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**Monique Canto-Sperber: Moral Disquiet and Human Life**

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## Ethics and the Challenge to Moral Philosophy

**E**THICAL DISCOURSE is so fashionable these days that people tend to forget how much it owes to moral philosophy for its main concepts, claims, and topics. This book therefore serves as a reminder that without moral philosophy, there is no such a thing as ethical deliberation and that without ethical deliberation, there is no ethics worthy of consideration.

My analysis deals mainly with France, where ethics' privileged status remains unchallenged. Could the present situation be taken as an indication that moral philosophy is a blooming garden in the intellectual landscape of French philosophy? Or that our understanding of moral reasoning and ethical deliberation is now deeper, more refined, and more nuanced than ever before? Are there any good reasons to rejoice that rational deliberation has regained its vigor or that it has become multifaceted and unbiased?

My answer to each of these questions is negative.

No, French moral philosophy is not blooming. True, ethics is being treated better than logic or the philosophy of mind, but moral philosophy—as a philosophical discipline with its own history, rigorous concepts, and systematic approaches—is as ignored today as it was a generation ago. Ethical thinking and moral philosophy arise both from the same kind of intellectual endeavors: an unprejudiced understanding of a question's scope, premises, and consequences; a fair assessment of possible action or lack thereof; and deliberations and decisions supported by justifications, whether partial or multiple, complete or not. Due to this common intellectual core, ethical deliberation may be applied successfully to a whole range of concrete, present-day questions, whereas moral philosophy concerns itself with more traditional issues that are sometimes revisited by contemporary thought. The essential point is that ethics and moral philosophy are closely linked by their common ways of reasoning.

Ethics is no doubt more fashionable today in France than at the end of the 1980s, but its success will be rather precarious and at risk of being misunderstood so long as moral philosophy remains ignored. It does not help that moral philosophy is actually attacked, led astray, dogmatized,

or broken up in self-help moral lessons by so-called friends more harmful than its open enemies. In the face of excessive recycling and multiple attacks, there is only one conclusion to be drawn: among professional French philosophers, only a few are truly trying to find out what is moral philosophy, what are its concepts and methods.

The first proof of it being so is that the teaching of philosophy in our high schools and universities—with one or two exceptions—lacks a modern moral philosophy component. The same could be said of other branches of philosophy. The fact is that a general characteristic of all philosophy courses taught in France—at least to the level of *aggregation*, that is, the state examination that certifies secondary school teachers—is the almost total lack of reference to the twentieth-century history of philosophy and the very scarce mention of the state of philosophy in other countries or of any topics debated among contemporary philosophers. It is as though one resolved to teach a scientific discipline—or, for that matter, any discipline in natural affinity with clarity and argumentation—by vaguely alluding to its history in the past twenty-five years, ignoring its developments in other countries, and leaving one's students in total darkness as to contemporary debates in that field. As for moral philosophy, the gap between educational and intellectual reality is even greater, because this discipline (as defined in the twentieth century) is nowhere to be found in today's French universities. The contrast with ethics could not be greater: in France, the teaching of modern moral philosophy has no recognized place whatsoever.

Another proof comes from the nature of publications claiming to belong to the realm of ethics. Here again, one is bound to notice that almost every author who tackles the subject of morality goes about it in his or her preferred idiom—be it postmodern, Kantian, or materialistic—but very rarely treats moral philosophy as a rational and critical discipline. Most authors start from scratch, often dealing zealously with the work of their favorite philosopher, but remaining oblivious to everything written before them on its subject and rarely mentioning anybody else's relevant contributions in the matter. In stark contrast, all reflexive disciplines share in a common pool of research topics and methods, as well as a whole range of viewpoints and debates that it would be unthinkable not to mention, and without which new contributions make no sense whatsoever. When recently published works of ethics are avoiding all reference to the state of contemporary philosophical thought on morality, I doubt that happens because their authors are following Rousseau's famous call to "Leave all books behind." Rather, it happens because these authors are blissfully unaware of the actual thinking going on in their discipline.<sup>1</sup>

The root cause of both the absence of moral philosophy from university curricula and the lack of interest shown by French philosophers for contemporary issues in this field lies in our philosophical community's inabil-

ity to distance itself from its own, mainly historical, training and ossified certainties, such as “Good philosophy can only be found in France,” “Morality can only be Kantian,” “The history of an issue is all one needs in order to properly understand it,” “ancient, modern, and present-day philosophy are well-defined divisions in the history of thought,” “The Moderns are superior to Ancients in everything,” “Science and technology are the enemies of philosophy,” “A formal argument is worse than superstition.” This is how our philosophers, suspicious of science and non-French thought but sure of having a good grasp on the future of the human mind, delude themselves. Yet, the reality is markedly different. Philosophical studies are excellent elsewhere; the Kantian approach is only one among many; the history of human thought does not follow a predetermined path (that would just happen to coincide with chronological divisions widely adopted in the teaching of philosophy in France); philosophy is universal because its theses are intelligible and its developments rational. More tellingly, the history of moral philosophy shows no discernible linear progression toward truth or goodness, and rational arguments, including formalized ones, are at the heart of ethical thinking. Any serious and informed study of moral philosophy could have delivered a decisive rebuttal to every delusional certainty that afflicts contemporary philosophy in France, but, alas, none has been forthcoming. The old conceptual frame still shapes the teaching of philosophy in our universities and any component of moral philosophy that does not fit in is simply ignored. For all these reasons, it cannot be said in fairness that moral philosophy—as a rigorous discipline—is blooming in France today.

No, there has been no research or analysis attempting to grasp the significance of moral thought. The meaning of the term “moral code” remains loose and mostly arbitrary. All of a sudden, everybody has awakened to the urgent need of dealing with ethics. The once sparsely inhabited field is now crowded. Until recently, any attempt to reinvigorate moral thinking was looked upon with mistrust and scorn. Nowadays, the label “ethics” confers respectability to almost any statement. Its present celebration could however be as harmful as was its past neglect. But, while the neglect was entirely due to ignorance, the actual tendency of indiscriminately using the term “moral” makes the concept unrecognizable, and therefore useless. Both neglect and celebration come from the failure to grasp the essence of moral thought. Stigmatizing or trivializing a research object seems to be the easiest way of exempting oneself from analyzing its specificity.

Let us consider the scenario of a philosophical debate on a moral question. In the absence of a well-argued exchange, each participant would advance his or her own philosophical beliefs and, instead of a principled dialogue highlighting the rigor and sophistication of each point of view, one would witness a thunderous clash of irreconcilable opinions. Generally

speaking, philosophical exchanges about ethics are still viewed as a confrontation whereby each side would rather defend its beliefs and state its viewpoints than strive to clarify concepts, to qualify its positions, to detect its own vulnerabilities, and to try to fully understand a point of view contrary to its own. This being the case, it cannot be said that French philosophers are today any better at grasping the essence of moral thought than their predecessors.

Lastly, practical reasoning is still not a privileged subject of tolerant or pluralist discussion. Rhetorical accusations and denunciations can be found on both sides of the debate. By the end of the 1980s when ethical thought again became important, the return to moral codes of conduct and raising moral standards was angrily denounced as moralizing. It goes without saying that no philosopher would favor a reign of moral prejudice or conformism. Excessive moralizing was therefore properly criticized at that time. The problem was that the criticism had started before anyone knew what its object was. Moral thinking has little in common with moral conformism. On the contrary, it may often become the best way of avoiding conformism. This is a topic that I take up again and again in this book, but it should be clear from the start that if moral thinking can be easily defended against any criticism of moral conformism, it does not follow that it is above all criticism. It is all right to criticize the pretensions of moral philosophy, to be suspicious of its hegemonic tendencies, or to question its premises, concepts, or methods. No body of thought can grow and mature if made into a constant object of reverence. The best way to test its value is by exposing it to criticism and questioning. There is, however, a limit beyond which criticism outweighs its usefulness: this happens when it takes on poorly conceived conclusions and doubtful caricatures about its object, or when it deliberately ignores the true nature of its object or willfully confuses the issues.

To illustrate this point, an imaginary conversation could better serve our purpose than a lengthy development of the subject.

- One cannot look for moral standards everywhere. In politics, for instance, it is useless to do so.
- No doubt, but it all depends on what the meaning of “moral” is. If you mean by it “moral lessons,” then I agree, they are pointless in politics. However, politics can be a valid object of ethical or normative analysis.
- Not so. Ethics is a matter of commitment and conviction. The morality of convictions, which is the only one out there, has nothing to do with political thought, which deals with power, complex hierarchies, and consequences.

At this point, allow me to interrupt the conversation so as to contest the stealthy definition it gives of “moral.” Moral analysis and political analysis are both part of practical philosophy, also called philosophy of human

action. But it would be erroneous to say that moral philosophy is limited to conviction and commitment. Moral philosophy is not limited to defending opinions. It may be inspired by a conviction, but this is not always the case. Mainly, it is a reflexive approach, and there is no reason for it to replace political analysis entirely. But neither is there any reason for arbitrarily detaching it from such an approach, confining it to the realm of personal convictions—or, in more modern terms, treating it as a kind of secular religion or complacent humanism.

Moral philosophy is not politics, a religion, or a general philosophy about human beings; rather, it is a mainly intellectual, rational field of research. Only in a limited sense can it be said to be a repository of commitments, yearnings, or convictions. The value of moral thought is gauged first by its reasons, not by the grandiloquence or emotional appeal of its premise. The freedom of thought is the first precondition of any thought process. Thus, one should feel free to evaluate a point of view, criticize a given thesis, suggest counterexamples, or make objections without being spooked by gloomy overstatements (as in “saying this shows that in fact you mean . . .” or “talking about this, even in critical terms, shows your readiness to accept it”) and by the conjuring up of horrible consequences such as the loss of all human dignity, the inescapable genocide, or various combinations thereof, and, to cap it all, by alluding to Hitler and the Nazis.<sup>2</sup>

Many a criticism of moral philosophy is built on a deliberate misreading of its specificity. Such a misreading is deliberate not only because it is intentional but also because no attempt is ever made to correct itself. This is the main reason that such criticism has failed to this day to achieve a true pluralism. It is undoubtedly difficult to spot the fine line between, on the one hand, pluralism and nuanced debate aiming to reach the best possible explanations and, on the other, unrestrained antagonism. Be that as it may, I still feel that antagonism and the lack of fair exchanges have left their sorry mark on the philosophical debate in France. The propensity for veneration that begets dogmatism and stifles open and lively debate goes hand in hand with an excess of criticism and denunciation that has a sterilizing rather than an enriching effect on intellectual debates. It is precisely this mixture of blind veneration and stubborn misconception that makes me doubt the existence of conditions conducive to open and lively debate in France.

In 1992 I wrote an article about the state of research in moral philosophy for the French review *Le Débat*.<sup>3</sup> The article points out the near disappearance of moral philosophy from the French intellectual landscape. It mentions the absence of publications, research, and debates on the subject and deplores the denunciation of morality and the disregard if not disdain for the idea that philosophers can have a valid contribution to the debate on

society's issues. Eight years have passed since, and I have to admit that the situation has changed in certain cases, at least on the surface. Books, articles, and special issues have been published that give the public, including university students, a general idea of what contemporary moral philosophy is about. I have myself tried to bring to their attention the continuous history of moral ideas, the main topics, the basic principles, and even the style of current debate in this field.<sup>4</sup> Among other signs of change, one notices the creation of a few discussion groups and a small community of philosophers interested in the normative aspects of moral thought.

If so, then what justifies the doubts I now express? In my view, these changes have not really affected the status of moral philosophy in France. The discipline is still mostly absent from university curricula, and very few philosophers are aware of it. People interested in philosophy have no means of evaluating or criticizing what is published under the heading "moral philosophy." Worse still, professional philosophers remain largely unaware of moral philosophy as a discipline, while thoroughly infatuated with ethics. A world in which people understand the importance of ethics is surely preferable to one in which they do not. But this only underlines the urgency of the following questions: What are the reasons of this public omnipresence of ethics? Is it grounded in solid intellectual reality? It is precisely on this point that I have the greatest doubts and fears. If ethics is not rooted in philosophical reflection, then the term could be used indiscriminately to impress, intimidate, or blame instead of being restricted to thinking and reasoning.<sup>5</sup>

In writing this book, my main purpose has been to thoroughly examine moral philosophy, to scrutinize its current reality, and to explore the role it can play in the community of philosophers and French society in general. I aim to show that moral philosophy is the foundation without which concerns with ethics and moral claims lack seriousness, and that concern for ethics is not in itself a guarantee of relevance. To this day, there is no permanent link between appeals to ethics and moral considerations. Moreover, the state of moral reflection itself is not entirely satisfactory. The doubts and fears expressed earlier arise from a double acknowledgment: moral reflection is often inconsistent, and ethical activism in the form of proclamations of virtue, commitments, or rebukes shows in most cases no connection whatsoever with the intellectual undercurrent of moral philosophy. The major source of legitimacy resides in thought. The development of moral philosophy and the awareness of the links binding it to concrete ethical deliberation are the principal preconditions for the ability of our society to carry out successfully an ethical reflection that is informed, judicious, fair, and as objective as possible. This is the only way to secure a critical role for moral philosophy in helping to better understand and

appreciate important aspects of the human condition and contemporary thought. A critical approach is particularly useful today, when the infatuation with ethics—facilitated by the specificity of our world—could be seen as a taste for ready-to-use answers. Such answers could easily be found in what I call moralizing. Moral philosophy is altogether different.

Hence, the topic of my book: Is there such a thing as a moral philosophy in France? What tasks is it called to perform? What are its pathways and dead ends? How could it define its main issues, challenges, insuperable obstacles, goals? Drawing up a reflexive and critical approach is a difficult and precarious task in philosophy. Success is not assured in advance. Ten years ago, at the rebirth of moral philosophy, the main intellectual task was to help rebuild it as a discipline by reopening the debate on a set of issues, methods, and concepts that had been forgotten for thirty years and by placing them again at the core of philosophical scrutiny. Today, moral philosophy must also rid itself of superfluous claims and ambitions that are incompatible with this task.

If moral philosophy is to play a legitimate role in modern critical thought, it must answer a few challenging questions. Some of those deal with its history, its neutrality, and its connections with political philosophy and with the real world. They are typical expressions of the need for introspective reflection in a discipline intent on rigorously defining itself. Others, though, are intentionally stuck in misunderstandings and misconceptions. Questions raised in this connection usually attack imaginary targets that reveal bias more than anything else. Still, they too deserve answers for seeking some clarifications and explanations. This exercise in refutation and rebuttal can sometimes lead to a better understanding of the issues under consideration. Between stimulating criticism and unfair attacks, there is, however, a third kind of questions. These are of the “dangerous friend” type. Their harm lies in attempting to assign a role to moral philosophy that it cannot and should not fulfill, that is, the role of a modern religion or a science of all things human. Let this be a reminder that no moral philosophy worthy of its name should ever aspire to become a secular religion or a philosophy of modernity.

A few requisites have been set up arbitrarily as necessary preconditions of relevance for contemporary moral thought. I intend to introduce them one by one and offer a detailed critical analysis for each. First, though, I want to warn the reader against all of them by recalling some examples of these allegedly self-evident preconditions for accurate and legitimate moral thinking: the certitude that moralizing intentions or power struggles are always the hidden motivating factors of moral thought; the doctrinaire assertion that moral thought and ethics are opposites, the former representing the law and the latter, the good behavior; the stubborn belief that, modern ethics being rational and autonomous, it has left behind religion,

which is seen as authoritarian and not autonomous; the mistaken belief that only atheists can legitimately engage in moral thinking; the unrealistic conviction that modern man is the product of a necessary and univocal process of emancipation; the illusion that modernity is a singularity and, as such, is homogeneous and could not have evolved differently from what it is today; the deluded notion that a phenomenon such as Kantian philosophy has generated a new kind of reasoning, that Kantian formalism and universalism define by themselves the relevance criterion for modern moral philosophy as a whole, and that everything preceding the Kantian approach, particularly the thought of Ancients, is therefore out-of-date.

However strongly held, these philosophical beliefs are as open to questioning as any other substantial commitment to a stated position. They are acceptable as long as they remain subject to discussions, counterevidence, and arguments but become ossified dogma when taken as indisputable and unconditional truths. As articles of faith, though, they are at best unwarranted and at worst misguided approximations of ethical thinking. They encourage philosophers and their readers to accept passively comforting illusions and to misunderstand completely the complex intellectual tasks that our world faces today. To me, it seems impossible to preserve a plausible and realistic image of our moral experience without criticizing such beliefs and their pretension to be the sole yardstick for valid moral reflection.

If my analysis appears to be critical, it is so because it inevitably reflects at least part of what is presently being said, written, or thought in France. When criticism is used fairly, without libel or abuse, it can become an intellectual duty—all the more so when bias and dogmas threaten to stifle dynamic thought.

### *Critique of “Ethical Ideology”: Truths and Falsehoods*

Having deplored the quasi disappearance of moral philosophy, should we also be worried by the omnipresence of the term “ethics”? Charles Péguy thought that the trivialized use of a term heralds its near demise. When a term becomes widely used in all kinds of contexts with all kinds of meanings, it will soon lose all meaning. Many have rightfully criticized the abusive usage of “ethics.” In so doing, they helped undo the cocoon of easy certitudes and complacencies in which this term is often wrapped. When, by such abusive usage, the term “ethics” becomes unavoidable in all discourse, there is a point beyond which a reversal of such a situation becomes inevitable. The inflated use of “ethics” can only become distasteful. Seeing its damaging effect on moral reflection, one almost wishes it would become so.

Unfortunately, those who are denouncing “ethical ideology” are themselves often making false representations of contemporary ethics. Unlike their predecessors of the sixties, such so-called defenders of ethical thought are uncertain whether to stop or continue discussing it. So, while proclaiming that ethics is worth nothing, they hasten to add that there is an authentic ethics nonetheless. An assertion such as “the ethics (suggested by others) is worthless, but the ethics (that I will reveal) is worthy” tries to present a hotchpotch of confused ideas and declarations of intentions as valid arguments in the debate. Such rhetorical denunciations do not allow for an answer to the only philosophically valid question: What is truly ethics, once the surrounding chatter is removed? Why should we not follow the example of any other subject field and consider ethics to be a body of knowledge, a conceptual network with a set of principles that remain valid regardless of the semantic deviations and arbitrary redefinitions to which it is exposed?

The little book entitled *Ethics* that Alain Badiou published in 1993 illustrates quite well this swing motion of denunciation and rehabilitation. In it, the author describes ethics—the dominant philosophical trend at that time—as a stabilizing influence on the discussion of political, social, or scientific events. Thus, ethics is backed up by institutions (the famous French State Committees on ethics) and enjoys an authority of its own that the author leaves unspecified.<sup>6</sup> The distinctive characteristic of this stabilizing influence is the concern for propriety and the obsession with conventionality. In his view, ethics is an outline of opinion guided by the motto “You should like only what you have always strongly believed.”<sup>7</sup>

Alain Badiou criticizes that “object” of ethics, which, according to him, amounts to an abstract, statistical consensus that lacks forcefulness: we recognize evil by the suffering it inflicts on its victims. As for the general and abstract “subject” of ethics, Badiou declares that the victims themselves are its subject.<sup>8</sup> The current obsession with evil and fondness for victims provide ethics with a unique program: the defense of human rights. The tearful concern for the suffering of others can only be understood as the expression of a fascination with death—typical for our world—based on the conviction that the only thing that will inevitably happen is death. According to Alain Badiou, the contemporary ethics of a “proper life” comes down to a decision about who dies and who does not.<sup>9</sup> He believes that this explains the infatuation for bioethics and the obsession with euthanasia. In this sense, the inordinate predilection for ethics exhibited by our contemporaries is seen as a manifestation of nihilism.

On this topic though, Badiou’s sound-and-light display does strike a right note: an inflated ethical discourse, fed on the fetishism of human rights and aggrandized by the rhetoric of an abstract, universal subject, often stiffens moral reflection instead of yielding a better understanding

of its own specificity. Human rights cannot constitute a morality in and of themselves.<sup>10</sup> But Badiou's criticism displays the same self-righteousness as its target. For a fleeting moment, the certainties of this demystifier seem as unshakable as those of ethical conservatism. Yet soon enough he too returns to that which he has always liked and—for this reason—believes to be true. The main point of his criticism is to proclaim once more what he considers to be a universally known truth, that is, that the main actor in ethics is the public opinion—a universal, nondescript, resigned, and submissive victim that a semblance of democracy misleads into believing that it still has a free will and the power of decision. One might ask: to what is public opinion submissive? To the economy, of course, comes the answer. In Badiou's words, public opinion is submissive to “the logic of capitalism,” stating that “our parliamentary systems are satisfied with a public opinion subjectively constrained to ratify whatever is beforehand deemed necessary.”<sup>11</sup>

Here, it seems to me, we can recognize the familiar logic of self-proclaimed radical discourse. We are nothing but heedless slaves, subdued by necessity, addicted to powerful opiates that give us the illusion of being free. Ethics is such a drug. It has the same power as parliamentary institutions to lull us into a trance wherein we move as little as possible and want to change nothing in spite of sporadic convulsions that can sometimes lapse in spiteful anger. Badiou asserts that the main cause of “subjective resignation and contentment with the existing state of things” is the shared annoyance at the very possibility of future atrocities.

Let us examine the last statement more closely. What is Badiou attacking? Is it the fact that most of us react with either horror or compassion to the suffering of others? But who would wish that suffering leave everybody unmoved? Does he condemn the kind of indignation that easily makes one feel self-righteous yet somehow indifferent? Is it the indignation itself that leads to inaction? Badiou does not give any answers, his intention being not to explain but to condemn, not to enlighten but to sentence. As a matter of fact, there is nothing wrong with the feeling of annoyance; one would rather wish that it were more widely shared. It is also entirely plausible that such a feeling would not incite people to act. It could very well become a product for general consumption or foster an attitude of smug but inconsequential bewailing. What should be criticized for leading to indifference or inaction is not the annoyance at somebody's suffering or it being a shared feeling, but the inability to act, the decision to do nothing, or any number of related factors.<sup>12</sup>

In order for Badiou's analysis to have any relevance, the reader has to agree that we are the victims of an illusion. Only then would Badiou's radical solutions put us right, give us back our lucidity, and reconnect us with reality. But there is no reason to agree or disagree that such is indeed

our condition. His statement belongs to the class of beliefs that can be neither proved nor disproved. However, all beliefs are not equally able to help us better understand the world, or foresee or influence it. This kind of intellectual task could benefit from the lesson of American pragmatism: “one can assess a belief by the extent to which it helps us understand.”<sup>13</sup> Badiou’s idea that we do not think what we want to think, that we do not do what we want to do, does not help improve our understanding of reality, tighten our hold on it, or increase our ability to influence it. Such an idea can certainly deny all possibility of knowledge or action, but it has never thrown the slightest light on what we are. This does not prove that the idea is false; it just furthers our claim that it does not amount to much.

With such radical demystification often comes prodigious naiveté. If we accept the idea that we form collectively a great “subject” that is manipulated and victimized, formal and at the same time empty, then Alain Badiou’s injunction—to detach ourselves, to move off center, to become somebody else, some kind of “nonsubject”—might seem justified. However, there is a classical objection to this thesis—that is, if we were indeed distancing ourselves from the subject, then would this not entail renouncing also all notion of responsibility, project, or action?<sup>14</sup> Yet Badiou rejects this objection. As Gilles Deleuze had declared before him, “Contrary to received opinion, it is not necessary to claim one’s belonging to the human race in order to resist it.”<sup>15</sup> Badiou shares the idea that commitment does not need a subject. He finds positive proof of its validity in the fact that Michel Foucault, who denied all pertinence to the concept of subject, had nonetheless “vigorously involved himself in the cause of the imprisoned” and Louis Althusser, an advocate of “theoretical antihumanism,” “was simply aiming to define anew a true emancipation policy.” As for Jacques Lacan, who believed that the subject was dependent on history’s contingency laws and on the objects of its desires, he passed “most of his life listening to people.”<sup>16</sup>

This amounts to mistaking anecdote for proof and juxtaposition for causality. There is absolutely no indication that Foucault, Althusser, or Lacan had acted as he had because he was applying his own, antihumanist philosophy. Furthermore, signaling the compatibility of a theory with a worthy commitment has never been considered sufficient proof of that theory’s truth or superiority. Alain Badiou tells us that these thinkers were able to distance themselves from the idea of “subject” and to defend “their rebellion against established order, their radical dissatisfaction with it, while remaining deeply involved in real situations.”<sup>17</sup> Yet rebellion, resistance, protestation, dissatisfaction, rejection, even commitment are all mental states, attitudes, or actions with no moral value in and of themselves.<sup>18</sup> True, the ability to distance oneself from reality in order to better criticize it is often a sign of practical rationality and, as such, is linked to moral

philosophy. Nevertheless, the moral value of rebellion resides essentially in that to which it is opposed, and that for which it is opposed. Human reality plays a fundamental role in the ethical evaluation of rebellion. And this reality is not a manipulated human being, subject to subconscious desires or social infrastructures, but a human individuality embodied in a single being that has its own thoughts, desires, and expectations. Rebellion against an unjust state of affairs is morally justified only if it occurs in the name of the respect due a given person. Conversely, the idea of “antisubject” and the expectation to transcend the subject bring by themselves no moral justification to any kind of rebellion. Therefore, if the rebellion of the antihumanists or their criticism has any ethical value, it comes from something wholly unrelated to their philosophy, that is, from their fight for the rights of the oppressed. This only shows that the thesis claiming the extinction of the subject, so fashionable in the sixties, is acceptable as a descriptive and historical claim (there is no subject anymore) but not as a normative one (there should be no subject). For this reason alone, such a thesis is compatible with the kind of actions that require the existence of a subject and which would be impossible under a normative conception of the nonsubject as found in works by Antoine Artaud or Georges Bataille.

Alain Badiou defines the human being as “a particular kind of animal brought about by circumstance” and states that, in addition to being able to exceed his own limits, this creature’s mind is crossed by various truths and summoned by transcendence to immortality.<sup>19</sup> The nature of the summon remains ill-defined; however, it is quite clear that his description leaves no place for the protection of individual rights. If the human being is a mere product of interacting mechanisms and primary forces, and if various truth processes cross his mind but their meaning is found beyond him, then what justification would there be for opposing his elimination when a higher calling is hindered by the contingency of his existence? Who would assess or protect the right of human beings to oppose the success of rebellion or the attainment of “transcendence”?

Badiou insists that the source of such legitimacy is collective, not individual, and that ethical ideology is misleading on this very point. It limits reflection to a schematic concept of the abstract individual and makes us “renounce initiative, any politics of emancipation, and all valid political causes.”<sup>20</sup> This is too fuzzy a thesis to be either proved or falsified. If he means that only a collective can attain goodness and truthfulness, then one would be hard put to find a single actual collective realization that would historically illustrate this thesis. On the other hand, there are many instances of collective emancipation inspired by the hope “to organize collective powers and work toward reaching undreamed of possibilities” that ended in untold death and destruction of human beings.<sup>21</sup> As Isaiah Berlin used to say in this respect, we have always seen the broken eggs but never

the omelettes. For his part, Badiou likes to prophesize that “the rights to Immortality assert themselves; the rights to Infinity exercise their sovereignty over the contingency of suffering and death.”<sup>22</sup> One can only tremble at his conclusion that “the contingency of suffering and death” could legitimately be imposed on a particular human being in the name of “the rights to Infinity.” The choice of the term “rights” to qualify a sovereignty that goes mostly *against* individual autonomy is an abuse of language. For now, those are only a philosopher’s delusions. But they can easily become worrisome when their author proudly reveals his admiration for one of the most sinister episodes in the history of mankind: “During the Chinese cultural revolution of 1967, when some of the Red Guards announced the abolition of egoism, they were envisaging a society cleared of individual interests, in which they would replace personal opinions with their own truth.”<sup>23</sup> And what was that truth? Who has the right to decide what interests are to be suppressed, without considering the persons whose interests are to be suppressed?

Too attractive a subject to be left alone, ethics catches the eye of Alain Badiou, who then endeavors to explain what true ethics should be about. This firmly puts a kind of gigantomachy in place. On the one side, one finds the “ethical” ideology fed on conformism and fascination with death. On the other, there is Alain Badiou’s “ethics of truth” based on an ontology of events capable of creating a new way of being.<sup>24</sup> His ethics of truth considers the subject as the bearer of loyalty to events. It welcomes the new configurations of meaning and the gaps created by singular or situational truth processes.<sup>25</sup> It is always opened to some form of transcendence and has a genuine capacity for goodness. Badiou’s ethics of truth advises us to go beyond our limits and to answer the call of immortality. It celebrates reality as a chance encounter.

Some of the features that Badiou assigns to his “ethics of truth” are no doubt those of ethical reasoning. This seems to be the case when he states that his ethics should feed on moral dissent and pluralism, that it should stick to the singular reality of situations, and that it should stay closely attached to goodness. But he fills each of these requisites with a mixture of invective and excess so noxious that it leaves them devoid of all meaning.

When he speaks of moral pluralism, Badiou declares that it belongs exclusively to the discourse on the death of man, whereas what he calls “ethical ideology” needs only a soft consensus.<sup>26</sup> This could be true of the caricature of ethics that his essay attacks, but certainly not of what is commonly understood by moral reflection. Pluralism is a basic component of ethical rationality. Moral reflection thrives indeed on dissent and dilemmas. If, by what Badiou calls “the division in two,” he means the ability to seek the pro and con of a moral issue in order to have a better access to the truth, then such an approach is part and parcel of ethical debate.<sup>27</sup> But

taking pluralism seriously means always being ready to consider beliefs that seem contrary to those that one considers true for the best of reasons. And this has nothing to do with the kind of “pluralism” that Mao Tse-tung had in mind while writing *On Contradiction*, his famous book, which Alain Badiou abundantly quotes.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Mao’s embrace of dissent is nothing but a polemic subterfuge: he views dissent as a struggle whereby conflict is systematically stirred even if uncalled for, its only reason being to provoke opposition so as to uncover its proponents and take them out.<sup>29</sup>

Badiou correctly upholds the thesis that ethics must stay in touch with the demands of the real world, of particular situations and concerned individuals. He is right to assert that ethics should not become too general a concept, thinly spread over a given set of activities, but that it should remain solidly grounded in what is real, concrete, and distinct.<sup>30</sup> Yet, such a thesis remains itself too general and uncertain so long as it is unclear with what reality it deals specifically. The reality described in Badiou’s book is less factual than mythical: it is an imperious and stubborn reality, allegedly shaped by events, class struggles, and conflicts. Process replaces reality, collectives substitute for the subject, faithfulness to events takes over truth, shouting supplants reason, and violence ousts action. If this is the kind of reality to which ethics must be “loyal,” then one might as well abandon the search for moral objectivity. It makes no sense to speak of “truth” in this case.

Badiou’s analysis of the connection between ethics and goodness shows the same medley of witty perspicacity and abuse of language. He convincingly reminds us that the ethics of truth is closely linked to “the good,” only to disconcert us by unexpectedly defining good as an “impossible of possibles” and an object of “vision.”<sup>31</sup> But if “good” is indeed a vision of the impossible, then it can be anything and everything. If so, then on what basis could we judge the soundness of the means used to reach it? How are we to assess the goodness of our dominant goals or ends? There is no intrinsic moral value in such a vision of the impossible as there was none to be found in the notion of rebellion discussed earlier. The idea of an impossible world deemed to be better than the one we live in is harmful and irrational. The only valid vision of moral good is the one provided by exercising one’s capacity for thought.

Badiou attempts to lock us in a false confrontation between an ethics of conservatism, resignation, and a death wish and his ethics of truth and superhumanity.<sup>32</sup> His conception of ethics, which invokes immortality, calling, and creative events, is closer to incantation than philosophy. It is dramatized by the critique of a subject that is both abstract and hollow. One can nevertheless subscribe, at least in part, to such a critique on the condition of resisting Badiou’s false alternative, that is, either renounce entirely the concept of “subject” or adopt the vision of a collective, decen-

tered subject. By leaving behind the false choices between an empty subject and a nonsubject, or between the abdication of reasoning and the prophetic utterances, one can finally glimpse again the essence of the question: what is the difference between ethics and moral reflection? Alain Badiou's book does not tackle this topic. The author offers shrewd criticisms of various trivialized versions of popular ethics and moral standards, but he utterly fails to explain the difference between those versions and moral reflection. Such an explanation remains a pressing demand on ethical discourse. To ignore it while criticizing the misuse of ethics and the efforts to define it is but a fruitless undertaking.

### *Moral Philosophy and Ethics*

The relationship between moral philosophy and ethics appears to have particular relevance to those interested in issues of ethical revival. The 1980s' widespread interest in regulating behavior was centered on ethics, not on morality. Interest in ethics was perceived as new, relatively neutral, and tied to commonly shared values. It connoted lucidity, awareness, and accountability. It seemed modern and profound. Unlike ethics, reflection on morality was seen as neither modern nor secularized but more like a strap-wielding, grumpy old teacher, keen on straightening thoughts and deeds, and eager to invade everyone's privacy for sheer killjoy satisfaction.

Given such dissimilarities, readers might consider my using the terms "ethics" and "morality" synonymously rather unhelpful. I do so because I believe that too sharp a distinction between these terms would show an unwarranted preference for style over substance. There is no doubt, after all, that both terms designate the same field of investigation: they are appropriately used interchangeably in reference to particular thought processes involved in analyzing concepts such as action, good, or justice. Strictly speaking, a much more legitimate distinction could be drawn between morality and ethics on the one hand and "moral philosophy" on the other. Indeed, moral philosophy has very distinctive historical and conceptual characteristics forming an easily identifiable set of hard-core issues and concepts that differentiate it not only from metaphysics but from the other philosophical fields as well. But here again, to overemphasize the distinctiveness of moral philosophy would do more harm than good. Being essentially a discipline of reflection and critical thinking is what secures moral philosophy's place among other disciplines devoted to the study of moral life.

Yet one has to notice a slight, loose, but increasingly marked differentiation in the usage of these terms. The fact that "ethics" has a Greek origin whereas "morality" comes from Latin would not provide a sufficient ex-

planation for such differentiation but, used as a tool for enhancing nuanced thinking and signaling dissimilar perspectives on quasi-identical concepts, the distinction has its merits. Morality points primarily but not exclusively to existing rules and laws, whereas ethics is closely linked to concepts of goodness, virtue, and custom. However, because goodness itself might include an element of obligation while virtue could contain in turn an element of formality, even the distinction between them may prove uncertain and temporary. In any case, difficulties of conceptual differentiation should never be exploited for reducing morality to sets of rules and ethics to mores and social etiquette. Interpretations that drastically oppose morality to ethics have no validity. Just what would such an opposition entail? If we deny the existence of universal obligations, we would have to get rid of the term “morality” in favor of “ethics.” Thus, the term “morality of virtue” would be proscribed in favor of “ethics of virtue,” while the term “morality of rules” would replace “ethics of rules.” These expressions, however, are widely used and perfectly understood, whether proscribed or not. Furthermore, until about twenty years ago, such an opposition did not even exist in the history of moral philosophy or, if it did, it was inconsequential. In fact, references to Aristotle’s morality of virtues and to Kant’s universal ethics were as common before the 1980s as they are nowadays. Obviously, attempts to impose a dogmatic distinction between morality and ethics are doomed by their own inconsistencies and contradictions, especially when the terms are used in value judgments proclaiming that ethics is okay but morality is not. As for the general use of these terms, people who are fond of using “ethics” indiscriminately would only use “morality” with great reticence, while remaining blissfully unaware of the difference between “moral code” and “ethical behavior”—the only contrasting element that would support such a terminological distinction.<sup>33</sup>

There would be no reason to dwell on the distinction between ethics and morality if it were not artificially dichotomized and often used as a stand-alone topic in current French philosophy. As the argument goes, because morality merges with the impersonal and emphatic rigidity of the law, then it naturally follows that rigid moralism (i.e., the practice of rigid morality) is out-of-date. One would be tempted to ask what other conclusion could be drawn from such a premise. And if, according to this argument, we have no more moral standards, then what are we left with? As to consequences, the answer varies depending on the temperament of the author. In his essay *Man Made God*, Luc Ferry expects us to seek meaning by reaching beyond morality and to open ourselves to a form of transcendence by rekindling the idea of the Sacred. Gilles Lipovetsky notes that the hard-to-practice idea of moral duty is being replaced by that of “painless ethics,” which represents both a way of life and a quest for well-being. Others

hail the decline of morality and everything related to it as signaling the forthcoming age of the “sculpture of the self” and of the “accession to the sense of pleasure.”<sup>34</sup> These interpretations have all the same flaw: they proceed from the rather dubious premise that morality is only a law and, as such, does not satisfy us anymore and has lost its pertinence. In fact, there are no conceptual or material links between moral standards, rigid laws, and painful duties. Current lamentations on the end, the decline, or the limits of morality are as unconvincing as their rendering of morality itself is implausible. Morality is as little of a credo, a commitment, or a posture as it is a mere form of duty or law.

The present essay consistently links morality and ethics to a process of analytical, critical, and explanatory thinking. This may come as a welcome change, given the profusion of contemporary publications on this subject that avoid discussing the nature of moral reasoning or answering an all-important question: What is involved in grasping, defining, and describing an issue in moral terms? What does it mean to reason, work out, or discuss a topic from a moral perspective? What does it entail to make a moral decision or to morally justify it? Everybody hails, bewails, or rails against the decline of morality, the revival of ethics, the cult of the individual, the vogue of the self, the decline of duty, and the rise of desire, ethical vanity, or serene despair, and all this without anybody ever saying what moral deliberation is.

Yet, going back to the history of moral philosophy, we find that great authors were speaking of little else. Aristotle, Spinoza, and Kant and, more recently, Brentano, Moore, and Scheler never sought to know whether their contemporaries rejected morality or not, whether they were satisfied with their way of life or aiming for a sense of the Sacred. Those philosophers never tried to declare that morality is this and ethics is that. They tried instead to grasp the particularities of practical rationality by discerning its facets and fundamentals. They endeavored to apprehend the ontological nature of moral realities as well as their epistemological underpinnings, and they analyzed extensively the psychological side of morality under headings such as virtue and motivation. Of these core topics of moral philosophy, French publications of the past ten years bear no trace. One finds instead a grandiose performance whereby ethics and morality put in play both heroic and pathetic characters, at times sticking together, at other times fighting bitterly with one another, some being relegated to the backstage of modernity while others look more alluring than ever, all being guided by obvious precepts (ethics demands . . . , morality contests . . . ), and all being manipulated by the ruse of reason that leads invariably to modernity. One feels the urge to turn on the lights and ask: Wait a minute, what’s going on here? What are ethics and morality? How can one get to them? What reality are they made of? How can they be explained? How

can they be used for understanding, thinking, reaching conclusions? Alas, the lights go off, ethics and morality are submerged anew in lamentation and invective, surrounded by inescapable outcomes, by enemies and friends, making one forget that behind all that there are always people who perceive reality, who think about the principles guiding their actions, and who can justify their decisions. If ethics and morality are both products of the mind, why even think of hailing or blaming them? How come that philosophy itself contributes to obscure the question, becomes in turn a source of prejudice and distances itself from common sense? Let us look at a few examples.

*Myths of Our Time: Moral Grandstanding  
and Ethical Self-Indulgence*

In his book *Le Crépuscule du devoir* (The Twilight of Duty) published in 1992, Gilles Lipovetsky claims that morality represents by definition endless duty, sacrifice, pain, and self-denial, whereas ethics embodies the comfortable complacency of good intentions.

The author provides a striking description of the human condition: we are bubbling with “ethical excitement” for “values to be regained” and “new responsibilities to be assumed” at a time when “self-absorbed individualism . . . is prevalent.” Morality dwindles while making way for the ethics of well-being and subjective rights—a painless process that “demands no major sacrifices or self-denial.”<sup>35</sup> He claims that the dramatic rise of ethics dates precisely from 1950 (?!), that it marks the beginning of “postmoralism” and the abandonment of “formal duty,” which had been in turn made possible by the secularization of religion. “The postmoralist society characterizes an epoch in which duty is watered down and weakened, the idea of self-sacrifice has no legitimacy, and moral standards do not demand devotion to ends higher than one’s self.”<sup>36</sup> He explicitly admits that morality—as he understands it—closely resembles the “religious spirit” from which it inherited “the notion of infinite debt and absolute duty . . . , the imperative character of limitless duty.”<sup>37</sup> His views of morality as “infinite or absolute duty,” as “a set of supreme obligations concerning what is beyond us”<sup>38</sup> and “a foundation of moral and collective obligations,” are presented as self-evident, trivial truths.<sup>39</sup>

Yet, morality was not defined as infinite duty by Aristotle, Descartes, and Spinoza, nor was it defined in such terms by the philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, much less by the majority of modern philosophers. In any case, Lipovetsky’s tentative definition does not explain what infinite duty and supreme obligation are supposed to mean.

Stripped of bombastic qualifiers, it has not much left to show for itself, other than a rather ordinary attempt to define morality as made of laws and rules, that is, a moral philosophy among many others. Besides, one could rightly ask what exactly is “moral” in a definition whose distinctive feature, “absolute duty,” is described as having a “religious form.”<sup>40</sup> Similarly biased views can be found in Pascal Bruckner’s *La Tentation de l’innocence* (The Temptation of Innocence), which defines morality as merely impersonal, universal, and formal duty.<sup>41</sup> Luc Ferry also considers rules of behavior to be mere formalism, some sort of “utilitarian or Kantian programs” that would “tell us without error what decisions impose themselves in each case,” much like “a moral automaton, a robot who, given any hypothesis, does what it should do.” Moral philosophy is useful and even necessary, but it remains within the negative order of prohibition. “The truth is not created by human beings; it remains today as yesterday established by the divine law, the universal and objective norm of morality.”<sup>42</sup>

However useful to those striving to show that morality is outdated, such definitions only beg the question or improvise ad hoc constructs replete with inconsistencies. It is for precisely this reason that authors like Gilles Lipovetsky, well aware of such flaws, feel obliged to multiply warnings and mitigating factors with regard to their own theses. A case in point is Lipovetsky’s warning that, when faced with two contradictory aspects of the same reality—at least one of which could serve as criticism of his thesis—readers should conclude that reality is insidious enough to produce simultaneously a result and its reverse. For instance, his thesis on the “twilight of duty” can be objected to by mentioning the noticeable comeback of moral standards: the modern individual is “utterly indifferent to his kind and to the public good,” but he is also thoroughly involved in ethical claims.<sup>43</sup> In his answer, the author dismisses the objection by claiming that morality has been replaced in our time with ethics, which is inherently dissociated, that is, simultaneously permissive and intransigent, tolerant and harsh.<sup>44</sup> In other words, the twilight of duty is simultaneously followed by the abandonment of morality and by its omnipresence. Gilles Lipovetsky comes up with multiple examples of the same kind, whereby being paradoxical and contradicted by evidence becomes a sign of truth. By his lights, the recent boom of voluntary work in France is a result of a neo-individualistic ethos. The disinterested, freely assumed commitment to the well-being of others is but a “new ruse of reason” directly motivated by “ego promotion.” As for solidarity and mutual aid, they are only inspired by the desire to make something out of one’s life. In short, the twilight of duty “produces moral standards and at the same time ends them”; it juxtaposes disorganization and ethical reorganization;<sup>45</sup> and it equals

modern ethics to both morality and its contrary. It would be almost as credible to talk of immoral ethics or unethical morality.

To refute such a thesis, one would only need to ask why should morality and law be identified. What conceptual analysis of the *object* “morality” could possibly persuade us that it only consists of duty? Has there ever been a time when the study of virtue, of deliberate action, of values, of happiness and goodness did not belong to moral philosophy? Such topics have obviously very little to do with obeying rules or an absolute law. When choosing the best course of action among two paths, are we not handling dilemmas and moral conflicts? Do we not qualify a dilemma as “moral” even when it clearly does not involve two opposing *laws* prescribing incompatible outcomes? Many philosophers have sought the source of morality in feelings and emotions, although these do not derive from duty or rules. Truly moral considerations, such as being concerned for personal safety or indebted to a close relative, may lead us to act in ways contrary to strictly defined duty for the simple reason that extreme or simplistic definitions of morality cannot account for the complexity of our moral experience.

Lipovetsky relentlessly invokes a stringent, heroic, sacrificial, even “incandescent” duty, but has such a notion ever existed?<sup>46</sup> We are told that “the duty to devote one’s life to one’s neighbor is only rarely discharged nowadays,” but one can find no fact or argument in support of this claim. We are told that calls to blind devotion have deserted the public arena, but looking as far back in history as we can see makes us doubt that such devotion was ever too common. Besides, who can reasonably prove that modern society is indeed experiencing an unbridled search for personal well-being, as we are tirelessly told? Gilles Lipovetsky seems to admit that our experience is not limited to a “materialistic and libertarian mind-set.” Therefore, we are correct in concluding that we are facing two stereotypes that function well together but have no basis in reality. And the author himself seems to acknowledge at times that this is indeed the case.<sup>47</sup>

The question “What is postmoralism?” has yet to be answered. While Lipovetsky, by assimilating ethics to *laissez-faire*, emphasizes the opposition between the “high duties” of morality and the “subjective rights” of ethics, Luc Ferry looks for an undefined sort of wisdom to materialize after the end of religion and to transcend morality. Even without mentioning again the tendentious definition of morality as law, one might wonder what intellectual content such a wisdom would have, other than the one that has always been the essence of morality, that is, practical reasoning.

Our authors claim that moral standards lack genuine, substantial values, especially love; that if we had love, then we would not need moral codes, imperatives, injunctions, and prohibitions.<sup>48</sup> As with wisdom, one may wonder about the intellectual content of love: what does it mean?

Those who would discard moral standards for love hasten to specify “only if it is true love, of course.” But who could verify and confirm the authenticity of love? Could it be the person who is in love? Certainly not: one has only to read Stendhal or Proust in order to shed any illusions on this point. The strongest quality of love is its ambivalence: it has the power of illusion while giving us access to a source of knowledge or truth that remains inaccessible by any other means; it vows a cult to the object of love while striving to possess it, even destroy it. In this context, to speak of a model of “transcendence in immanence” is to talk nonsense.<sup>49</sup> Love is the most precious feeling there is, but it would be unrealistic to believe that it can lead us to self-rule, integrity, and respect for the other, or that it could make us quit narcissism and help us spread happiness in the world. Besides, what does it mean to evaluate the authenticity of love if not to critically analyze it so as to determine its value? In fact, such an assessment is precisely the main objective of moral reflection.

I will not dwell any longer on the links between ethics and morality. Once the source of confusion has been spotted, I doubt that what remains qualifies for philosophical debate. Those who argue in favor of a true semantic difference between ethics and morality must find worthier arguments than stipulatory definitions of morality as duty or of ethics as well-being.<sup>50</sup> The concepts involved are much more important than the words used to designate them. Again, ethics and morality refer to the same intellectual approach, that is, understanding reality, guiding deliberations, and justifying decisions. Refusing to view morality as duty would have no effect on the critical and reflexive process that constitutes moral deliberation. Many of the criticisms formulated in the preceding pages would have been rendered null and void, had the targeted authors asked from the beginning the relevant question: as critical, rational, and introspective reasoning, what does ethics consist of?

Gilles Lipovetsky’s book brilliantly illustrates my point. In some of its best passages, he recommends an “intelligent ethics” that would aim at finding “reasonable compromises” and “appropriate measures,” well adapted to the circumstances of real human beings; an ethics rising from “negotiation, redistribution, and training.”<sup>51</sup> My book is a plea for placing theoretical and practical rationality at the heart of ethics. Therefore, I wholeheartedly support the intellectual ambitions of such a program, but I sincerely doubt that it could be realized without relinquishing the caricaturing and historical dramatizing presently used in France to convey it. Specifically, it is meaningless to regard morality as sacred while ridiculing ethics, and conversely—to glorify ethics while pronouncing moral standards outdated. Morality and ethics share the same intellectual approach based on critical reflection and introspection.

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