The Individual as a Moral Subject   Bob Stone

A. Thinking for yourself

Who decides what's right and wrong? The most challenging answer to that question is from Kant: it's not God who decides, not the authorities, not majority opinion – it's *me*. Or you. Each individual person has to decide what is right or wrong. That does not mean I have *carte blanche* to decide what is right *for me*, in some kind of free-for-all moral relativism. It means that I have to use my *reason* to work out what the rational, and therefore right, course of action is that I should take. More specifically, I need to ask myself whether a proposed course of action is such that I would want my rationale for doing it to become a universal law: that is the famous Categorical Imperative (Kant 4.402). As the laws of reasoning are *a priori* and universal, we should all, in theory and if we were perfectly rational, agree on all questions of rightness and wrongness, just as we would on some mathematical question (Kant 4.432).

Now I'm not going to discuss the Categorical Imperative here, and I'm not at all certain that all moral questions could, even in theory, be settled by perfect reasoning, but it's the general principle that counts. No one tells me what to think about moral questions: I work it out for myself. And, if I decide after working it out that the rational policy is to follow the *Book of Deuteronomy* in every detail, or for that matter the *Little Book of Humanism*, that is my decision and I have to take ultimate responsibility for it. I cannot blame *Deuteronomy* or the *Little Book* if I do something that is not approved of.

That, I believe, is the general position among the philosophical community in this part of the world, even among those who have no time for Kant. If we ask someone why they behave in a certain way, or why they hold certain views, we expect them to attempt to *justify* their behaviour with *reasons*. If they say something like "God told me to", or "My mother taught me", or "It's what Donald Trump would want me to do", we may reply: "Fine. But why do you think it's right to obey God or your mother or Trump?" Again we would expect some attempt to *justify* that implied rationale for their behaviour. We in fact have limited respect for those who shuffle off responsibility for their actions or their beliefs on to someone else or some authoritative body or sacred text, or even on to some overarching ethical principle – unless of course they can justify that principle, too.

Problems with thinking for yourself

1. The myth of rationality

We all know, and if we didn't a huge amount of literature this century has demonstrated (e.g. Kahneman, *passim*), that it is well nigh impossible to think about anything at all exclusively rationally, without any input from emotions, intuitions, instincts, memories, or the attempts of others to prime us; and it may be that it is psychologically impossible to make any decision based on reason without some prompt from other aspects of ourselves – for example, Damasio's famous 'somatic marker' (Damasio 173-5).

2. Cultural resistance

But a more fundamental problem, which would persist even if we could be perfectly rational, is that not everybody accepts the *right* of individuals to decide which moral principles they are going to adopt. Some families, or bodies of religious believers, or indeed whole cultures, insist that their members subordinate their will and judgment to the collective wisdom of the community. This has been built up over the generations and centuries, sometimes reinforced by a written body of doctrine, often regarded as sacred, and is believed – not necessarily on

compelling empirical evidence – to have served the community well in the past and to be likely to go on doing so.

The attitude of a young person who thinks she knows better and wishes to challenge the inherited doctrine is regarded not as many of *us* would regard it – evidence of a keen, intelligent mind that wishes to escape the shackles of a community that has sunk into an unthinking, conservative torpor, and, like Socrates's gadfly, hopes to goad them into thinking outside the box – but as insufferable arrogance, which constitutes disloyalty, even treachery, towards the community which has brought her up. Disagreement with the norms is not just intellectually mistaken, but morally wrong, even punishable – perhaps by death. "I don't agree with you, but you're entitled to your opinion" is not a typical response to such a challenge. Let alone the famous saying misattributed to Voltaire: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

So individualism in deciding about how to live and how to judge what is right and wrong is not as obviously 'a good thing' as it seems to people brought up like me. In fact, I would suggest it is a minority view, probably confined to that small section of the world known by the acronym WEIRD: Western Educated Industrialised Rich Democratic. (For a long discussion of this, see Haidt 111 ff, and much of the book.)

3. From one conformity to another

But in any case, let a weirdo like me examine what it would be to free oneself from the shackles of majority opinion. When I was an undergraduate in the heady intellectual climate of the late 1960s, while many of my fellow-students were challenging the social norms and being enthused by what was going on in Paris, I was quietly observing things from the viewpoint of a traditional classicist, who went to College chapel on Sundays, turned up to lectures on weekdays – especially if there was supposed to be a student strike – and even wore a tie from time to time. It was hard to see the 60s counter-culture as anything other than an *alternative* culture – but still a culture. Its adherents were as conformist as the young people of an earlier generation, but the norms to which they conformed were different from those earlier ones.

4. The myth of free will

What was going on in the minds of the students when they were choosing their allegiance? Was it the exercise of individual free will, to choose either the traditional values or those of the new age? I'm afraid not. Assuming that we do not choose our principles and beliefs merely at random – which is possible, if quantum randomness somehow spills over into the everyday world, but which would be alarming and would make our so-called decisions valueless – our decisions have a *cause*, or more accurately are caused by a whole network of factors that constitute '*the cause*'. Each individual, from the moment he or she (or some other pronoun) is born, is assailed from all sides by experiences, some pleasurable some not, by memories of experiences, some true some false, by awareness of ideas, by observation of role-models, and a million other influences – noticed or unnoticed – which one could never list in full.

The notion – maybe the 'common sense' notion – that there is a controlling 'self' inside each one of us that can survey all the influences, all the contributory factors, and decide on the basis of reason which beliefs to hold is sheer fantasy. The 'self', the 'I', at any given moment, is the person that each of us has become as the result of all those factors; it cannot be independent of them, like a disembodied rational homunculus unsullied by experience. If that independent self were to choose one belief, or set of moral principles, rather than another, the question would arise: why?

The only possible explanation is that its experience to date has made it – i.e. the person – someone who is more attracted to one kind of reason than to another, or who prefers the sort of people who believe that kind of thing. The independent-minded type who, say, challenges his parents' opinions and goes down a different path is someone who has become the sort of person who finds the attractions of the different path more powerful than those of his parents' views. Nothing wrong with that, but it is not a truly independent choice – in the sense of being uncaused, or taken by an inner 'self' that rises above the self which the person has become, an idea that soon collapses into meaninglessness.

So, if we talk of an individualist society, in which people are free to choose their goals and principles, I suggest that what we actually *mean* is that, probably by a historical accident, we live in a society surrounded by a kaleidoscope of different ideas that jostle for our attention and approval – which used not to be the case – and inevitably many individuals finish up with different beliefs, principles and lifestyles from those with which they were brought up. We're not really independent-minded at all, we're just at the mercy of several competing norms rather than – as has been the case for most of history – subject to just one.

Summary

To summarise what I've said so far on the individual as a moral thinker, the version of individualism according to which individuals decide for themselves, mostly on the basis of reasoning, which set of moral principles to adopt, rather than consciously going along with the crowd, is (a) not a sensible policy in the eyes of the majority of the world; (b) the individual's choice is more a preference for a different crowd to go along with than real individual thinking, (c) it is no less determined by that person's history, circumstances, genes, upbringing and everything else you can think of than the attitude of the most conventional and unadventurous among us. Nonetheless, with all those difficulties and paradoxes, I go along with the *ideal* of that kind of individualism 100%!

B. The Moral Agent

A rather different type of individualism concerns not so much the individual *thinker* as the individual moral *agent*. Whatever views you hold on what is right or wrong – whether you espouse utilitarianism, deontology, social contract, divine command, or simply being loyal to the well-trodden path of your parents or your culture – you probably want to do your best to do what's right. This is where the recently popular 'virtue ethics' makes its appearance.

I'll pass over the fact that the concept has a whiff of circularity about it, to use Marianne Talbot's phrase (*Bioethics* 35), as we wonder how on earth we can choose *which* virtues to cultivate, or which role-models to follow, without first working out in traditional philosopher's fashion which types of behaviour are right or wrong. But let us suppose we have sorted that out, and have a good idea of how we ought to behave. Virtue ethics then has a number of advantages: we have to *think* intelligently using our practical reasoning (what Aristotle calls *phronesis*, VI.v), in order to make decisions that are actually sensible in our *particular* situation; as life goes on, we gradually *learn* to get better at that; and the *self-critical* attitude it encourages makes it less likely that we are hypocritical in pointing out the beam in someone else's eye while unaware of the mote in our own.

Problems with virtue ethics

But there seem to me serious risks.

1. *It's all about me*

Aristotle likens the development of virtue to the maintaining of *physical fitness* (e.g. III.v.11), and Julia Annas – a leading light in virtue ethics today – likens it to acquiring a *skill*, such as playing the piano (Annas 17 ff). These, of course, are only partial analogies, and it would be unfair to take them too far. But the danger is here. My practising the piano, or going to the gym, or for that matter following one of the myriad methods available nowadays for looking after my mental health, are basically about *me*. Paradoxical as it may sound, training myself to be virtuous – maybe compassionate, honest, just, generous, woke, or whatever – could focus my attention not on the other people around me, who ought to be the beneficiaries of my virtue, but on my own development as a moral being.

For Aristotle, that danger is intensified by the *purpose* of virtue (or at least one of its purposes), which is to achieve happiness (a rough translation of *eudaimonia*: e.g. I.iv) – *my* happiness, that is, not that of other people. And that motive is not entirely absent from modern versions either. In a religious variant, the motive may be personal salvation, or a happy afterlife.

Maybe the plague of virtue-signalling is another example: I may give money to the beggar not for the beggar's sake, but to signal to onlookers (or to those Facebook friends of mine who read my post that relates the event) that I have the virtue of compassion.

Illustration

An illustration of a self-regarding view of virtue struck me when I was about 10 or 11, when my housemaster at school was urging us to donate a book to a charity for deprived children, who would otherwise not have anything to read. Very reasonable, but he added that donating a book we'd already read and so didn't need any more was not really generous; proper generosity would be to donate a book we had *not* read, but had been going to, and so would miss. I felt then the first stirrings of my utilitarian instincts, as I wondered how the world would be a better place if one deprived child had one extra booksworth of happiness, and I was deprived of one booksworth, than it would be if the deprived child had the same addition of happiness and I lost nothing of value to me.

2a. The 'clean hands' fallacy

More recently, and more seriously, I heard an interview on the radio a few years ago in which a man, who I *think* was a doctor, was saying that in the Second World War he had refused to join up as a combatant who might have to kill someone, since his Christian beliefs forbade it. But he had nonetheless been in the thick of things, showing (I assume) considerable courage, because he was tending to wounded soldiers at the front.

Although this seems at first sight a noble option – avoiding killing anyone, but showing courage under fire – it leaves me unconvinced. If killing people is forbidden by your ethical code, presumably that code applies not just to you but to everyone. So, if people are being persuaded to join in the war effort in a way that will most likely lead to their killing other people, the logical thing to do would be to campaign to stop them joining up: presumably you hope that everyone will refuse to kill in just the way that you do, accepting that losing the war is the price we are all prepared to pay for our pacifist principles. Yet this man – if I understood him right, and in case I didn't you can regard it as a thought experiment – was in effect conniving at other people's immoral acts of killing by helping them when they were wounded.

Some may regard that as an unfair judgment – not of the man's moral worth, of course, but of his reasoning – yet I don't think it is. The doctor's policy may be seen as an example of 'keeping my hands clean'. As long as I avoid doing something bad myself, then, whatever anyone else is doing, even with my connivance, I'm off the hook: *my* virtue is intact.

Illustration

If you saw CP Taylor's play *Good*, which was produced in London recently and shown on screens elsewhere, you will remember how, as the Nazis took power in Germany, a professor of literature – an apparently decent man – managed to deceive himself by a series of intellectual contortions into helping the government set up death camps. That was chilling enough. But what interested me, too, was the attitude of the young student for whom he left his wife and who claimed not to be interested in doing anything political: her rather inarticulate ramblings (selected from various points in the text) included "People just survive and live . . . it doesn't seem to matter what kind of government people have . . . you find somebody you love . . . and you have a family . . . and you look after them . . . and try not to harm anybody . . . isn't that what happens? . . . in the end you have to survive . . . and the less you harm people in surviving . . ." That might be seen as the ultimate 'keep my own hands clean' philosophy, and I would characterize that whole idea not as genuine morality but as a kind of moral self-indulgence.

2.b Purity and pollution

The word 'clean' there is significant in other ways too. The ancient Greeks, most especially the Pythagoreans (Kirk et al 229-235) and other mystery cults, had long lists of things that they wouldn't do or eat, in case it made them unclean; in some cases they needed to purify themselves ritually with holy water (or kill a pig) if they came in contact with the wrong sort of fish, for example. There is plenty of that kind of stuff in the aforementioned *Book of Deuteronomy*, too. These apparent hang-ups may well derive from an evolutionarily useful feature called the 'disgust instinct' which I gather all animals have, from nematodes upwards. There are certain harmful, poisonous things which it is a good idea to avoid, and the instinct to find them disgusting will make the species more likely to survive.

What has always fascinated me about such rules is that nowadays, with our greater knowledge of medicine, they now have absolutely no function in making society as a whole, or even individuals individually, healthy or happy or successful – unless you think they may be punished by the gods if they don't obey them. The purpose is to maintain a kind of symbolic purity, to avoid symbolic pollution. Harmless nonsense, one might think, just the disgust instinct on overdrive. But the notions of purity and pollution are still with us – not so obviously in chattering class culture in Oxford – and the ironic, indeed appalling, thing is that, while the rules are about the private behaviour of individuals, not at all about justice or causing harm between different individuals, there can be massive prejudice, not to mention legal sanctions, against those who don't conform.

Illustration

There are people I know who, over the years, have reconciled themselves to the idea that gay and Lesbian people should not be prosecuted, or even persecuted or ostracized, but still insist that their activity is nevertheless wrong, or even sinful. Why, I ask, assuming that the relationship is conducted between consenting adults in private (the original condition, I seem to remember) and does absolutely nobody any harm? One answer they give is that the act is 'unnatural', just simply not right, and – if pressed for an explanation – it is using parts of the body for purposes for which nature clearly did not intend them. Rather like, I say, using your foot to kick a ball into the back of a net! To judge from the utterances and laws of various governments around the world, that prejudice and its justification are endorsed by a sizable proportion of the human race.

Summary

We can endorse the humanist mantra (on their bookmarks) "Think for yourself", but the idea of thinking primarily *about* yourself – whether it is seeing your own virtue (or indeed your purity, whatever that may mean) as an end in itself, or as a means to some reward such as public esteem, keeping out of trouble with the police, or earning a happy afterlife – is not really morality at all, but simple self-interest. Morality – whatever its content – must be, by definition, about the interests of *others*, not of oneself. To complete the humanist mantra I started, "Think for yourself, act *for others*".

C. Conclusion

To summarise my view on the connection between morality and individualism, individualism is half-right and half-wrong. If what we are interested in is that the world should be as just as possible and that people should cause as little harm to each other as possible – which I take to be the proper purpose of *any* moral system . . .

a) As a moral *thinker*, one should at least try to be an individual: forget about loyalty to the *views* of one's family or community or any authority, and work out for oneself what is best for the good of other people – however unpopular that attitude may be among a huge slice of the world, and however difficult it may be genuinely to think as an individual.

b) As a moral *agent*, it is wrong and self-indulgent to think that one's own individual virtue matters in the grand scheme of things, except insofar as it can contribute to the general good.

In other words, the community we live in should be the beneficiary of an individual's actions, not the decider of his or her principles.

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