

Introduction

This is first an essay about emotions and attitudes that include some estimate of the self, such as pride, self-esteem, vanity, arrogance, shame, humility, embarrassment, resentment, and indignation. It is also about some qualities that bear on these emotions: our integrity, sincerity, or authenticity. I am concerned with the way these emotions and qualities manifest themselves in human life in general, and in the modern world in particular. The essay is therefore what the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), never afraid of a grand title, would have called an exercise in pragmatic anthropology:

Physiological knowledge of the human being concerns the investigation of what *nature* makes of the human being; pragmatic, the investigation of what *he* as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself.¹

Kant here echoes an older theological tradition that while other animals have their settled natures, human beings are free to make

2 INTRODUCTION

of themselves what they will. So this book is about what we make of ourselves, or can and should make of ourselves.

There is a melancholy pleasure in contemplating the wandering infirmities to which we are all prone. A more strenuous moralist than myself might preach to arm us against them, but I have little such ambition. According to the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76), “the merit of delivering true general precepts in ethics is indeed very small. Whoever recommends any moral virtues, really does no more than is implied in the terms themselves.”² I pretty much agree. By the time we have grown up, we have learned that courage, justice, kindness, honesty, modesty, open-mindedness, and many other traits are virtues and commendable, and that others such as selfishness, malevolence, laziness, dishonesty, inconstancy, vanity, and pigheadedness are the reverse. When we learn what words others are using about us, we immediately know whether they are praising us or criticizing us. In morality, it is usually not knowledge we lack but the ability to bend our will to it, although there is room for puzzles and dilemmas when morality speaks with two voices. From a rather different angle to Hume’s, the Church historian Owen Chadwick, poring over the denunciations of sin in one of the fathers of the monastic tradition, confesses,

it must be admitted that this expanded catalogue of vice makes for decidedly tedious reading . . . sin, unless it offers hope of scandal, does not interest the human mind.³

Enthusiasm for chasing down and denouncing sin is not an attractive human trait. Medieval penitentials (works giving instruction to priests for the handling of confessions) make dull reading, al-

though some are enlivened with delightful stories, rather along the lines of reality TV shows.⁴ Even Kant, although he is usually thought of as a strict and rigorous moralist, shies away from undue enthusiasm for virtue, quoting the Roman poet Horace: “The wise man has the name of being a fool, the just man of being iniquitous, if he seeks virtue *beyond what is sufficient*.”⁵

Although this is well said, there is another role for critical reflection, or philosophy. People may not need to be taught what counts as wrongdoing and what counts as behaving well. Much knowledge of vice and virtue may well be a fairly democratic possession, learned at one’s mother’s knee. This, however, is only true of the part of ethics that is concerned with simple and socially enforced rules and prohibitions. It has recently been the principal concern of much modern moral philosophy, which conceives of life in quasi-legal terms as a network of rights and duties derived for the most part from voluntary contracts between individual economic atoms, each with given desires.⁶ The danger is that in this picture, a kind of trading becomes the paradigm of moral relations between individuals. This emphasis neglects the domain of self-cultivation, psychological development, or reflection on achieving some kind of harmony or happiness in life that goes beyond satisfaction of whichever desires we happen to have. It also neglects the pervasive influence of culture and context, the “spirit of the age,” or the climate of ideas that surround us and play such a large role in directing our thoughts and desires. Yet such reflection used to make up the wider sphere of ethics. Much classical philosophy, not to mention writing on the borderlines where philosophy dissolves into religion, has had precisely this as its topic, with the overt aim of promoting spiritual health, or enabling people to see how to live well. The ancient schools, such as the Cyrenaics, the Cynics, Epicu-

4 INTRODUCTION

reans, Skeptics, Stoics, and Aristotelians or Peripatetics were largely concerned with offering recipes for this, variously concentrating on self-command, pleasure, friendship, renunciation, citizenship, and virtue, in different mixtures. Similarly, in the religions of the Book, we learn how the true pilgrim, the true trustee of his or her own soul, must pass through the world ignoring most of its blandishments. The pilgrim's progress is not to be impeded by Vanity Fair:

Therefore at this fair are all such merchandise sold: as houses, lands, trades, places, honours, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures, and delights of all sorts—as whores, bawds, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not.

And moreover, at this fair there is at all times to be seen jugglings, cheats, games, plays, fools, apes, knaves, and rogues, and that of all sorts.⁷

The moral here is that while it is easy to know not to lie to each other, for example, it is a great deal harder to know how to look after our own souls. What we need may even be more self-love, not less, for a truly informed concern for the self may be a very different thing from a blank check to spend at Vanity Fair.

Unfortunately, this kind of exercise can itself descend into banalities: don't overindulge, control yourself, be a good citizen, don't sweat the small stuff, enjoy life, don't ask too much of it, remember how short life is, cultivate friendships, be nice. Philosophers have themselves worried about this: Bertrand Russell, for instance, says of Aristotle's long disquisitions on friendship that "all that is said is sensible, but there is not one word that rises above

common sense.”⁸ So although many people today feel, as others throughout history have felt, that “there must be something more” to life than whatever they are managing to make of it, there is no agreed recipe for discovering what it is.

Perhaps it is the human condition that there cannot be such a recipe, for the idea of an endpoint or goal is illusory. The seventeenth-century writer Thomas Hobbes thought this:

To which end we are to consider that the felicity of this life consisteth not in the repose of a mind satisfied. For 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.⁹

Restless desire prevents there being any endpoint: like conversation or gardening, living is a process not a product.

Others have supposed that the secret must be to overcome desire altogether. Immanuel Kant came close to claiming this, at least in some moods, regretting that the word “apathy” has fallen into disrepute. Kant’s psychology is often portrayed as a kind of Manichean conflict between a pathologically overdeveloped sense of duty, constantly bowing to the categorical imperative, and its great enemy, the seething cauldron of “inclinations,” which he seems to have thought of as an almost unmanageable chaos of purely selfish lusts and desires.¹⁰ In this mood Kant chastises ordinary human passions and inclinations as “blind and slavish,” and ends up claiming that bliss is the state of “complete independence from inclination and desires.” So real self-love would not require gratifying desires but suppressing or destroying them until a final nirvana of

6 INTRODUCTION

total calm descends. To be fair, however, in his later works, and especially in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, it is not complete apathy but only “moral apathy” that he recommends, and this means not that we are to have no feelings but that whatever feelings we have must remain subservient in practice to obedience to the moral law. This is a good deal more palatable, for we all want the desires people have and the inclinations that people feel to be suitably subject to whatever checks decency and morality put upon them.

Rae Langton eloquently illustrates the trouble with ordinary apathy or failure of affect as an ideal in a classic paper, citing the sad example of a particularly enthusiastic follower of Kant.¹¹ The young girl Maria von Herbert, a correspondent of Kant and an avid disciple of his philosophy, indeed found her life drained of all desire. The reason was that she had lost her one true love, and the reason she had lost him was that she had felt morally obliged to confess a previous indiscretion to him, in conformity to the categorical imperative.¹² But her state was not one of blissful nirvana but of desolation and despair, and it finally ended in her tragic suicide. The categorical imperative acts as a kind of filter or check on whether it is permissible to act on an inclination. But if you have no inclinations, it too has nothing left to do. For most of us, fortunately, life offers many possible sources of satisfaction—science, art, music, poetry, friendship, family, achievement—but any of these might fail to enkindle us, and if we approach them without eros or desire, they will. The result is desolation rather than contentment. This, incidentally, is almost certainly part of the reason why widely prescribed SSRI drugs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) that work to flatten emotion and affect also have apathy, loss of libido, and suicide as significant side effects.¹³

Insofar as Kant had a mistrust of inclination and desire, he was preceded by many religious traditions. The pious resignation of

the self into the hands of God can share much with Maria von Herbert's desolation, and religious melancholy is not an uncommon phenomenon. Kant was preceded as well by the Stoics, preaching a life of calm and fortitude, dwelling on the insignificance of our own individual trials in the great cosmic scheme of things. The counsel is to abandon our usual self-centered perspective and endeavor to see the world under the heading of eternity, trying to take ourselves to a purely objective view, God's view, a view from nowhere and nowhen, in which petty human affairs shrink into virtual nothingness. It is to make ourselves into iron men, monsters of fortitude, self-sufficient, independent of the ways of the world or the accidents that happen to us, resolute in the discharge of our duties, yet all the while undisturbed by whatever befalls.

It's very high-minded, and there may even be something sublime about it as an ideal. It is a tough school for heroes and patriots, but it is open to the objection that when life throws its all-too-real problems at us, this kind of wisdom literature is more apt to provoke us than console us. Worse, failing to live up to these ideals, we may ravage ourselves with guilt and misery. We are not iron men. We are buffeted by misfortunes, frequently dependent on other people, far from immune to fears, hopes, griefs, and desires.

It is not in our natures, nor should it be, to maintain a pure and lofty indifference to the world as we find it. And we find it from our own point of view, in which the here and now inevitably looms large. So when things go wrong, we naturally get upset. A person with the right temperament may be soothed in misfortune by the thought that under the sun worse things have happened and will go on happening to better people. Unfortunately, someone with the wrong temperament may be equally embittered by the sister thought that better things have happened and will go on happening to worse people.

8 INTRODUCTION

In keeping the Stoics at arm's length, we have Hume on our side:

Away then with all those vain pretences of making ourselves happy within ourselves, of feasting on our own thoughts, of being satisfied with the consciousness of well-doing, and despising all assistance and all supplies from external objects. This is the voice of pride, not of nature.¹⁴

Hume goes on to remark that the best one can hope for in this direction is to “compose the language and countenance to a philosophical dignity, in order to deceive the ignorant vulgar,” and “the heart meanwhile is empty of all enjoyment, and the mind, unsupported by its proper objects, sinks into the deepest sorrow and dejection.” The proper objects that are missing are those that give us pleasure, including security, ease, friendships, family, achievements, and so on—the ordinary affairs of life that we are adapted to make into our concerns.

But Hume is too hard on the Stoics, and, surprisingly, not quite on top of human psychology at this point. The Stoics have a more humane side that makes some room for “*eupatheia*” or good feelings. It is fitting, for instance, to feel grief for the death of a child or a friend. The classical Stoics, including Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, thus temper the wind to the shorn lamb. They know that we are going to be liable to these emotions, so the recipe becomes not so much to try to be indifferent to things as to maintain decency, composure, or moderation when they threaten to overwhelm us. We are to get a grip on ourselves, take a deep breath, and preserve our dignity through life's inevitable buffets. Examples of the fortitude of others may help, and so sometimes might exer-

cises of reflecting on the size of the cosmos and the insignificance of all human life, including our own.

And contrary to Hume, dignity and decorum are not put on to deceive the ignorant vulgar but are taken up rather like uniforms or routines in the military, so as to provide order and to give shape and boundaries to the emotional lives we are all bound to lead. The ideal is rather that of being the master of one's fate or captain of one's soul.¹⁵ It was sometimes paradoxically expressed by the idea of everything being indifferent, but some things being "preferred indifferents"—a phrase that hardly wears its meaning on its face. The idea, however, is that some things are certainly preferred, or ought to be preferred. But if things don't fall out as we would like, we must exercise self-control. We must know how to cope with the situation and to preserve our ability to carry on. We are to retain our balance; we are not to be capsized. Such an ideal is not trivial; indeed, the phrase "captain of my fate, master of my soul" itself comes at the end of the famous inspirational poem "Invictus" (unconquered) by the Victorian poet W. E. Henley, who wrote it as a teenager, when tuberculosis in the bone meant that he had to suffer having one leg amputated:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.¹⁶

For this, the more humane side of Stoicism, it is the stiff upper lip in the face of adversity that is admirable, not the kind of anaesthetized, melancholy indifference that doesn't feel the adversity in the first place. And a determination to remain the master of one's fate

is an unalloyed good thing: there are impressive narratives of its success in enabling people to endure horrific circumstances.¹⁷ And it also comes down to the modern world in a form that preoccupies us later, which is the existentialist ideal of taking command, or recognizing our freedom to reject whatever conventional or oppressive scripts society may have written for us to follow.

Retaining self-mastery may require a kind of pride or self-respect, which is one feeling around which this book circles, arguing that it is at the center of a constellation of attitudes to the self, including self-esteem, arrogance, vanity, narcissism, and others. Some of these are regrettable, others essential. Generally they vary, being benign in some forms and not in others: if we reject the ideal of giving up desire and passion altogether, we might still worry about whether there are dispensable desires, idiotic desires, unsatisfiable desires, and, if so, which they are. So it all depends on how emotions bearing on oneself are embedded in one's life. Pride, for example, may be, as Christianity holds, the root of all evil, the chief of the seven deadly sins, or it may instead be something that is absolutely essential to protect, a prime motivator to good behavior, determination, tenacity, and courage, a guarantor of our integrity, a lifeline to which to cling—something, in fact, of which to be proud. Pride, it has been well said, is only tolerable in adversity; by motivating a fight against defeat, it consorts with courage and the preservation of dignity. As we discuss in chapter 7, Satan's pride in Milton's *Paradise Lost* is admirable when it is mostly shown in his courageously staring down the dreadful fate he has brought upon himself. His pride was only bad when it displayed itself as a rejection of all that is good.

Perhaps understanding how to balance these opposing assessments might even assist us to live with ourselves, or at the very least

INTRODUCTION 11

to understand why we might find it difficult to do so. And that in turn might have some use in life's affairs, as Kant hoped, even if two centuries before him, the skeptical Michel de Montaigne had rather charmingly thrown even that into doubt:

If others examined themselves attentively, as I do, they would find themselves, as I do, full of inanity and nonsense. Get rid of it I cannot without getting rid of myself. We are all steeped in it, one as much as another; but those who are aware of it are a little better off—though I don't know.¹⁸

I hope Montaigne's final doubt was wrong. The great forerunner of the Enlightenment, Benedict Spinoza (1632–77), also thought that freedom lay in replacing inadequate ideas of things with further understanding, and my belief is that we could all do with a bit more of that. In any case, I think it is terrific fun to explore how we might do so.