

## SOME MORAL MYTHOLOGIES

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### I

There are moral philosophers — philosophers I call ethical rationalists — who think that to be immoral is always, in all circumstances and at all times, to act contrary to reason. The immoralist, no matter how clever, informed, philosophically sophisticated, self-controlled, psychologically astute and careful, must make some mistake or exhibit some failure in rationality in acting as he does.<sup>1</sup> Morality is in accordance with reason, immorality contrary to it. A personal policy of immoralism, that is, is simply *necessarily* contrary to reason.

Kurt Baier, in a series of important essays, has made a strong case for such an ethical rationalism.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it may be the strongest contemporary case. Yet it still seems to me a rationalist mythology. I want here to give some of the more salient reasons for believing that it actually is such a mythology.

### II

It is vital to keep firmly in mind that in spite of the weight that Baier gives to interests in moral reasoning, unlike the so-called egoist, he conceives of the moral order as necessarily including “principles and precepts capable of coming into conflict with the counsels of self-interest....”<sup>3</sup> (236). Baier is concerned, as I am, with the ‘Why-should-I-be-moral-question’ as a *validation* request and not as a *motivational* request. The question at issue is an agent’s question — the question of an individual, anybody you like, considering what he or she should do when the counsels of prudence and the requirements of morality really do conflict. Such an individual perfectly well knows that morality requires that he follow morality and prudence dictates that he follow prudence. (There are matching moral ‘shoulds’ and prudential ‘shoulds’ here.) But

the validation request for an individual agent here (anyone you like) is to ascertain, if he can, whether reason requires that he always follow prudence or whether it always requires that he act as a person of moral principle when morality and prudence conflict or whether *in general* (special circumstances apart) reason makes no particular determinations here. The agent wants to know which of these directives, constitutes reasons for him (or anyone) to act accordingly; or, if both give reasons for acting which of them is superior, which one he should in reason follow, and why? (237) ('Anyone' should not be read here as 'everyone' or 'everybody' but literally as what it says, to wit, 'anyone'.<sup>4</sup>) The agent is, or at least should be, aware that he is talking about situations in which there is a genuine conflict between morality and prudence. What he wants to know, where there is such real conflict, is which of these directives over-rides which.

Let us look at the matter from another angle. Baier develops a conception of *self-anchored reasons*: to wit, reasons "grounded in the satisfactoriness of the agent's own life". (242) Self-anchored reasons are not the same thing as self-interested ones. If I love my daughter and I give her a push in the swing because I know it will give her pleasure, my reason for giving her a push in the swing is a self-anchored *other*-interested reason. On the other hand, if I am nice to Jones simply because I think by being nice to him that will help me get on in the institution in which we both work, my reason for so acting is a self-anchored *self*-interested reason.

The 'why-be-moral-question?' could be construed as 'Why should an agent ever allow reasons which are not for him self-anchored reasons to over-ride his self-anchored reasons?' But it could just as well, though it need not be, be broken down into, on the one hand, the question 'Why should an agent ever allow reasons which are not for him self-anchored reasons to over-ride his self-anchored reasons which are also reasons of self-interest?' or, on the other hand, into the question 'Why should an agent ever allow reasons which are not for him self-anchored to over-ride any reasons of his, self-interested or otherwise, which are self-anchored?'

### III

Keeping these various readings of 'Why be moral?' in mind, let us turn to Baier's answer to the 'question'. Baier argues, as

## SOME MORAL MYTHS

I initially remarked, that any agent necessarily makes a mistake — does something which is contrary to reason — if he, in a social order which is also a moral order (if that isn't pleonastic), does not do what morality requires of him. To avoid, at least to some extent, in some way faulting his rationality, a person must, in such circumstances, treat moral requirements as over-riding any other requirements, including, of course, the requirements of prudence. Any other behavior is not only immoral, it is also, Baier claims, contrary to reason.

Baier, though he importantly differs from Hobbes, is a Hobbesist, in a very general contemporary sense, in a way analogous to the way in which, in a contemporary sense, Jon Elster is a Marxist.<sup>5</sup> Baier, accepts Hobbes's claim that "if everyone followed only reasons of self-interest, then in the absence of a coercive social order the resulting state of affairs would be necessarily undesirable". (242) Baier also agrees with Hobbes that it is "in everyone's interest to have such a coercive social order regulating interpersonal relations so as to make unnecessary and to prevent the settling of conflicts of interest by force or cunning". (242)

I think that Baier is justified in following Hobbes here and that this Hobbesist move is an important initial step in ethics. But Baier, rightly I believe, refuses to follow Hobbes's next step: a step which, if correct, would establish the irrationality of an agent's not acting as morality requires. Baier, however, does want to come to the same conclusion as does Hobbes by way of a quite different route.

Hobbes thought that the very existence of a coercive social order so transforms the circumstances for those living under it such that they have adequate reason to think that it is always in their best interests to satisfy that social requirement. Hobbes argues that the immoralist (the moral free-rider) could only gain, could only successfully flaunt, the requirements of morality if other men made errors: if they did not clearly see what the actual social situation was and what opportunities the various agents had and what lines of possible action were available and attractive to various agents. This seems fair enough. If everyone, or indeed even if most people most of the time, could clairvoyantly see what the actual situation is, including the rationale for the immoralist's actions, it would be stupid to be an immoralist.

However, Baier is surely right in claiming that Hobbes is mistaken in maintaining that the immoralist could never be in a position in which he could foresee or reckon upon such errors. It is just not true that in certain circumstances he could not reliably expect a lack of clairvoyance on the part of people. But with that Hobbes has lost his ground for claiming that he should, if he is being through and through rational, never violate the requirements of morality. Hobbes would have us believe that he should always be a man of good morals. But in the first place there isn't such clairvoyance. We can't reasonably claim that people are never in a position here to make rough reckonings concerning how people can be duped. Secondly, to act as if we must assume such clairvoyance is surely an excessively play safe policy — so play safe as to be contrary to reason. Hobbes's attempt to scare the immoralist into good morals won't work in all circumstances for an immoralist who can think clearly.

If that is the basis for not being immoral, then it should be responded that it is, upon occasion, not contrary to reason to be immoral. As Baier puts it, "in most societies, if not all, it is not always impossible or even unlikely that a person should be able to tell with very great certainty and with comparatively little risk to himself, should he be mistaken, that he will not be caught". (243) Hobbes, in fact has not shown that there are self-anchored reasons of sufficient strength such that we have established that every member of every coercive social order on every occasion of his life must give pride of place to moral considerations in the orientation of his life or else do something which is contrary to reason. He has not shown that if they are, in some circumstances, cleverly and prudently immoral, their self-interest will be harmed or their self-fulfillment or human flourishing worked against. Moreover, an acknowledgement of this state of affairs on the part of philosophers, would not cause morality to totter, for a recognition of this, on the part of a few philosophers, does nothing to show that, if this obtains, the coercive social order will be destabilized. The society would not thereby become unstable if self-anchored reasons are regarded by them as supreme. Whatever they privately resolved to do as individuals, they could readily come to see that it is in the *collective* self-interest of people not to treat their own

## SOME MORAL MYTHS

individual self-anchored reasons as supreme. Treating such reasons as supreme, over-riding reasons, is, paradoxically enough, with all the instability that would be generated by it, “undesirable from every member’s self-anchored point of view”. (244). To avoid such social instability, the thing to do, Baier argues, is to take the coercive requirements of the social order as themselves reasons to act in accordance with that order and as reasons over-riding self-anchored reasons. This means, Baier claims, that it is rationally mandatory for the individual agent to be committed to morality, even to a ‘conventional morality’, as something superior to taking self-anchored reasons as his ultimate guide. This is rationally mandatory, Baier claims, even from the individual rational agent’s own point of view. When compared with a system of purely self-anchored reasons the coercive requirements of almost any social order will be seen by rational people to be preferable to a world without such a social order — a world where each individual agent is allowed, without any social constraint, to go after number one. If we are not to act contrary to reason, the requirements of the coercive social order are to be regarded by members of that order as reasons for acting accordingly and, where “they come into conflict with self-anchored reasons, as over-riding them”. (244)

An acceptance of this, as Baier is well aware, would not be sufficient to commit us to a genuine moral point of view (a point of view that gives sound moral action guides) but it would convince us to at least accept what Baier calls a Rational Conventionalism. That is to say, it would convince us to accept some mutually useful action guides, as over-riding the individual pursuit of self-interest, or the sticking with self-regarding reasons as over-riding.

However, *pace* Baier, I think we still need to ask the following question: even if we accept, as surely is plausible, such a Rational Conventionalism as superior, from an *agent-neutral perspective*, to rational egoism or any other generalized appeal to self-anchored reasons, why should an *individual* agent adopt such a Rational Conventionalism rather than an agent relative perspective where he, for himself alone, accepts self-anchored reasons instead?<sup>6</sup> He isn’t making a claim that others should adopt self-anchored reasons as their over-riding reasons. Indeed, he wants others, or at least most

others, to accept at least a Rational Conventionalism and perhaps even a genuine moral point of view, if there is such a thing, as their over-riding reasons. He does not want them to take self-anchored reasons as their ultimate action guide. But he is asking, *for himself alone*, why should he take the moral point of view and adopt an agent-neutral perspective rather than to continue to reason and act from an agent relative perspective which will provide self-anchored reasons that will for him (for this *anybody*) over-ride, where they conflict, those agent-neutral reasons which would commit him to at least Rational Conventionalism?

Why does he, or does he act against reason if he refuses to abandon an agent relative perspective and adopt an agent neutral perspective? To call the latter 'the point of view of Reason' is, I submit, rather a question begging. To say that to refuse to do so is to be unfair is also to beg the question, for to so raise considerations of fairness is to *assume* an answer to what is being questioned; it just assumes that one should be moral, that any individual you like, should take moral reasons as the supreme over-riding reasons for the guidance of his life. To the question, 'What is so special about you which justifies your not abandoning your agent-relative perspective?' the immoralist can reply 'Nothing. I didn't set out to make a rule for all humankind. I am looking out for myself and some people I just happen to like. What intellectual mistake must I have made if I so act? Why, must I have ignored considerations touching on my own flourishing, if I refuse to abandon a thorough going agent — relative view-point here?' It is far from clear that Baier has shown that the immoralist must in all such circumstances have so erred, let alone that he necessarily must have so erred, if he does not treat such a non-self-anchored system of reasons as over-riding his own system, perhaps a carefully crafted system, of purely self-anchored reasons, even when the former system of reasons are generally being firmly accepted in the society in which he lives.

#### IV

This remark of Baier's might be taken as a response to the above arrangement: "As a validation request 'Why be moral?' implies either that everyone should or no one need always be moral; i.e., that either moral reasons always necessarily do or

## SOME MORAL MYTHS

that they don't always necessarily over-ride all other kinds of reason..." (237) Beyond that "it asks for a demonstration and explanation of the answer". (237) But, to put it this way, collapses reasoning from an *agent-relative* perspective into reasoning from an *agent-neutral* perspective, and, in effect, only considers the perspective and the reasons, appropriate to the latter. Baier, in effect, reasons as if all reasons were agent-neutral reasons.

Some explanation is in order. Agent-neutral reasons are reasons which can be given a general form which does not include any essential reference to the person to whom it applies. If, by contrast, the general form of a reason does include an essential reference to the person to whom it applies, it is an agent-relative reason. 'That it would reduce the amount of suffering in the world' is the former sort of reason. 'That it is in his interest' is in the latter sort. But note that an agent-relative reason is still general in the following sort of way, namely it must, to be an agent-relative reason, be a reason for anyone, or at least a certain sort of 'anyone' with a certain sort of personality and in a certain sort of way. In the above case it would be that it is in his interest.

It is crucial to recognize that an agent-relative reason only gives a person a reason to act in accordance with it if it is related to an agent in the right way. It must actually be in his interest or in some way, directly or indirectly, make for his self-fulfillment if it is to be a reason for him to act on it. But I need not, if my reasons are agent-relative reasons, believe that others must act on them. I need not believe that others must do what is in my self-interest or believe that I should act myself to further my self-interest in accepting that it is in my interest or that it furthers my self-fulfillment are reasons for me to act. This does not, of course, obtain for agent-neutral reasons. That it would cause suffering is a reason for anyone not to do it. That it is in my interest does not have such a status.

## V

When I ask for a reason why I should be moral, I can, and naturally would, be asking for an agent-relative reason. And this can, and typically would, be as much a *validation-request* and not just, or even necessarily at all, a *motivation-request*,

as would a deliberation asking for an agent-neutral reason for being moral.

As an agent-relative *validation-request* it is not asking, as Baier insists, "that everyone should or no one need always be moral". Rather, it is asking, for an individual placed in a stable moral community, why this individual should always do what is right even when it is irksome for him? And the person who asks this need not be at all inquiring into what would *get* him to do it.<sup>7</sup> Like Adeimantus and Glaucon he may be perfectly prepared to do it. What he wants to know is whether there is any non-question begging ground which will show that he acts more rationally in so acting than does the immoralist when he does not so act. And this plainly is a *validation-request*.

If the answer is that he should always do what is right, *universalizability* commits us to believing that any relevantly similar individual in such a situation should as well. But even that is not to say anything about what everybody should do but only say to what *anybody* with that sort of personality in that sort of situation should do.<sup>8</sup> To talk about what *everybody* should do is to move to the agent-neutral perspective and to appeal to agent-neutral reasons. But, if an individual sticks resolutely to an agent-relative perspective and appeals to agent-relative reasons, Baier has done nothing to show that he must be acting irrationally or be acting contrary to reason or not be asking anything coherent in asking the question 'Why be moral?' as a *validation-request*. I need not be asking what can *get* me or *goad* me or *move* me to do what is morally required of me. But I am asking what, if anything, will *justify* my doing so by showing that I must be acting in a way that is contrary to reason, if I do not abandon in such a circumstance an agent-relative perspective, even where I, for my own life orientation, take self-anchored reasons as over-riding moral reasons.

Suppose we go (assuming now that we can go) beyond Rational Conventionalism to a society where a) a genuine moral point of view is part of a society's culture, b) where it is generally and correctly believed in that society that the coercive requirements of the social order in that society provide over-riding reasons and c) where the desirable benefits of their being so regarded accrue to everyone only if they are



## SOME MORAL MYTHS

*generally* so regarded. Suppose further that the society is such that the social requirements are not merely for the good of everyone, (by comparison with the state of nature) but are for the good of everyone *alike* (by comparison with other possible social orders). Where these conditions are met, there is, Baier claims, "no possible change of the social order" which would be an improvement from the point of view of reason". (245) What Baier means by that is that here we have a "point of view which requires the social order to be such that everyone has the best possible self-anchored reason everyone (not anyone) can possibly have for wanting the requirements of the actual coercive social order under which he lives generally recognized in that order as *constituting* reasons overriding them." (245)

Let us now suppose, what in fact we cannot realistically suppose, namely that we have concretely and specifically a clear conception of such a social order and that it indeed exists. We would then indeed have the best possible self-anchored reason everyone (not anyone) could have for wanting such a social order to continue to prevail. If it is the best possible self-anchored reason everyone could have for wanting such a social order to prevail, then it is the best possible reason I could have for wanting such a social order to prevail. However, I could accept that and still continue to accept, without the slightest inconsistency, that I could have the best possible self-anchored reason which I, like *everyone else*, could have for wanting that social order to prevail and still, quite consistently, have an equally sound self-anchored reason for wanting to be able to freeload off that social order, neglecting its moral requirements where doing so is not going to be catching, will not in any other way have an undermining effect on that social order and will not be found out. In such a circumstance, I get the best of both worlds. I get the best possible moral order prevailing in which others, but not me, act in accordance with it. But I also get a world, without upsetting the principled behaviour of others, in which I live and pursue maximally effectively my own advantage even when that means discreetly not acting in accordance with that social order.

Suppose it is said, by way of reply, that that state of affairs could not be the best possible social order because no matter

how good a social order it was, a social order just like that but with me, as well, acting in accordance with it, would be a still better social order.

That is a fair enough remark to make. But even so, it could very well be that *for me*, from my *agent-relative point of view*, the best state of affairs would be that of (from an agent-neutral perspective) a second best social order obtaining where everything else remains as in what from the agent-neutral perspective would be the best state of affairs obtaining, except that I act immorally with completely undetected success. (And here, of course, *anybody*, could replace me though I could not, of course, be replaced by *everybody* or even by very many people.) That state of affairs might obtain and I might, as far as anything Baier has shown, have acted on such a rationale without acting irrationally or at all contrary to reason. I just resolutely refuse, in such a circumstance, to take an agent-neutral perspective, I refuse, that is, to allow agent-neutral reasons to over-ride what for me (or *anyone* else like me and in my position) are perfectly sound agent-relative reasons. And in so acting, I am, of course, refusing to take the moral point of view. But I need not, for all of that, have made the slightest intellectual mistake. And in that crucial way I need not have acted contrary to reason or to have made the slightest rational mistake.

The immoralist, of course, would not have Baier's ideal of the just society, but he could have, as a personal ideal, an ideal of a society just like it, except that it be a society in which he could and would successfully freeload, merely seeming to do his share instead of actually doing it. His reason for acting is not a reason that everyone could have together but it is a reason that *anyone* could have on condition that not many others do likewise. In that way everyone could have it (where 'everyone' is taken distributively), but only on condition that everyone (now taken collectively) does not have such a rationale for how he personally is to act. An individual P (any individual you like) could have a reason, indeed *for him* an over-riding reason, that not everyone ('everyone' taken collectively) could have but that does not show that A's reason was therefore not really a reason or, in a non-question begging way, a defective reason. Indeed, it is even universalizable. Anyone like A, with an A-like personality and in A's situation

## SOME MORAL MYTHS

(a situation where only a few could act on it) could have it as a reason for acting.

### VI

In Section III of his "Moral Reasons and Reasons to be Moral" Baier in effect, tries to meet a line of argument not radically different from the one I have developed above. I shall argue, not unsurprisingly, that his argument fails.

Baier first notes that it may "be objected that while reason does indeed require of us that we publicly advocate acting morally, it would be a mistake to infer from this that it is contrary to reason to act immorally". (248) It is true, Baier acknowledges, that sometimes what we have reason to acknowledge publicly, is not identical with what we would acknowledge privately. But, this, he continues is not so for the 'Why be moral?' case. In a dictatorship, by contrast, I might publically acknowledge the authority of the dictator — while privately rejecting it and seeking to undermine it. The rationale for that is evident. Plainly, I have reason to do both. But, Baier claims there is no such rationale, or indeed even any rationale at all, in the moral case for a divergence between a public and private stance, since "there is nothing similarly undesirable and remediable in the case of moral reasons". (248) Even if an agent does not love his fellow beings or even care much about them, he will recognize, if he is rational, that life in society is better than life in solitude. This being so, such agents, if they are rational, will acknowledge, at least to themselves, that "the presence and cooperation of other people is an indispensable condition of that better life". This being so, he will have reason to be moral; he will have a sound reason for supporting that system of cooperation.

The immoralist, Baier contends, must be confused, for this very line of reasoning commits him, if he will be consistent, to the belief that "moral reasons ought to be recognized and treated as over-riding". But while remaining so committed, he still fails, and by the immoralist's own lights, he correctly fails, so to treat them and indeed he does not act on them except when so acting is to his own advantage. But then, Baier claims, he does not, indeed he deliberately does not, do what reason tells him to do and thus he acts contrary to reason.

It is the confusing of *agent-neutral reasons* and an agent-

neutral perspective with *agent-relative reasons* and with an agent-relative perspective that allows Baier to conclude that the immoralist is caught in such a trap. From an agent neutral perspective, reasoning according to agent-neutral reasons, the immoralist does indeed have sound reasons which, if he takes that perspective as over-riding would require him to try to cease to be an immoralist and which do, quite plainly, from that perspective, over-ride any self-anchored reasons he might have. But, *qua* immoralist, he does not, if he is being clear-headed, propose to reason from an agent-neutral perspective and to appeal to agent-neutral reasons, rather he appeals to agent-relative reasons and to an agent-relative perspective. But nothing in Baier's arguments show that he is being inconsistent or acting against reason if he does not, in a clash between morality and prudence, abandon, his agent relative perspective and reason from the moral point of view.

The immoralist need not, as Baier thinks he is, be advancing a theory of reasons where "self-interested (or at least self-anchored) reasons are the only reasons or the supreme ones". (249) To be rational or not to be acting contrary to reason, the immoralist need not be offering a *theory* of reasons at all. But even if we do construe him as tendering a theory of reasons, it need not be the inconsistent one with which Baier tries to saddle him. The immoralist, as we have seen, will make, if he has his wits about him, a sharp distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons. Reasoning in accordance with agent neutral reasons, it is true — indeed, it is trivially true — that moral reasons, genuine moral reasons, are "reasons over-riding self-anchored ones" and that, from this perspective, these reasons, and indeed the just requirements of the social order, really do over-ride self-anchored ones and that they "really do deserve to be so regarded and treated". (248) But, as we have seen, the consistent immoralist does not set out, in seeking a rationale for his own actions, to take that perspective, but reasons, instead, from an agent-relative perspective and appeals, from that perspective, to agent-relative reasons and takes them as being over-riding from that perspective. There is no inconsistency here as long as he is clear about what perspective he is reasoning in accordance with. Moreover, if he wants such a thing, he can have a theory of reasons which tells

## SOME MORAL MYTHS

him how to reason and how to act and which explains the rationale of his actions. What it will not do is tell him whether *in general* agent-neutral reasons are better than (superior to) agent-relative reasons. It will not, in that way, tell him, where morality and prudence do really conflict, whether he should follow agent-neutral reasons or agent-relative reasons. His theory of reasons will be in that respect incomplete, and, he will argue, not capable of being completed. But it is not that anybody else is in any better position. (We are back with Sidgwick's dualism of practical reason.) But he can plausibly take this as a virtue, a testimony to the realism, of his theory of reasons. There is no good reason to believe that there must be a reason (as distinct from a cause) for everything or that everything we reasonably do we do for a reason. Both the person of moral principle and the immoralist could be acting reasonably. The key point to be made here against Baier is that there is no sound reason for believing that the immoralist must be inconsistent or acting contrary to reason.

### VII

Baier thinks that the immoralist in trying to defend his position, gets pushed into a self-contradictory position. This is the alleged self-contradictory proposition: it is true of *everybody* that *he* should not acknowledge the over-ridingness of moral reasons, but that *everybody other than he* should; in other words, that everybody should not and that everybody should. By now it should be clear that the immoralist need not be making such a self-contradictory statement, the offending utterance, filled out, can be given a non-self-contradictory reading. When an individual reasons from an *agent-relative point of view*, he recognizes that he need not acknowledge the over-ridingness of moral reasons and that it is possible that they might come to see that and adopt that point of view, with those implications, as well, without acting against reason; in other words, everyone might, as individuals adopt that perspective, though such an individual will continue to hope, and with good reason, others will not and he, as a rational immoralist, will act where he can to keep them from so acting. That is how a consistent immoralist will interpret Baier's putatively inconsistent utterance. And, where it is so read, it is plainly not inconsistent. If this reading seems too far from the intent of Baier's sentence, the following reading, as well, frees

the immoralist from unsaying what he/she is saying. She could be understood to be claiming that it is true for anyone that when she (that is any individual you like) is reasoning from an agent relative point of view, and thinking of herself alone, that she need not acknowledge the over-ridingness of moral reasons, but, that not withstanding, any rational individual will also recognize that it is in her interests that, generally speaking, others should acknowledge and act on the over-ridingness of moral reasons. Thus, when she looks at things from an agent relative perspective, she correctly denies that everyone must or necessarily should take moral reasons as over-riding; when she looks at things from an agent-neutral perspective, she correctly asserts that everyone must take moral reasons as over-riding. But there is no inconsistency there and she is not saying, as Baier believes, 'that everybody should not and that everybody should'.

## VIII

Baier might take another tack and argue that the immoralist could not accept what, Baier tells us, is an essential characteristic of practical reasoning, namely, that no practical principles could be sound principles of practical reason which could be such only if they were not universally followed. The immoralist violates that constraint so he could not have an adequate theory of reasons or be acting fully rationally.

However, once we disambiguate here we can see that the immoralist need not violate that constraint. He could say 'In situations where most people will act morally or at least approximate that condition, anyone (and thus — viewed distributively — everyone) can act immorally'. In that type of situation such a principle could be universally followed. By that I mean that for all X, any X can do Y, where it is known or correctly believed that only a few X's will do Y. However, if everybody were actually to so act, then we would have a very different ball game. It is like the rule — a rule universally followed. 'In situations where not everyone will need kidney dialysis everybody who needs it can have it'. That principle can be universally followed and it still would not be broken if everyone came to need dialysis and thus not everyone could have it. The immoralist need not be flaunting sound principles of practical reason or acting inconsistently.

## SOME MORAL MYTHS

### IX

Baier very much wants to defend the concerns of Glaucon and Adeimantus in the *Republic*. He tries to show that what they want to be the case must really be the case. Their concern is to show “that it must never be according to reason to be immoral, even when immorality appears to one as the most rewarding course”.<sup>9</sup> They hope to see it established that the resolve to be moral is not only always perfectly rational, but also that any departure from that resolve is contrary to reason. Baier has sought to establish that what Glaucon and Adeimantus hope is true is actually true and indeed necessarily true. He thinks he has established by philosophical argumentation certain necessary truths or at least unassailable truths which show just that. I have sought to show, more in the spirit of both Hume and Sidgwick, that such a position, such as ethical rationalism, has not been established and that the prospects for establishing it are not, to put it minimally, very good.

I have not denied that, from an *agent-neutral perspective*, there is a social demand firmly grounded in reason, that, as Baier puts it, “the precepts of morality be treated as practical guidelines *over-riding* those of self-interest, and as far as I can see all other guidelines as well”.<sup>10</sup> From that perspective, we rightly “demand that everyone always be moral” and, as a corollary, we again rightly demand “that people treat moral precepts as supreme guidelines”.<sup>11</sup> This is what we as a society — as do all societies — require of the members of our society. Indeed, it is something that any people, if they are not to act contrary to reason, would require of every member, capable of so acting. It has not, however, been the burden of this essay to deny that. Indeed, I believe that it is vital not to deny it and, in the face of ethical skepticism, to stress it. But such a stress does nothing at all to establish the irrationality, or even diminished rationality, of Hume’s sensible knave or the unprincipled bastard.<sup>12</sup>

The immoralist need not get bad marks vis-a-vis his rationality in terms of either ability or performance. The immoralist should be a person as out of sympathy, as are both Baier and Rawls, with ‘ethical egoism’ (so-called ‘ethical egoism’). He can and will perfectly well acknowledge the *social over-ridingness* of the moral point of view and its distance

KAI NIELSEN

from any form of egoism, while still perfectly consistently, without default of reason, persisting in his own immoralism.

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USA

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1970) and Alan Gewirth, *Reason and Morality*, (Chicago, Illinois: the University of Chicago Press, 1978). Gewirth's is the most extreme form of contemporary ethical rationalism on the scene. I have criticized it in my "Against Ethical Rationalism" in Edward Regis (ed.) *Gewirth's Ethical Rationalism*, (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).
- <sup>2</sup> The following are the essays of Kurt Baier's I have in mind. "The Social Source of Reason," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 51 (1978); "Moral Reasons and Reasons to be Moral" in A.I. Goldman and J. Kim (eds.), *Values and Morals* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978); "Defining Morality Without Prejudice", *The Monist*, vol. 64 (1981); "Moral Reasons," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vo. III (1978); and "The Conceptual Link Between Morality and Rationality," *Nous*, Vol. XVI, No. 1 (March, 1982).
- <sup>3</sup> The article of Baier's I will most frequently cite is his "Moral Reasons and Reasons to be Moral". Citations to it will occur in the text. Other citations will be given in the standard way in the footnotes.
- <sup>4</sup> Some have, for reasons which escape me, found Baier's distinction between 'anybody' and 'everybody' confusing. To say that *anyone* can be the first to get an artificial heart is not to say that *everyone* can be the first to get an artificial heart.
- <sup>5</sup> Elster expresses it thus: "When asked whether I am a Marxist or why I call myself a Marxist, I have the following well-rehearsed answer: if, by a Marxist, you mean someone who holds all of the beliefs that Marx himself thought were his most important ideas, such as the labor theory of value, the theory of the falling rate of profit, the unity of theory and practice in revolutionary struggle, the theory of exploitation, the utopian vision of a transparent society, the theory of class struggle, and more generally the basic principles of historical materialism — then I am certainly not a Marxist. But if, by a Marxist you mean someone who can trace the ancestry of his most important beliefs back to Marx, then I am indeed a Marxist. For me this includes the theory of exploitation and the theory of class struggle, both in a suitably revised and generalized form." Jon Elster "Clearing the Decks", *Ethics*, vol. 91, No. 4 (July, 1981), p. 644, Baier's Hobbesianism has a similar general ancestry in Hobbes.



## SOME MORAL MYTHS

- <sup>6</sup> Thomas Nagel, "The Limits of Objectivity", *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. I, (Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah, 1980), pp. 77-139.
- <sup>7</sup> David Falk, "Guiding and Goadng", *Mind*, (1954).
- <sup>8</sup> See my "Universalizability and the Commitment to Impartiality" in Nelson Potter and Mark Timmons (eds.) *New Essays on Ethical Universalizability*, forthcoming.
- <sup>9</sup> Kurt Baier, "The Conceptual Link Between Morality and Rationality", *Nous*, vol. XVI, No. 1 (March, 1983).
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> See my "Baier on the Link Between Immorality and Irrationality", *Nous*, vol. XVI, No. 1 (March, 1982), pp. 91-92.