

ON GIVING REASONS FOR BEING MORAL

By KAI NIELSEN

RODGER Beehler¹ is surely justified in stressing the importance of the Kantian distinction between a man of good morals and a morally good man. Both men, though with different attitudes in mind, will be concerned to do what is right. But the morally good man will do it out of a regard for what is right, because he believes it to be right, while the evil or amoral man will do what is right only because he sees or thinks he sees some advantage in it. But it is not the case that a following out of the implications of this distinction undermines either my claim that an individual can sensibly ask why be moral (why do what he acknowledges is morally required of him) or my companion claim that the moral point of view is something that could be adopted or rejected, i.e., that a man might decide not to take moral considerations as overriding all other considerations in the context of action.

The claim is made by Mr. Beehler that it makes no sense to ask such questions because he believes that it makes no sense to speak of *deciding* to allow moral considerations to count most with one, or to speak of deciding to be just or honest or kind. In general one cannot decide to be moral or to discard one's commitment to taking moral considerations as overriding all other considerations. There is, according to Beehler, no deciding to have a regard for goodness; there is no way of deciding to care for others. There is no deciding to be moral or immoral.

On the contrary, I think there is a tolerably straightforward sense in which an individual can decide to be moral. What this comes to here is a resolving to be moral. It is not that honesty or selflessness just matters to you or it does not. They can matter to an individual; and yet there are times when he is not honest or selfless, and as an intelligent agent with interests, wants and needs, he looks about him and he sees that people often are—and frequently to their advantage—dishonest and anything but selfless, and he sees honest and selfless men harmed.² He sees all that; he sees the defeat and repression of progressive social movements and the constant spectacle of evil and of human indifference. Faced with this, he may in a certain mood—indeed perhaps in a despairing mood—ask if there is any rhyme or reason to this concern of his with selflessness and honesty. He may very well come to feel that to live in this way is an arbitrary “act of faith” on his part, and that it is the case that he and others like him who are so concerned are being duped and used. He may out of his disillusion and resulting cynicism decide that moral concern

¹ Vid. sup., pp. 12–16.

² No sophisticated talk about the way(s) in which a good man cannot be harmed will suffice to undercut the force of the plain fact that there are still evident enough ways in which he can be harmed.

should not really matter so much, should not play such a central role in his life, and he may resolve to put a concern with them aside, except in the purely instrumental way that a Uriah Heep may be concerned with them.

For some human beings, by contrast, it might go the other way. They might be self-interested creatures reasonably hardened to others. But human beings are often not of a piece and they might come ambivalently to feel that there might be something in having moral concern and developing selflessness, and they might strive to make these things matter to them or at least wonder whether, after all, they really should make these things matter to them. And they might succeed in making these things matter. There is no conceptual ban (*pace* Beehler) on their trying or resolving to make them matter and indeed in their even making them matter.

In the first instance we have a man quite intelligibly wondering whether he should discard the moral point of view, and in the latter instance we have a man wondering whether he should act in accordance with it, as a morally good man—a man of good will—would act in accordance with it.

It is at best a psychological truth and not a conceptual truth that shame, remorse and guilt will accrue because of a negative decision in the latter case or a positive decision in the former case. But even if there were such psychological reactions, they would not show that a man cannot reject the moral point of view, for he might no longer attach *authoritative* weight to those feelings but might come to regard them as irrational hang-ups to be overcome. (Think of a man who might come to think of his conscience simply as his superego.) Most of the main characters in *No Exit to Brooklyn* had once, at least in some rudimentary way, learned moral notions, but they dispensed with them, discarded them, in the way many people discard religious beliefs.

Men who are not kind or just or loyal or honest can decide to *try to become so*. That is to say, they can so resolve. This can be as a result of deliberation, and in so deliberating they can decide to adopt a moral point of view—a point of view in which they will try to take a proper regard for considerations of honesty, selflessness, mercy, integrity and justice. And since immoral or amoral men, or just torn, ambivalent men, can by their deliberate decisions come to adopt the moral point of view, moral men can by deliberate decisions opt out of trying to live in accordance with the dictates of morality. Smerdyakovs are not conceptual impossibilities.

Which point of view a man adopts is a *logically* contingent matter and thus it is a real question and not a pseudo-question whether an individual should be moral. We know what it would be like for him to go one way and we know what it would be like for him to go the other, and we want

to know how, if at all, he could justify (without begging the question) going on in one way rather than another. It is not, however, evident what such a justification would look like. But it is the case that a moral point of view and various non-moral points of view are—as far as conceptual possibilities are concerned—open options for him.¹ He wants to know if any objective, decisive or even nearly decisive, but non-question-begging, reason can be given for his adopting one point of view rather than the other.

That we do not know what would count as an answer here does not show that such a question is a pseudo-question. We would only know that it was a pseudo-question if we knew that nothing could, logically could, count as an answer to such a question. Beehler has not shown that this is so and I know of no sound argument for believing it to be so. To meet Beehler's criticisms, I have simply set a context (one of several contexts) in which 'Why be moral?' could be asked without invoking incoherent or thoroughly problematic notions. Thus the perplexing question 'Why be moral?' remains with us. And to acknowledge that it is a genuine question, though indeed a very perplexing one, is not to give to understand that one thinks it has no answer.²

¹ It isn't just that morality can conflict with self-interest, it can conflict with various forms of privilege and with family, class and tribal considerations as well.

² In my 'Why Should I be Moral?', *Methodos*, Vol. XV (1963), I try to give the kind of answer that I think can be given to such a question. This essay has been reprinted in Kenneth Pahl and Marvin Schiller (edd.), *Readings in Contemporary Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1970).

University of Calgary

MORALS AND REASONS

By RODGER BEEHLER

KAI Nielsen gives what he claims are two instances of deciding to be (or not to be) moral.¹ It turns out that these are instances of *resolving* to be, or not to be, moral.

In the first case a man resolves not to let moral considerations count with him. He 'decides that moral concern should not really matter so much, should not play such a central role in his life'.² He resolves to put moral concern aside. Just before that we are told that 'he may very well *come to feel* that to live this way is . . . arbitrary', and so on. Now this last may indeed happen to a man. The question is whether he can decide that it should. Earlier we are told that it is in a moment of despair that

¹ Vid. sup., pp. 17–19.

² Is 'so much' a hedge? Are morals to have *some* 'role'?