

interpretation

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Autonomous Morality and the Idea of the Noble

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INTRODUCTION

I refer to autonomous morality in my title, and what I principally mean by the term is that tradition of moral theorizing that wants to separate off moral values and moral thinking from other forms of thinking, such as thinking about natural objects, and to set it in a realm of its own where it operates according to its own internal logic without having any foundation in anything outside itself. In this sense morality is autonomous because it has its own independent sphere. This autonomy is often expressed by reference to the is/ought distinction. Morality is the realm of the 'ought', not the 'is', and this 'ought' is *sui generis* and is not, for instance, like the prudential or hypothetical 'ought'. For the prudential 'ought' rests for its force on the facts about the contingent desires and interests people have, and just tells one what one ought to do if one is to satisfy them; but the moral 'ought' has a force peculiar to itself, and is somehow uncontaminated by calculations of selfish advantage. Unless one recognizes this peculiar 'categorical' character of morality, it is said, one has failed to grasp the idea of moral thinking at all.¹

Another way of stating the same idea is to say that morality is nonnaturalist, or that thinking about what one ought to do and what counts as morally good is quite different from thinking about how things are or about the true and false. In this sense it is said that moral thinking is volitional rather than cognitive, for it is not constituted by knowing certain facts, but rather by the performance of certain acts of will, or acts of choice that are spontaneous and not elicited by any prior acts of thought. The existence of morality as an independent sphere is thus understood as arising from the fact that it is constituted by independent, spontaneous acts of will. As both senses of independence used here are to be counted as senses of autonomy, the autonomous morality of my title must be taken to embrace both.

An earlier version of this article was read to the Irish Philosophical Society at its conference in Cork, March 1984. I am grateful to the other participants for the stimulating and helpful discussion that followed.

1. E.g. Phillips and Mounce, "On Morality's Having a Point", in Hudson, *The Is/Ought Question* (Macmillan, London, 1969), p. 233; Hudson, *Modern Moral Philosophy* (Macmillan, London, 1970), pp. 274–75 (though see also pp. 276–81); the very interesting article of Duff, "Desire, Duty and Moral Absolutes," in *Philosophy*, 55, 1980, pp. 223–38; Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1878), essays 11 and 12; Paton, *The Moral Law* (Hutchinson University Library, London, 1948), p. 22; Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines* (RKP, London, 1962), vol. 1, p. 275; MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Duckworth, London 1981), p. 131.

The claim that morality is autonomous is often looked upon as the guarantee of its peculiar and distinctive character, without which it would get reduced or collapsed into something quite different. But one may also and equally look upon it as the claim that there is a divorce, or a severing, between the realm of knowledge and nature on the one hand and the realm of will and moral values on the other. At least the finest exponent of the autonomy of morality, Kant, looked on it like this, as he made starkly evident in the introduction to his *Third Critique*.

It is, in fact, this theme of the autonomy of morality as constituting a divorce or split in human existence that I want to examine in this article. Considering the influence of the ideas of autonomous morality today, and even more so the influence of Kant in contemporary moral philosophy, it is a theme that perhaps deserves more attention than it is usually given.² If I choose to approach it from the vantage of history, it is not because I think a philosophical position can be explained or refuted in terms of its origins, but because in many cases, and especially in this case, the internal logic of a philosophical position can become clearer if seen in its process of growth. The precise bearing and significance of different elements in a united whole, and which they still have in that whole, may be better seen if observed outside it in their beginnings. In this way, when one returns to the whole, one may be able to discern in it what before had escaped one's notice.

My principal object of concern in what follows will be Kant (though I will deal with several others as well). I regard him not just as the finest but also the first exponent of the idea of autonomous morality, and as the one who is responsible, if anyone is, for the persistence of that idea in our own day.³ My remarks will of course not be exhaustive, either with respect to history or with respect to the philosophy of Kant. I hope, nevertheless, that they will be pertinent and provocative.

THE 'REALISM' OF MACHIAVELLI

In tracing any historical development one is always faced with the problem of how far back to go. Wherever one stops it will always be possible to continue further, for no historical beginning is absolutely a beginning (except possibly the Big Bang). Obviously one needs to go back as far as is required for one's purpose. My purpose can suitably begin with Machiavelli. I cannot really justify this choice in advance because the justification is precisely the ensuing argument where the importance of Machiavelli for my theme will become clear. I can,

2. E.g. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (OUP, Oxford, 1963), pp. 34, 219; *Moral Thinking* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1981), pp. 4, 9–11; Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (OUP, Oxford 1972), pp. viii, 256; Foot, *op. cit.*, pp. 157ff.

3. Cf. Von Wright, *Varieties of Goodness* (RKP, London, 1963), p. 1.

nevertheless, appeal to the fact that Machiavelli is widely regarded as initiating something original; as being one of the chief founders of modern forms of thought.⁴ Since autonomous morality as I have described it is a typically modern doctrine (nothing like it exists in ancient moral thought which is far more holistic and naturalist in character), it would not be surprising if it has roots in Machiavelli.⁵

There has, of course, been much debate about the novelty of Machiavelli, and I have no intention here of entering this debate.⁶ I will note one particular element of his thinking which is especially relevant for my purposes. This is his rejection of the ancient idea that there is by nature a supreme or highest good for man (namely human perfection), which is discoverable by reason and which determines the character and structure of the good life. This, one may say, was the very substance of ancient moral and political thought, and in chapter 15 of *The Prince* Machiavelli gives what is effectively his dismissal of it. Declaring his intention to write something “useful”, and separating himself from the “orders” of others, he was going to go to the “effectual truth of the matter,” not the “imagination of it.” He accordingly mounted an attack on the thinkers of the previous tradition, those who “imagined republics and principedoms that have never been seen, or known to be in truth.” It is in this that is found what I shall call Machiavelli’s ‘realism’, or his refusal to indulge in speculations about, and constructions of, the best regime, such as were usual in the classical writers, and his insistence instead on speaking about the world of actual realities, and to men whose concern was with getting on in that world. The effort, by the imaginative construction of the best regime, to see as far as possible what political order will best realize man’s highest good, and the attempt to live by the virtues relative to that good, is rejected by Machiavelli as both useless and ruinous.

Machiavelli’s work may have a confessedly practical rather than theoretical orientation—for he wants not to speculate but to get results—yet his practical teaching is given a theoretical basis. “Nature,” he writes, “has created men in a way that they can desire everything but cannot obtain everything”;⁷ and again: “human appetites are insatiable, because having from nature the power and wish to desire everything, and from fortune the power to obtain few of them, there re-

4. E.g. Berlin, *Against the Current* (Hogarth Press, London 1979), essay on “The Originality of Machiavelli”; Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (CUP, Cambridge, 1978), vol. 1, pp. 180–86; Procacci, *Machiavelli: Il Principe e Discorsi* (Feltrinelli, Milan, 1979), Intro., p. xcii.

5. The novelty of the modern autonomous ‘ought’ was argued in a famous article by Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy”, in Hudson, *The Is/Ought Question*, pp. 175–95 (it originally appeared in *Philosophy*, 33, 1958). The thesis has been recently and more elaborately re-argued by MacIntyre, *op. cit.* While I agree with some of the things especially that MacIntyre says, my own views are somewhat different and owe more to the writings of Leo Strauss (e.g. *Natural Right and History*, Chicago, 1953).

6. For a summary of the varying views, see the essay by Berlin, note 4.

7. *Discourses*: Bk. 1, ch. 37; all translations, whether of Machiavelli or others, are my own.

sults continually an ill content in human minds, and a disgust with the things that are possessed".⁸ For Machiavelli men's desires turn out to be both insatiable and self-interested. Men's good is their private good, their private pleasure and advantage. As he sees it, men are directed by nature only to the objects of their contingent and self-regarding passions, and to all of them equally, not to one more than another. There can be no sense in speaking of a highest among these, or of one that will complete and satisfy the possessor.

Moreover because these passions are infinite but man's lot is such that he can never satisfy them, the natural human condition is understood as one of misery and frustration. The world is hostile to man and opposed to his natural urges. Machiavelli, in fact, speaks almost as if nature had been deliberately cruel and vicious to man. At any rate his 'realist' vision is of man as a creature of selfish passions set in a hostile world where he is forever condemned to frustration in greater or lesser degree.

The contrast between this vision of man and the ancient vision could hardly be greater. It is, therefore, of some importance to fix the precise sense and character of the difference. The traditional idea of a supreme end for man may be said to have two aspects to it: (i) it is the fully satisfying object of desire that excludes nothing desirable;⁹ (ii) it is an ordered hierarchy responding to the objective hierarchy of human nature. Man is a being made up of parts and these parts are rightly ordered when subject to the discipline of reason, and when they preserve and assist the activity of reason (in art, science, philosophy, etc.). It is not the case, therefore, that whatever one may subjectively and contingently happen to desire will be satisfied by the supreme good, for it may be that some of these desires lack the necessary subordination to reason. Attaining the supreme good involves not just the satisfaction of desire, but also the disciplining and control of desire, so that it does not exceed the rational measure; but this in fact proves to be the most desirable and fully satisfying state because it is the state that accords with the objective condition of nature.¹⁰

The good life may thus be the most objectively satisfying life; but it is also the most noble or excellent life. The noble is understood as the highest and most elevated, and in the context of human life, high and elevated mean the most complete and advanced development of soul, where life is lived to its fullest and most intense. As this development of soul, or perfection, is precisely the realizing in oneself of the hierarchy of one's being, it follows that the good and satisfied life must also, at least in the ultimate case, be the noble and beautiful life. Such a life is the intention of nature itself: this is what man is naturally directed towards. In

8. *Ibid.*: Bk. 2, Preface.

9. E.g. Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, III, prose 2; Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1215^b18; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, q. 1, a. 5.

10. This is certainly the thrust of Plato's and Aristotle's ethical thought, and of Aquinas in his articles on happiness, *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, qq. 1–5.

becoming good and noble, in achieving virtue and rational self-control, one does not oppose or thwart one's natural inclinations but rather follows them.

For Machiavelli, however, the reverse is the case. Man has no natural inclination to virtue or nobility; he is just by nature a creature of multitudinous passions, ruled by whatever desires he happens to have and moved by nothing but the restless urge to satisfy them. There might still be here a notion (implicit rather than explicit) of a supreme good in the sense of complete satisfaction of desire (though this satisfaction remains out of reach), but not in the sense of an ordered hierarchy. There is no longer any attempt in Machiavelli to distinguish among natural and unnatural desires, or to impose, in the name of nature, discipline and restraint on the latter; instead all desires whatever are regarded as equally natural. By thus retaining the idea of complete satisfaction and rejecting the idea of order and hierarchy, the idea of complete satisfaction of one's being and one's yearning for it become, instead of something ennobling and elevating, a curse and a burden; and man's world, instead of friendly and beneficent, hostile and cruel.¹¹

Man's desires thus cease to be a guide to follow and become rather a problem to overcome. These desires are the cause both of happiness and misery; happiness if they are satisfied, misery if they are not. Complete happiness is impossible but one can at least contrive to get what one can. In Machiavelli's case this takes the form of the devious and unscrupulous techniques of his political science whereby the artful prince is able to conquer and subdue other men and win for himself the pleasures of lasting rule and glory. There were, however, other answers, notably that of Hobbes.

Hobbes presents the Machiavellian picture of man in some ways more effectively even than Machiavelli himself. To quote one of his more striking passages:

There is no such *finis ultimus* (utmost aim) nor *summum bonum* (greatest good) as is spoken of in the books of the old moral philosophers. Nor can a man any more live whose desires are at an end than he whose senses and imaginations are at a stand.

Felicity is a continual progress of the desire from one object to another, the attaining of the former being still but the way to the later. The cause whereof is that the object of man's desire is not to enjoy once only and for one instant of time, but to assure forever the way of his future desire.¹²

This insatiable quest for satisfactions has the inevitable result, in Hobbes' view, that in all men there is a "perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceaseth only in death;" for what men want is not just satisfaction now but an ability to secure satisfaction for the future.¹³ This necessarily brings men into con-

11. Aristotle was as aware as Machiavelli of the infinite character of the passions; but because of his notion of hierarchy, he holds, unlike Machiavelli, that reason's imposition of a measure on the passions is natural and ultimately most satisfying, cf. *Politics*, 1257^b24–8^a14.

12. *Leviathan*, ch. 11; I have changed spelling and punctuation to bring them more into line with current conventions.

13. *Ibid.*

flict, since they are competing for limited goods and so striving to get the better of each other. From this results the “war of everyman against everyman” where, far from being satisfied or secure, each is in continual fear of violent death.

This picture is quite parallel to Machiavelli’s, but Hobbes has not acquired the same reputation for ‘wickedness’ and ‘evil arts’. The reason, I think, is not far to seek. While Machiavelli leaves the unredeemed condition of man unredeemed and merely counsels how to exploit it to one’s own advantage, Hobbes in a quite ingenious way endeavours to refound morality on its basis. He does this in effect by finding a substitute for the traditional idea of a highest end; only Hobbes’ substitute is rather a necessary condition than a supreme end. In the state of war of everyman against everyman, since no one can be sure of getting any satisfaction at all, let alone of assuring satisfactions for the future, the one absolutely indispensable thing for everyone is to replace it with a state of peace. Peace is the universal and necessary condition for the attainment of any satisfaction whatever, and hence for the attainment and safe enjoyment of anything that the individual can call good. Whatever, therefore, is necessary for peace is necessary for any sort of decent and satisfied life. Hobbes accordingly constructs a set of rules or “natural laws”, whose sole purpose is to secure peace; they are, as he calls them, “convenient articles of peace”.¹⁴ They are also at the same time the normative rules of Hobbes’ moral theory. That is why I call this universal condition of peace a substitute for the ancient vision of a supreme end. For as the ancients understood the moral by reference to the highest good of human perfection, so Hobbes understands the moral by reference to the necessary condition of peace.¹⁵

Hobbes’ theory may be ingenious but the morality that results has a certain feature that, for my present theme, deserves particular notice. It creates a two-fold split or divorce. First of all there is a divorce that it creates between the moral life and the satisfied life. Morality consists in the rules of peace, and these rules consist in giving up, for the sake of satisfying some of one’s passions, the pursuit of the satisfaction of all of them. For to try to satisfy all is to achieve nothing but the war of everyman against everyman, and that in turn is to achieve nothing but the frustration of all one’s passions. One has, therefore, a choice between satisfying some passions or none; one certainly cannot satisfy all.

But just as there is this divorce between the moral life and the fully satisfied life, so there is a divorce between the moral life and the natural life. By nature man pursues the satisfaction of all passions whatever, without distinction, and morality comes along as a check, a restraint, on nature, to hold it back—in short to frustrate it; for even if the frustration is partial and is justified in the name of satisfaction, it is still frustration and a frustration that one cannot entirely avoid. This is implicitly admitted by Hobbes, but it has taken a modern Hobbesian, G. J. Warnock, who consciously constructs his morality on the Hobbesian model, to

14. *Ibid.*, ch. 13.

15. *Ibid.*, ch. 15, *ad finem*.

point out that such a morality—since it involves the frustration indeed the repression, not the fulfillment, of nature—involves also the likelihood of causing continuous psychological damage, or a general psychic malaise.¹⁶ It is at any rate quite clear that Hobbesian morality generates a split or divorce in the structure of human life: the requirements of morality and those of satisfaction and nature are in insoluble conflict.

If in elaborating one of the strands of Machiavellian ‘realism’ Hobbes uncovers one divorce it creates within human existence, Bacon and Descartes, by elaborating a further strand of it, uncover another. Along with Machiavelli’s picture of man as a collection of unordered passions went also, as has already been briefly mentioned, a picture of knowledge as a technique of mastery for personal advantage. To control the insatiable beast that is man one needs skill and force, and Machiavelli prided himself on his knowledge, on his understanding of the passions of men, and much more on his understanding of how to control them.¹⁷ The Machiavellian prince is a man who knows how to manipulate men, and to exploit their passions to his own advantage; he is a man endowed with a superior technique. The man of knowledge in this sense is a man who knows how to conquer human nature and human affairs; knowledge, in other words, is power and for the conquest of what is known.

Machiavelli confined his knowledge to control of man, but Bacon, who picked up Machiavelli’s idea of knowledge as conquest, thought it could and should be applied to the conquest of nonhuman things as well, so that they could be exploited for human advantage. It seemed to Bacon, who at least for this life accepted Machiavelli’s picture of man,¹⁸ that even if one could not secure entire satisfaction, one could achieve a lot more of it than Machiavelli thought, for one could overcome the hostility of external nature by the conquest of technological science, and so exploit the nonhuman things for human advantage and satisfaction. Bacon, in fact, implicitly accused Machiavelli of being one-sided, of not seeing the advantage of having knowledge in both areas, and of thus failing to see that one could control man not just by the direct use of force and trickery,¹⁹ but also by the invention of “new arts, endowments, and commodities towards man’s life”²⁰ If Hobbesian morality was one alternative answer to the Machiavellian problem of how to deal with man’s insatiable passions, Baconian science was another. What Machiavelli thought to secure by ruthless politics, Bacon hoped to secure by technological science. His vision of the *New Atlantis* is a fictional representation of just that hope.

Bacon’s new method of science, which was invented precisely for this pur-

16. *The Object of Morality* (Methuen, London, 1971), pp. 161–62; cf. also Mackie, *Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin, 1977), pp. 107–19.

17. See the dedicatory epistles of *The Prince* and *Discourses*.

18. *Advancement*, in *Works*, ed. Spedding, Ellis and Heath (Longman, London, 1857–74), vol. III, pp. 301–302, 419ff.; *Great Instauration*, Preface, *Works*, vol. I, pp. 125–33.

19. *Advancement*, bk. I; in *Works*: vol. III, pp. 244–45.

20. *Advancement*, bk. I, in *Works*: vol. III, pp. 301–302.

pose²¹ (a purpose which still predominately animates the pursuit of technological science to this day), has however precisely the same consequence for human knowing as Hobbes' new morality had for human acting—namely a split or divorce of man from nature. Previous or traditional science had, in Bacon's view, failed to find the proper method. It had set too much store by the "immediate and natural perceptions of the senses," and had tried to use these to get to the realities of things. But this is a hopeless procedure because the senses are too gross to judge nature directly; they can only judge it by means of artificial aids; that is, they can report the truth about experiments but it is the experiments that must report the truth about nature. For Bacon's science is a mechanical and materialist science; the world is just bodies and efficient causes, operating without reference to ends, that is without any inherent teleology. The world is just a collection of goalless facts.²² It is, indeed, only on the basis of such a vision of things that a technological science seems best able to operate, for such a science first requires that the natural be reduced to calculable rules, so that artificial devices can be built with the necessary mathematical and mechanical precision to embody and exploit them; and second it requires that things be understood as no more directed to one thing than another, so that man is free to use them exactly as he wills.

Now Bacon took this picture of nature postulated by science as objectively real, and hence he thought that by the knowledge revealed by artificial experiments alone, and not by the knowledge of the unaided senses, could a legitimate familiarity be restored between the mind and things.²³ But it is at once evident that this restoration by means of an artificial method is only required because by nature the mind and things are divorced. Man has, as such, no direct access to the nature of things, and though mechanical aids enable him in part to overcome this, he only ever gets indirect access; the original divorce is never abolished. It remains the case that the mind and the senses are not by nature fitted to know nature.

This divorce is even more evident in the case of Descartes, another of the great founders of modern science, who also, like Bacon, saw in it a means of the conquest of nature for human advantage.²⁴ His famous 'doubt', his use of skepticism to reject the natural and ordinary operations of the mind and the senses, has, as its result, and indeed intended result, the setting of the world of things beyond human access behind a screen of 'ideas', or inner mental entities, which are always the direct and proper object of knowledge. In his view, one only ever knows the contents of one's own consciousness, and external things only to the

21. *Advancement*, bk. 1, in *Works*, vol. III, pp. 294–95; *Great Instauration*, Preface and Distribution of the Work, in *Works*, vol. 1, pp. 125–45.

22. *Novum Organum*, II, sect. 2, *Advancement*, bk. 2, in *Works*, vol. III, pp. 357–59; *Great Instauration*, Preface and Distribution of the Work, in *Works*, vol. 1, pp. 121, 138.

23. *Works*: vol. 1, pp. 121, 138; *Novum Organum*: Preface, and I sect. 50.

24. *Discourse*: Part VI.

extent that God guarantees one's ideas are like them. The picture of the real world Descartes ends up with is one of pure mathematical extensions, devoid of all sensible properties; something, in other words, both typically scientific and at the same time quite foreign to what we are familiar with through the unaided senses.

This new vision of science and of the world and man's place in it is marked already in Bacon and Descartes by two opposing characteristics—confidence and despair. The confidence is more noticeable, for it is what they both stress, namely their belief in the almost unlimited power of man to conquer nature for his own advantage, that is for the increasing satisfaction of his passions. But the despair goes hand in hand with this, for it is nothing other than the divorce between mind and things on which the new method of science was founded. Man may be able to conquer the world for his own use, but the real nature or essence of that world is forever cut off from the direct grasp of the human mind behind a screen of more or less delusive sensible images.

We have long grown accustomed to call this despair by another name, the name of epistemology. For the epistemological task, as this exists in its typically modern form, was from the outset that of confining the human mind within narrower bounds than had traditionally been allowed by laying down for it its legitimate sphere of competence. It seemed very clear at the time, indeed, that if this was not done the mind would fly off in all directions into areas where it had and could have no knowledge, and consequently where it could produce nothing but ignorance and useless disputing. The condition of the schools of the day was eagerly seized upon as furnishing just the evidence for this fact. Not surprisingly it soon came to be believed that the first task of any philosophy that pretended to systematic rigor, was precisely to determine the scope and competence of the human mind, and so to impose on it the necessary ascetic discipline and restraint that the previous scholastic tradition of philosophy had signally ignored. This becomes quite explicit in Locke,²⁵ and from him it passes over into Hume, Kant, and latterly, A. J. Ayer.²⁶

Taking this divorce from nature in the sphere of knowledge together with the divorce from nature in the sphere of morals traced earlier, one evidently has in the tradition of realism descended from Machiavelli what may be called in general the philosophy of divorce. In fact, such a title is exactly applicable to the Kantian critique, for it is, as was suggested in the introduction and as I shall now try to show more at length, in Kant's critical philosophy that one gets perhaps the most ingenious and systematic elaboration of just this theme. One also gets in this philosophy another, and for my purposes, quite significant answer to the Machiavellian problem that had exercised Bacon and Hobbes.

25. *Essay on Human Understanding*, bk. 1, ch. 1, sect. 7.

26. One is tempted to suggest, in the light of this, that whereas the ancient tradition was severe as regards the passions but indulgent as regards speculative thought, the modern Machiavellian tradition is the reverse—severe as regards speculative thought and indulgent as regards the passions.

KANTIAN AUTONOMOUS MORALITY

Following Bacon and Descartes, Kant holds that the direct and immediate object of our knowledge and experience is not real externally existing things but entities in our own minds. He goes further, however, than Descartes in asserting, with the British empiricists, that the content of our experience is always purely sensible and that we never know anything except what is in some way a matter of sensible properties. He denies, however, that the patterns of unity or combination that give this sensible content coherence and meaning derive from experience; on the contrary they are imposed on sensible experience by the mind itself in the act of knowing. For the mind, according to Kant, is endowed with these patterns of unity, or categories as he calls them, *a priori*, that is, it possesses them already as part of its structure. Consequently, whenever the mind thinks experience it must of necessity think it according to these categories. Knowledge is thus, for Kant, a matter of subsuming sensible or empirical data under laws or patterns given prior to that data. He expressly models himself here on the procedures of modern science as practiced by people like Copernicus, Galileo and Newton,²⁷ for, like many in his own day and since, he was deeply impressed by the success of modern science and became convinced that it had the key to knowledge in general.²⁸ But if the actual procedures of contemporary science were part of his inspiration here, the major influence was undoubtedly the empiricism of Hume. Following and elaborating on Locke, Hume had confined knowledge to ideas and impressions (immediate sense experiences and their copies in imagination) grasped at the level of sensation; and he showed, with fair success, that in such a gutted experience there is nothing universal or necessary. Kant accepted that Hume was right about what experience in itself is like but because he recognized that there was no science without the universal and the necessary, and because he accepted the reality of science, he was driven to look for another source of these properties, and found it in the mind.

One of the immediate consequences of Kant's epistemology is the claim that we can never have knowledge of anything but what can be given in sensible form, either purely quantitative, in mathematics, or sensuous as well, in the natural sciences. There is no such thing as genuine metaphysical knowledge, that is knowledge of the being as being of things. In complete consistency with the tradition of epistemological despair that he was consciously following, Kant wholly rejected the speculative metaphysics that is so marked in the older thinkers. In his view we can only know appearances; the real being that things have in themselves is forever hidden from us. This leads him to distinguish two worlds: the phenomenal world, the world of appearances that we know, and the noumenal world, the world of realities that we do not know.

27. *First Critique*, B, pp. xiv–xxii.

28. *First Critique*, B, p. xvi; and also the conclusion to the *Second Critique*.

The phenomenal world is the natural world as described by contemporary science, and it has the features attributed to it by Bacon, for it is materialist, governed by mechanical necessity and lacks any objective teleology. But, and this is more important for present purposes, the description Kant gives of man insofar as he too is part of the natural or phenomenal world, proves to be no other than the description given previously by Machiavelli and Hobbes; man is just a creature of passions, and these passions are purely selfish and lack any natural ordering among themselves.²⁹

If Kant had been forced by reflection on the character of science, namely its universality and necessity, to add something from the mind to the empirical world of Hume, so he was forced by reflection on the character of morality to add something from the mind to the selfish world of Machiavelli and Hobbes. In the first case this addition took the form of the a priori categories or patterns of unity; in the second case it took the form of autonomy and the categorical imperative.

When Kant looked at morality, three things in particular seem to have struck him as characteristic of it. First, moral judgements have a special claim or authority that applies independently of one's actual and contingent wants (the only wants that, following Machiavelli and Hobbes, Kant felt one had as something natural). If morality is made to depend on such wants, one ought only to behave as the moral judgement requires if one will satisfy some want in the process; and if one has no such want, or one's wants change, then one no longer ought to do it. But the sense of 'ought' used in morality is not hypothetical like this. It does not vary with the state of one's inclinations, but rather stands independently of them, even in opposition to them; it is, as he says, in some sense 'categorical'. Second, morality is something elevated and sublime, but if one subordinates it to particular inclinations, which are all selfish, one will make of it something low and base, and destroy all its peculiar worth. Third, morality is bound up with freedom. Men, in judging and acting morally, do so without external constraint or compulsion from natural causes; they are exercising free choice or their rational will.³⁰

All three of these elements were lacking in the morality devised by Hobbes on the basis of Machiavelli's view of man. Kant could not, therefore, accept the correctness of that account. Now in doing this, Kant was, in effect, reverting to a

29. *Second Critique*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Königliche Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin, 1910ff.; hereafter referred to as AA [Akademieausgabe]), vol. v, pp. 21–25, 35. (Also in Abbott, *Kant's Theory of Ethics*. Longmans, London, 1898, pp. 107–12, 125.) One ought to say here that the ancient conception of a supreme and hierarchical end for human life was tied up with their far more confident conception of the scope of human knowledge. Knowledge is not, for them, confined to empiricist, sensible data, nor to such data plus Kantian categories, rather it embraces the whole, substantial 'being' of things, and it is by discernment of the 'being' of man (or his nature) that one discerns the supreme end. The rejection of ancient epistemology is thus of a piece, logically and conceptually, with the rejection of the ancient idea of a supreme end; cf. also note 26 above.

30. *Groundwork*, AA, vol. iv, pp. 428, 442–44.

more ancient and pre-Machiavellian vision of morality, the vision that did see moral goodness as something fine and splendid, as something objectively valid for all men independently of their particular passions, and as involving the free assent of human choice. For these were present in the ancient vision of the supreme good and the noble, or the natural perfection of soul. But if Kant was sympathetic to the ancient claim that the truly good life must be something noble, he was not sympathetic to their understanding of what the noble was. This was because he rejected their claim that the noble was part of nature and was an object of knowledge.

The reason for this is of course not difficult to grasp; it lies in his theory of knowledge, or his acceptance of the tradition of epistemological despair that was, as has been argued, just another (though distinguishable) element of the 'realism' of Machiavelli. Kant firmly believed that in the world of knowledge, the phenomenal world, none of the aspects of morality he had noted could be found. The phenomenal world is in fact the world of Machiavellian realism and Baconian science, of man as a beast of insatiable passions and of nature as a collection of valueless facts. Kant was, therefore, forced to find the origin of what was properly moral in the noumenal world. This had some important results.

To take first the questions of the moral good, or of the noble, and of freedom. The moral good can manifestly no longer be regarded as an object of knowledge as it had been by the ancients (for the only knowable goods are the object of particular selfish desires), and consequently, when one wills and acts in a moral way, it ceases to be the case that one is determined or moved to do so by some prior cognitive recognition of good. On the contrary nothing knowable can determine the will to moral choice; if the will is determined it cannot be by anything accessible to understanding, but only directly by the will itself. The will, says Kant accordingly, has its own spontaneity, its own free causality, quite distinct from the determinist causality of scientific nature. This causality or self-determination with which the will is endowed must evidently belong to the noumenal and hence unknowable sphere. If the impossibility of the will's being determined by any prior grasp of good, by any prior acts of thinking, means that it has to determine itself directly, the setting of this self-determination in the noumenal sphere makes freedom something entirely unknowable. Kant thus only secures the nobility and freedom associated with morality at the cost of shifting both into a sphere that lies completely beyond human grasp. The free acts of the will that constitute moral goodness and moral choice are beyond human explanation and comprehension.³¹

This does not mean, however, that one cannot say anything about the form that these choices take; on the contrary one can say quite specifically that they take the form of categorical imperatives or categorical 'oughts'. Morality is about action, or about how to behave. Judgments about how to behave are typi-

31. *Groundwork*, ch. 3.

cally expressed in terms of 'should' or 'ought'. In the ancient scheme of things these 'oughts' are relative to the good of the supreme end of human perfection; one ought to do so and so because it is part of, or leads to, the good. But Kant has ruled out this way of understanding 'ought' by denying that any good accessible to knowledge is other than contingent, low, and selfish. Consequently in the case of moral judgements about how to behave he is left with an 'ought' that is not relative to any good, or that is, in his own words, 'categorical'. This categorical 'ought' is just the pure idea of prescription or command, for that is all that is left to it when the reference to a good is removed. Kant's morality therefore becomes a matter of pure categorical 'oughts', and the will's free self-determination of itself takes the form of the imposition of a moral command. Freedom is self-legislation, that is autonomy or the commanding of an 'ought' that has no ground or source other than one's own mysterious will—it certainly has nothing to do with nature or anything that can be known; and it is essentially volitional, not cognitive. It is thus in Kantian categorical morality that the 'is/ought' distinction receives its first and certainly its classic expression.³²

This is one, and perhaps the most important, aspect of Kant's moral thought, but there is a further one that deserves mention, and that follows from it; for the separation of 'ought' from good means that the moral 'ought' has to be understood in a purely formal way. If one takes an 'ought' judgment and removes from it, in the manner described, any reference to a good to which the 'ought' is relative or which is to be attained by following what the 'ought' judgment prescribes, one is left, as has been said, merely with the formal character of the 'ought' as a prescription or a command. Now this purely formal character of 'ought' was understood by Kant as not just prescription, but universal prescription (the reason given is that what is formal is also necessarily universal). The 'ought' in which the will expresses itself, the so-called categorical imperative, requires that any proposed course of action must be examined to see if it can be made a universal law for everyone and still stand, and only if it can is it compatible with right and duty. This separates the action from dependence on merely subjective and selfish interests that are private and contingent to each individual, and so allows it the categorical character that is necessary for morality. This also enables Kant, at the same time, to give a moral dignity to the purely selfish character of man's desires as these were pictured in Machiavellian realism. For while it remains true that the only desires or interests that one can know to exist in men are their particular felt and self-interested preferences, it is nevertheless possible to put these desires on a higher moral plane provided they can be subsumed under the categorical imperative, the principle of morality, and be made into uni-

32. Some people, e.g. Anscombe (see note 5 above), have argued that this 'ought' begins with Hume. But Hume has no sense of disinterested duty, or unfounded autonomous 'oughts', since he makes it plain that duty or obligation is tied to, and follows, some interest one has and cannot be wished nor can it arise on its own (*Treatise*, ed. Selby Bigge, Oxford, 1888, pp. 484, 498, 517–19, 523).

versalized prescriptions or laws. Morality, in other words, becomes a kind of universalizing of what begins as self-interest.³³

The categorical autonomous 'ought' of universalizing carries the whole weight of Kant's moral system and it is, therefore, of some importance to understand its significance. If one looks at how Kant expressly regards the principle in his ethical writings (and not just *The Groundwork*), one will find that universalizing is little more than an elaboration of Hobbesian peace. The formal principle of universalizing establishes right, and right is that one should refrain from pursuing those of one's self-interested desires which are incompatible with others' pursuing their self-interested desires, or which bring one into conflict with others. Or, to put it differently, one is free, and has a right to pursue happiness, or one's self-interested desires, in whatever way one wishes, so long as in doing so one does not infringe upon the right and freedom of another to pursue his happiness, or his self-interested desires, in whatever way he wishes.³⁴ Right is the restraining and checking of one's desires sufficiently to avoid conflict; and the way to ensure this is precisely the device of universalizing one's desire. One asks what would be the result if everyone were to do the same, and if the result would be conflict or something like the war of all with all, then it is not right.³⁵

Kant's moral principle, then, which establishes the idea of right is no more than Hobbes' idea of peace—it is its logical as well as historical heir.³⁶ In this sense Kant never gets beyond Hobbesian morality. He does, however, manage to bestow on this morality something of that ancient sense of the noble that Hobbes (along with Machiavelli) had lost. But he does not do this by changing the formal

33. Cf. Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, 104–105.

34. *Theory and Practice*, AA, vol. VIII, pp. 290–91 (also in Riess, *Kant's Political Writings*, Cambridge, 1971, pp. 74ff.); compare with *Metaphysic of Morals*, AA, vol. VI, pp. 380–81, 396 (Abbott, pp. 291, 307); also AA, vol. VI, pp. 230–33 (Riess, pp. 133–35).

35. The contradiction that shows a given maxim cannot be universalized is rather one of will than of thought (e.g. *Groundwork*, AA, vol. IV, p. 423), and this will perhaps help to meet Mill's objection to Kant (in *Utilitarianism*, Everyman, 1910, ch. 1, pp. 3–4). The contradiction that rules out certain maxims or courses of action is just conflict of desire with desire. That is why Kant is prepared to appeal to the undesirability of consequences, for it is precisely the repugnance to one's desire of the consequences of an action when this action is universalized or conceived as done by everyone that shows one cannot desire it as universalized, even though one could desire it when conceived as done only by oneself. This does not mean that utilitarianism lies at the bottom of Kant's principle of universalizing (at least not utilitarianism in Mill's sense, though there are similarities with Hare's version, especially when one considers his remarks on 'fanaticism'), for an action done by many that increased the happiness of the many at the expense of happiness for a few would not be a case of universalizing, though it would or could be a case of utilitarianism. What it means is that one has to consider whether the consequences of a given maxim amount to conflict of desire or not in order to know whether the maxim is universalizable in the relevant sense. It is worth noting that Hobbes' argument against war and in favor of peace has exactly the same structure as this. Everyone finds he has to desire peace because what he instinctively and ordinarily desires—the unfettered pursuit of private pleasure—leads to consequences he cannot desire (namely the misery of war) if everyone does the same.

36. This becomes especially clear in such of Kant's political pamphlets as *Theory and Practice*, sect. II, and *Idea for a Universal History*, especially 4th and 5th propositions; AA, vol. VIII, pp. 289–306, 20–22.

character of Hobbesian morality; rather he changes its motive and its justification. For by making his expression of this formal character, namely the principle of universalizing, into the categorical imperative (in which is contained the pure idea of oughtness or command that the will imposes on itself without reference to good or desire), he aims to make this principle into an object of respect and awe in and for itself, quite regardless of the selfish interests it serves, and for the sake of which men would more or less necessarily be moved towards it in Hobbes' system. In this way the principle is separated from selfish and contingent motives (which it never was for Hobbes), and so has been endowed with precisely those three qualities which Kant, with his sense of the noble, felt it lacked. For it is now categorical, that is independent of actual, contingent desires; sublime, that is independent of what is low and selfish; and free, that is imposed on the will spontaneously by itself and not by the more or less mechanical workings of the passions.

It is thus in the idea of autonomy, of categorical 'oughts' and respect for universalizing as such, all divorced from anything natural and knowable, that the sense of the noble comes to rest in Kant's thought. As one can see from the movement of that thought traced above, this happens because the sense of the noble has had to be forced into a Machiavellian context of selfish inclinations and epistemological despair. The truth of this conclusion is no better illustrated than by Kant himself:

Duty! thou sublime, mighty name . . . what is your origin, and where is found the root of your noble descent, which proudly strikes out all kinship with inclinations? . . . It can be nothing less than what exalts man (as part of the sensible world) above himself. It can be nothing other than personality, that is freedom and independence of the mechanism of the whole of nature, yet viewed at the same time as a power of a being which is subject to special laws, pure practical laws given by its own reason.³⁷

Kant may thus have succeeded in restoring something of the noble to morality from within a Machiavellian context (which Hobbes failed to do), but because of the way that context forces him to alter that idea into the idea of categorical 'oughts', the noble is reduced to a sort of universalizing that differs from Hobbesian peace only because it is conceived as an unfounded and awesome command. For this reason Kant's noble has an altogether peculiar character. By Kant's own admission Hobbesian morality is too low for morality, yet his own 'higher' morality appears to be no more than Hobbes backed up by the unfounded 'ought' of noumenal, that is to say incomprehensible, freedom. As all that can be noble here is the sheer unfounded and incomprehensible 'oughtness' and nothing else, it would seem that Kant's noble is just Hobbes' ignoble made mysteriously imperious.

Perhaps, however, this is a little extreme. What Kant regards as ignoble about Hobbes is not the peace he commends but the grounds on which he commends it,

37. *Second Critique*, AA, vol. v, pp. 86–87; Abbott, p. 180.

namely selfish interest. So in removing this but keeping the idea of peace, Kant is not so much making Hobbes' ignoble imperious as removing something noble from an ignoble context. But this is to forget the logical origin of the idea of peace. This is only devised in the first place on the basis of a Machiavellian view of the natural man. For it is because men are conceived as creatures whose desires are just particular passions that the problem becomes one of coping with these passions. The Hobbesian way of making this problem a moral one is to ask how the satisfying of passion by one can be harmonized with the satisfying of passion by all. The answer is, in the end, to universalize. All that Kant adds is to say that man has a mysterious capacity to respect this universalizing as such and not just in view of what he gets out of it.

By contrast the ancient vision of the noble is tied to a view of the natural man which denies any independent validity to particular passions, and a fortiori any right to the pursuit of them, whether universalized or not. What needs to be discerned instead is how to subordinate the passions so as to make them accord with and promote the natural perfection and elevation of soul (which means, in the end, a certain perfection of reason in thought and action). Kant, however, is bitterly opposed to ancient moral thought. When he speaks of their vision of the perfection of man, he calls it "fanaticism," by which he means "the delusion of seeing beyond the boundaries of sensibility (sense perception)";³⁸ or, specifically in the case of "moral fanaticism," the attempt to base morality on something other than the stern categorical 'ought' of duty, and in particular the attempt to base it on some presumed knowledge and love of the noble.³⁹

Kant condemns all such ideas fiercely. To exhort men to action by appeal to the noble, sublime and magnanimous, is necessarily, whatever may be protested to the contrary, both to appeal to a motive that is "pathological", to some self-love or sentimental romanticism, and to induce an "airy, superficial, fantastical kind of thinking" that flatters men they have a "voluntary goodness of spirit" when, in fact, they are only moral when subject to the "yoke" of duty.⁴⁰ It is not necessary to repeat that Kant's reasons for such remarks are of course his beliefs about the limitations of human knowledge and about the selfishness of the natural man.⁴¹

This opposition to the ancient idea that the noble is perfection of soul and replacement of it by the pure 'ought' of duty has meant that in Kant's thought one has, besides the separations already mentioned of the moral from the natural and the real from the knowable, also the separation (deriving directly from Hobbes) of the moral from the beneficial and expedient, or from the idea of the most de-

38. *Third Critique*: sect. 29, AA, vol. v, p. 275. Kant was aware that the ancient vision of perfection presupposed a capacity of the mind to penetrate beyond sensible properties to the intelligible being of things; that is the main reason why he rejected it.

39. *Second Critique*, AA, vol. v, pp. 84–86; Abbott, pp. 178–79.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Groundwork*, AA, vol. iv, pp. 441–44; *Second Critique*, AA, vol. v, pp. 35–41; Abbott, pp. 124–30.

sirable and fully satisfying life. Since, for Kant, to speak of how something benefits one or makes one better off or fully satisfied is, if it is to have any graspable content and not be merely empty ideas, to speak of something empirical and selfishly pleasant,⁴² he necessarily associates the beneficial and satisfying with the low and selfish and so dissociates them from duty and the moral.⁴³ It has now become fairly standard, at least in some quarters, to repeat the same separation and to equate the selfish with the prudent and to deny any essential connection between the moral and what benefits the individual.⁴⁴ This separation is sometimes put in terms of the distinction between what it is to be a good *x* and what it is to be good for *x*. Such a distinction would not, for instance, have been tolerated by Plato's Socrates, who thought it absurd to suppose that what makes something good might not also be good or beneficial for it, and who went so far as to curse the man who first separated the useful and the just. There are others who have made the same protest since.⁴⁵

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this article I have tried to show how the idea of autonomous morality as developed by Kant has its roots in the morality of Hobbes, the science of conquest of Bacon and Descartes, and ultimately the 'realism' of Machiavelli. Having inherited and made his own a bestial, selfish view of natural human inclinations, despair of the human capacity to grasp the real being of things, and a mechanis-

42. See the references in the previous note.

43. It is worth noting that Kant asserts as much as, if not more than, Machiavelli and Hobbes that the natural condition of man is wretched and miserable. He goes further, however, in actually praising nature for being cruel and vicious for it is misery that is nature's engine to compel men to develop towards morality by forcing them to universalize their particular passions; *Third Critique*, sect. 83, AA, vol. v, pp. 429–34, *Universal History*, 4th proposition, AA, vol. viii, p. 21.

44. See the references in note 1, and also Saunders' remarks in the translation of *Aristotle's Politics* (Penguin, 1981), p. 390, which one should compare with Aristotle's own remarks in bk. 7, ch. 1, to which Saunders is referring.

45. Plato, *Gorgias*, 474c–479e, and of course there is the general teaching of the *Republic* that justice is a kind of health of soul and a benefit to the just man precisely as such without addition (e.g. 443c–445b). Foot and Warnock and others also wish to reunite the prudential and the moral by relating the moral to human benefit and harm, but they do, or were inclined to do this, by giving up the idea of the noble and returning to the selfishness of Hobbes (e.g. Foot, *op. cit.*, p. xiii). For a more Socratic position, one may compare Whately: "If anyone really holds that it can ever be expedient to violate the injunctions of duty—that he who does so is not sacrificing a greater good to a less (which all would admit to be inexpedient),—that it can be really advantageous to do what is morally wrong, and will come forward and acknowledge that to be his belief, I have only to protest, for my own part, with the deepest abhorrence, against what I conceive to be so profligate a principle." *Rhetoric*, Longmans, London, 1877, p. 316. Also Veatch. 'Telos and Teleology in Aristotelian Ethics,' in D. J. O'Meara. *Studies in Aristotle* (Catholic University of American Press, Washington, 1981). One should also not forget Nietzsche. Like the ancient authors, he wanted to see nobility in terms of perfection and elevation of soul, and so in terms of what enhances and benefits the noble individual (so *Beyond Good and Evil*. especially part 9).

tic, nonteleological science of nature, Kant devises an autonomous morality of self-willed categorical 'oughts' to cope with the sense of the noble. This has the consequence of reaffirming and making more absolute fundamental splits in human existence. The moral is divorced from the natural and knowable and also from the prudential and the fully satisfying, and mind is divorced from the real. One cannot say that these splits have been overcome or the root causes abandoned in the course of the historical development of autonomous morality since Kant, for they have not. The cardinal thesis of autonomous morality, the is/ought distinction, remains today as much dependent on empiricist notions of the 'is', or of 'facts', and a selfish understanding of human desires as it was for Kant; and there is still the same insistence that the moral has not been understood properly if it is at all equated with the prudential and satisfying.

These suggestions about the structure of autonomous morality, as derived from an examination of historical origins, do not in themselves amount to a refutation, either of the origins or of what rests on them. For one thing there is a lot of very good evidence to back up the Machiavellian account of the natural man (the appeal to facts of history is one of the strong points of Machiavelli's work). Yet one must not forget that there are other ways of coping with this evidence without going the way of Machiavelli, and so without going the way of Kant either.⁴⁶ I have, in fact, throughout this paper, contrasted the Kantian account of how things are with the more ancient one. This has doubtless revealed my own preferences. Certainly for one who is drawn towards a holistic and unified vision of man and his world, that does not posit nor require radical splits and yet gives a place to the noble, the ancient vision is far more promising. Still it has not been my aim to settle this issue here; merely to help make clearer what the issue is.

46. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253^a29–39.