Medieval Zeal and Modern Blame

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Medieval Voluntarism

- A movement that arises in the last quarter of the thirteenth century, within the new universities of Europe.
- Spurs the most important medieval contribution to the history of philosophy, at least when measured by the subsequent influence of the idea.
- Treats the will (*voluntas*) as the controlling faculty within us, the principal source of human behavior.
- Embraces a libertarian theory of freewill: the will is a first cause, an unmoved mover, capable of freely choosing between alternatives in such a way as to be completely in control of that choice.
- Becomes the consensus view between the Condemnation of 1277 and Martin Luther circa 1520.

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My answer. This libertarian approach to the will took hold in the Middle Ages because it was needed to justify the zealous attitudes toward morality that dominated medieval Christian philosophy.

The Socratic Approach

From Socrates forward, morality in the ancient Greek tradition is regarded as a matter of the highest concern, but it is something we should each be concerned about because it matters to our own happiness. Socrates counsels the jurors that one "should look to this alone whenever he does anything: whether his actions are just or unjust, the deeds of a good or bad man." At the same time, he offers them a self-interested reason to follow that advice: "from virtue comes money and all the other things that are good for human beings, both in private and in public life." This encourages an attitude of calm forbearance toward the bad behavior of others, who sin only because they know not what they do. Socrates tells the jurors that if in fact he has done wrong, he should be subjected not to a regime of punishment but to "private instruction and admonishment."

The Socratic Attitude in Boethius

The wrongdoer "ought to be brought to justice not by a prosecution counsel with an air of outrage, but by a prosecution kind and sympathetic, like sick men being brought to the doctor." The rational response to immorality is not zealous recrimination but sympathetic concern: "there is no reason at all for hating the bad. For just as weakness is a disease of the body, so wickedness is a disease of the mind. And if this is so, since we think of people who are sick in body as deserving sympathy rather than hatred, much more so do they deserve pity rather than blame who suffer an evil more severe than any physical illness."

(*Consolation of Philosophy* IV prose 4)

The Socratic Tradition Rejected

For all the influence that the *Consolation of Philosophy* had on medieval culture, this Socratic element in Boethius's story becomes increasingly hard to find as the Middle Ages develop. In its stead, medieval philosophers approach the moral domain with a zeal that is quite unlike the calm sympathy of antiquity. The weight of moral goodness and badness is understood to demand an intensely emotional response, whether that be of righteous anger in response to wrongdoing, or of joyous love in response to moral goodness.

We Remain in the Shadow of Voluntarism

The characteristic approach to morality of our era remains intensely censorious. It remains normal and natural within modern culture to respond to the moral failings of others with a severity that can be justified only if something like voluntarism is true. The Socratic attitudes that Boethius describes—"sympathy rather than hatred" and "pity rather than blame"—look as alien today as they did to medieval readers. And this means in turn that, for all the evident obscurity of the idea of the will as an undetermined first cause, our culture needs that idea just as much as did the voluntarists.

A First Historical Example: John Buridan on Causal Determinism

"On account of these arguments, many have been compelled to say that everything in the future has happened of necessity…."

And yet,

"This opinion is without a doubt grave and extremely dangerous both to the faith and to morals."

(*Questions on Ethics* III.1)

Buridan's Incompatibilism

"We have few arguments to refute this opinion, except based on our catholic faith, and because if we were predetermined in all of our acts then they could not be ascribed to us as meritorious or demeritorious. This is repugnant not just to our faith but also to the science and principles of morality. Hence we attribute that freedom to us more than to brutes only so as to secure the ascription to us of acting well or badly, meritoriously or demeritoriously."

(*Questions on Ethics* X.2)

What Buridan Wants to Believe

"And so I want to believe, unconditionally and firmly, from a faith that is one with experience and with the claims of the saints and philosophers who concur and firmly adhere to this belief, that the will, with everything else standing the same, can do opposite acts."

(Questions on Ethics III.1)

Buridan on the Dissatisfactions of Philosophy

"No one ought to withdraw from the common path on account of arguments that are insoluble to him, especially in matters that may touch the faith or morals. For he who believes that he knows everything and that he can be deceived in none of his opinions is a fool. For concerning a straw right before your eyes, there are a hundred arguments or questions that will be posed, about which the wisest of doctors will reach contrary opinions. For each of these, then, at least one of those doctors will be deceived, if not both. So I am not surprised that, with respect to this highest of matters, I cannot satisfy myself through arguments and solutions."

(*Quaestions on Ethics* III.1)

Peter John Olivi's 7 Attitudes

"We can make it quite clear that this [the denial of libertarian freedom] impugns the most evident lights and experiences of truth, if we consider the characteristic feature of the attitudes most natural to the rational will" (*Summa* II.57 [II:316])

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1. Zeal and mercy
2. Friendship and hostility
3. Pride and shame
4. Gratitude and ingratitude
5. Obligation and freedom
6. Trust and mistrust
7. Fear and recklessness

Olivian Zeal

"No one properly adopts the zeal of anger—the attitude of rebuke and punishment—against a bad act done by a beast or by someone lacking the free use of reason. But this is the attitude we do adopt, and that we think we *should* adopt, both against a bad act done by someone who has the free use of reason, and also against the agent who does it, insofar as he has free use of reason."

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"For it is only with respect to that kind of agent that the one who is angry senses that the agent ought not to have done the thing, and that he could have taken precautions and avoided it. The emotion of zeal or anger is founded on this sensation. But the sensation would be utterly false and based on an utterly false object if, when the agent was doing this bad thing, he did not have the free power for not doing it."

(*Summa* II.57 [II:317])

Nietzsche's Critique

Nietzsche contends that the whole point of the will is to provide the priestly class with a tool for censoring others: "the doctrine of will has been invented essentially for the purpose of punishment, that is of finding guilty." *(Twilight of the Idols*, p. 64)

Depending on your taste, this may strike you as pleasingly subversive, gratingly cynical, or just plain paranoid. One thing it probably will not look like is a careful piece of historical analysis, but in fact there is something surprisingly apt about Nietzsche's remark.

The Olivian Argument

- First, he regards our reactive attitudes as both inescapable and salutary, inasmuch as they shape our relationships to ourselves and to others as persons. Without these attitudes, and the freedom on which they are founded, Olivi memorably remarks that we would no longer be persons, but mere "intellectual beasts."
- Second, he contends that these attitudes could not be so important to our lives if they were not well-founded—that is, if they turned out to be unjustified in light of the truth about human nature.
- Third, he argues that these attitudes are justifiable if and only if we have libertarian freedom.

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What Strawson rejects. What Buridan rejects. A better response.

A Middle Path:
Keep Moral Responsibility and Reject Moral Zeal

We cannot, and we should not, doubt that human beings are morally responsible for the good and bad that they do. But to accept that someone is morally responsible for an action leaves open the question of what our reaction to that fact should be. The hard incompatibilist assumes, as do both Olivi and Strawson, that we face a binary choice: either we embrace the zealous moral attitudes of the wider culture, or we give up moral responsibility entirely. We can, however, have both moral responsibility and a naturalistic understanding of human agency if we recognize that what makes libertarianism seem so compelling is not the bare fact of moral responsibility, but the severity of the attitudes we bring to bear upon it. It is moral zeal that is incompatible with determinism, not moral responsibility.

How We Should Recalibrate: Treat Morality as Like Literacy

Although we cannot go back to the Socratic tradition, we can take from that tradition the aspiration to understand our moral agency in a way that allows us to replace moral zeal with something more rationally justifiable and less socially destructive. Although Socrates was wrong to suppose that immorality is a product of ignorance, he was right to think that we should respond to immorality in the way we respond to ignorance. We would do well to think of immorality as something like illiteracy, and devote ourselves not to blaming people for being in such a condition, but to helping them overcome it.

Deconstruct What the Voluntarists Constructed

An important step toward this recalibration of our reactive attitudes is to understand the conception of the will that the voluntarists long ago constructed, so that we can then set about deconstructing it. This means not just bringing the will, and with it human agency, back into the natural domain of causes, but also resisting the very idea of the will as a primitive and therefore mysterious source of agency.

Williams's "less important" Morality

> Scepticism about the freedom of morality from luck cannot leave the concept of morality where it was, any more than it can remain undisturbed by scepticism about the very closely related image we have of there being a moral order, within which our actions have a significance which may not be accorded to them by mere social recognition. These forms of scepticism will leave us with *a* concept of morality, but one less important, certainly, than ours is usually taken to be; and that will not be ours, since one thing that is particularly important about ours is how important it is taken to be.

Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck*, p. 39

A distinction. We should not take our moral values to have less importance, but we should strive to recognize that individuals lack the singular importance as moral agents that we are prone to ascribe to them.

E. O. Wilson, Slightly Modified

To adapt a remark by the biologist E. O. Wilson, the challenge of humanity is that while we have developed god-like technologies, we have retained our paleolithic emotions and a medieval conception of the self.

Will we solve the crises of next hundred years? asked Krulwich. "Yes, if we are honest and smart," said Wilson. "The real problem of humanity is the following: we have paleolithic emotions; medieval ~~institutions~~; and god-like technology. And it is terrifically dangerous, and it is now approaching a point of crisis overall."

https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2009/09/james-watson-edward-o-wilson-intellectual-entente

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