locus of the good life flies in the face of what were originally the dominant distinctions of our civilization. For both the warrior ethic and the Platonic, ordinary life in this sense is part of the lower range, part of what contrasts with the incomparably higher. The affirmation of ordinary life therefore involves a polemical stance towards these traditional views and their implied elitism. This was true of the Reformation theologies, which are the main source of the drive to this affirmation in modern times.

It is this polemical stance, carried over and transposed in secular guise, which powers the reductive views like utilitarianism which want to denounce all qualitative distinctions. They are all accused, just as the honour ethic or the monastic ethic of supererogation was earlier, of wrongly and perversely downgrading ordinary life, of failing to see that our destiny lies here in production and reproduction and not in some alleged higher sphere, of being blind to the dignity and worth of ordinary human desire and fulfilment.

In this, naturalism and utilitarianism touch a strong nerve of modern sensibility, and this explains some of their persuasive force. My claim is here that they are nevertheless deeply confused. For the affirmation of ordinary life, while necessarily denouncing certain distinctions, itself amounts to one; else it has no meaning at all. The notion that there is a certain dignity and worth in this life requires a contrast; no longer, indeed, between this life and some "higher" activity like contemplation, war, active citizenship, or heroic asceticism, but now lying between different ways of living the life of production and reproduction. The notion is never that *whatever* we do is acceptable. This would be unintelligible as the basis for a notion of dignity. Rather the key point is that the higher is to be found not outside of but as a *manner of living* ordinary life. For the Reformers this manner was defined theologically; for classical utilitarians, in terms of (instrumental) rationality. For Marxists, the expressivist element of free self-creation is added to Enlightenment rationality. But in all cases, some distinction is maintained between the higher, the admirable life and the lower life of sloth, irrationality, slavery, or alienation.

Once one sets aside the naturalist illusion, however, what remains is an extremely important fact about modern moral consciousness: a tension between the affirmation of ordinary life, to which we moderns are strongly drawn, and some of our most important moral distinctions. Indeed, it is too

simple to speak of a tension. We are in conflict, even confusion, about what it means to affirm ordinary life. What for some is the highest affirmation is for others blanket denial. Think of the utilitarian attack on orthodox Christianity; then of Dostoyevsky's attack on utilitarian utopian engineering. For those who are not firmly aligned on one side or the other of an ideological battle, this is the source of a deep uncertainty. We are as ambivalent about heroism as we are about the value of the workaday goals that it sacrifices. We struggle to hold on to a vision of the incomparably higher, while being true to the central modern insights about the value of ordinary life. We sympathize with both the hero and the anti-hero; and we dream of a world in which one could be in the same act both. This is the confusion in which naturalism takes root.

2

THE SELF IN MORAL SPACE

2.1

I said at the beginning of section 1.5 that the naturalist reduction which would exclude frameworks altogether from consideration cannot be carried through, and that to see why this is so is to understand something important about the place of frameworks in our lives. Having seen a little better what these frameworks consist in, I want now to pursue this point.

In sections 1.4 and 1.5 I have been talking about these qualitative distinctions in their relation to the issue of the meaning of life. But it is plain that distinctions of this kind play a role in all three dimensions of moral assessment that I identified above. The sense that human beings are capable of some kind of higher life forms part of the background for our belief that they are fit objects of respect, that their life and integrity is sacred or enjoys immunity, and is not to be attacked. As a consequence, we can see our conception of what this immunity consists in evolving with the development of new frameworks. Thus the fact that we now place such importance on expressive power means that our contemporary notions of what it is to respect people's integrity includes that of protecting their expressive freedom to express and develop their own opinions, to define their own life conceptions, to draw up their own life-plans.

At the same time, the third dimension too involves distinctions of this kind. The dignity of the warrior, the citizen, the householder, and so on repose on the background understanding that some special value attaches to these forms of life or to the rank or station that these people have attained within them.

Indeed, one of the examples above, the honour ethic, has plainly been the background for a very widespread understanding of dignity, which attaches to the free citizen or warrior-citizen and to an even higher degree to someone who plays a major role in public life. This goes on being an important dimension of our life in modern society, and the fierce competition for this kind of dignity is part of what animates democratic politics.

These distinctions, which I have been calling frameworks, are thus woven

NOTES

1. INESCAPABLE FRAMEWORKS

1. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970).
2. See my "What Is Human Agency?" in Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). A good test for whether an evaluation is 'strong' in my sense is whether it can be the basis for attitudes of admiration and contempt.
3. J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977).
4. See the discussion below in section 3.2 and also my "Explanation and Practical Reason" (forthcoming).
5. For a good example of this, see E. O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).
6. See Leszek Kołakowski, *Religion* (London: Fontana, 1982).
7. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).
8. See Marcel Proust, *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p. 438, on this inescapable sense of and concern for our appearance in public space.
9. See A. W. H. Adkins, *From the Many to the One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. 9–10.
10. See *The Gay Science*, para. 125. All translations are by Gretta Taylor or by myself, unless otherwise specified.
11. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 203–204.
12. See the perceptive discussion of this crisis of Luther as what we moderns would call a crisis of "identity" in Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther* (New York: Norton, 1958).
13. Paul Tillich, in *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), has described the difference between the age of the Reformation and our own in something like these terms.
14. See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1979), pp. 80–81; and also Janet Malcolm, *Psycho-analysis: The Impossible Profession* (New York: Knopf, 1981).