

ON BEING COMMITTED TO MORALITY

KAI NIELSEN

1

Free-riders exist and, what is another species altogether, classist immoralists exist and they do, speaking now of their actions and intentions, in one way or another, discount morality whether or not this morality is thought to be purely conventional or in some way a genuine morality that, when ideology is cut through, can still be seen not to just rest on tribal mores. Let us assume, for this discussion, what most of us will hope is true, namely that morality, or at least the morality of the modernizing societies, is not purely conventional but in its most general features is something that any human being who is both reasonable, caring and tolerably well informed would assent to at least if she had the good fortune to be in modernizing cultural circumstances and were carefully to reflect. People—or at least most people—in societies such as ours believe or at least hope, that there is such a moral point of view and they further believe that people ought to not only act in accordance with it but, as well, they should be committed to it. It is not enough to be persons of good morals; we should be morally good persons as well. Moreover, within morality there is no alternative to trying to act in accordance with the moral point of view and to being committed to the moral point of view. All *moral* reasons, even to be moral reasons, must support so acting and such commitment.

However, all of the above to the contrary notwithstanding, each of us can ask the question 'Why should I be moral?', as I for certain philosophical purposes ask that question, or more practically, as potential free-riders or classist immoralists do if they are at all reflective. The question comes most centrally to 'Why should I be moral when it is not in my interests or in the interests of my in-group to do so?' The 'should' cannot be a moral use of 'should' or else the question would be like 'Why are emerald things green?' But there are plenty of non-moral uses of 'should' as (in the normal circumstances of their utterance) 'Should I get a facelift?' or 'Should I learn to play chess?'. Why, an individual can at least ask himself, should I give a fig about

morality when either I or a limited group of others I just happen to care for will not get hurt if I don't? Why should I be either a caring person or a person of principle when it doesn't suit me? Being moral requires of us that we be persons of principle and caring persons but so what? Why should I be moral?¹

The usual answer, and it is the answer that William Hund gives, is that it is dumb not to be.² A person—to put it pedantically—will, the claim goes, not be a person of sound reason if she is not unequivocally committed to the moral point of view. We will, of course, if we are free-riders or classist immoralists, and not also rather brute dumb, want people generally (people of our local interest group aside) to be people who stably act in accordance with the moral point of view. We have at the very least good Hobbesian reasons for wanting the institutions of morality and most, if not all, of our moral practices to be firmly in place. But this Hobbesian answer to 'Why should *we* be moral?' is not a good answer to 'Why should *I* be moral?', particularly when it is understood as 'Why should I always do what I sincerely believe is what is required of me morally?' There is nothing unreasonable or irrational about remaining committed to the moral point of view or coming to be so committed but not everything that is *compatible* with reason or *in accordance with* reason is *required* by reason. The standard, traditionally received view from Plato and Aristotle to Kurt Baier and David Gauthier is that morality is required by reason. I claim that view is false when it is understood as the view that the immoralist must be making some intellectual mistake if she is not steadfastly committed, when she considers her own course of acting and living, to acting morally. What mistake over matters of fact, what logical blunder, what inductive error, what denial of her own long range or short range self-interest must such a free-rider or classist immoralist have made if, at least in her heart of hearts, she remains indifferent to the claims of morality? I do not believe that she *must* have made any so I do not believe that, so construed, reason *requires* morality.

¹Kai Nielsen, "Why Should I Be Moral?", *Methodos*, Vol. 15, No. 59-60 (1963), Symposium on "Morality and Class," an exchange between Kai Nielsen and Bela Szabados, *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. XXVII (The National University of Ireland, 1980), pp. 67-93. Kai Nielsen, "Must the Immoralist Act Contrary to Reason?" in David Copp and David Zimmerman (eds.), *Morality, Reason and Truth*, (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), pp. 212-227. Kai Nielsen, "Critique of Pure Virtue: Animadversions on a Virtue-Based Ethics," in Earl E. Shelp (ed.), *Virtue and Medicine* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1985), pp. 133-150.

²William Hund, "Kai Nielsen's 'Why Should I Be Moral?' Revisited," *Northwest Conference on Philosophy*, (Tacoma, WA, 13 November 1987). Kai Nielsen, "'Why Should I Be Moral?' Revisited," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 21 (1984), pp. 81-92.

I have conducted the case on the assumption that we have a genuine morality to contrast with a purely conventional morality. Even if that were not the case and we only had a conventional morality, it still would remain true that for Hobbesian reasons we would have good reasons for having in place as a social institution at least some morality, indeed any kind of morality, or at least almost any kind of morality, rather than no morality at all. Without some such institution our lives would surely be nasty, brutish and short. But even with a purely conventional morality, the claims I made about the possible rationality of some free-riders and classist immoralists would still remain in place. They need the institution, as we all do, but they still will prudently free-ride on it and indeed, if they are at all clever, will use the institution manipulatively. They would not, of course, even be able to do so unless morality existed as a set of reasonably stable and expectable social practices. Why must this immoralism on the part of individuals be irrational?

2

Has William Hund managed to refute the view sketched above? Has he shown it in any substantial way to be implausible? I may be failing to note the mote in my own eye, but I do not believe that he has. I argue that there are acts—say the donation of a kidney—that are *compatible* with reason while not being *required* by reason. I further argue that, though they are morally commendable, they *need* not be in either the short term or long term interests of the donor. We have in such situations what appears at least to be a classic conflict between morality and self-interest. Here the immoralist or the neutral observer (if they ever were such a being) can ask why do the morally commendable thing when it is not in your interest? Hund responds that when we consider our 'higher selves' we will, or at least may, come to appreciate that so acting is in our self-interest. Reminding one of the claims of psychological egoism, a venerable doctrine I thought had long ago been laid to rest, Hund remarks that "every action that I do is done in my self-interest because it is my action and is thought to benefit me in some way."³ But, particularly when 'benefit me in some way' gets cashed in terms of 'being in my self-interest', such a claim is plainly false. When in the Second World War in the parts of the world controlled by the Fascist forces, non-Jews hid Jews in their houses, often with a very considerable risk of being caught, so acting was not in their interests though these acts were acts of great moral courage. If, to use another example, I am gutsy enough to donate a kidney to a complete stranger I do something that gets high moral marks

³Hund, *op. cit.*

but what I do, in most circumstances, is by no stretch of the imagination in my self-interest.

It is a comforting doctrine to believe that morality always pays but it is utterly false. What Hund actually shows is that such actions are voluntary actions and that, as such, the agents choose to do them, perhaps, because of the alternatives available to them, they most prefer to do them or they are the things that, under the circumstances, they dislike doing least. But what I choose to do, or prefer in the circumstances doing, as every smoker knows, need not be what I take, even everything considered, to be in my self-interest. If whatever I choose I regard as being in some sense good or at least the lesser of several evils, not all of which can be avoided, it does not follow that what I choose to do I believe to be in my self-interest (short-range or long-range). So I see no reason at all to say, with Hund, that even if it has been established that there is in some reasonable sense an objective moral point of view, and thus that there is a genuine morality, that it always "is to my benefit, to my self-interest, to do what is morally right".⁴ There is no reason to believe that there is an intrinsic connection between moral norms and what is in a person's benefit. Sometimes, of course, doing the right thing is in one's self-interest but that is another matter entirely.

Hund contends (to turn to another of his arguments) that if it is agreed, as I agree, that *we* have good reasons for being moral then any individual has good reasons for being moral. "It would," Hund tells us, "be inconsistent of him to want to be part of a society where he wants everyone else but himself to be moral."⁵ The reason Hund gives for claiming this is the following: "If there is not a good reason for him to be moral, then there is not a good reason for any other individual to be moral..."⁶ But there is a good reason for people taken collectively to be moral, as I in effect agree in giving an affirmative answer to the question "Why *we* should be moral?" But that entails, Hund has it, that an individual should be moral. But this last claim is false. What applies to a collectivity need not apply to all the individuals or perhaps to any of the individuals in the collectivity. The team could have played well even though some of the individuals played badly and most, perhaps even all, of the individuals could have played well and the team could still have played badly if they did not play well together. I (or you) could believe that it is a good thing for all of us if people generally do not cheat on their income taxes or at least do not cheat very much, while still recognizing that, for many of us as individuals, where we can finesse it with relative safety, it would be a

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*

good thing (be in our individual rational interest) to cheat on our income taxes. We could believe this (take it to be an obvious bit of street wisdom) while still, without any inconsistency at all, hoping that most people will not cheat or not cheat very much, and indeed while continuing consistently to believe that morality should require that of them, since we recognize that if many people cheat it would have disastrous effects on the society. And, while we might, as moral agents, want to see a given social order go under we still would very much want, if we are at all rational, some social order to be in place. Thus from a societal perspective there are very good reasons for, under most circumstances, stopping income tax evasion. The government must have certain revenues for the good of us all. What is essential to see here is that what holds for the collectivity need not hold for the individual members of the collectivity. I can with perfect consistency recognize that it is in my interests to free-ride in certain circumstances without for a moment thinking it would be a good thing or even a tolerable thing to have a society of free-riders though universalizability would commit me to saying that if it is rational for me to do it, it is also rational for other similar and similarly situated individuals to do so as well. But that is not at all to say that I think they should do it or that I could not rationally oppose their doing it. From the point of view of the government, it is a good thing if all individuals pay their taxes but it doesn't follow from that, that from the point of view of any individual, it is a good thing if she pays her income tax. It is a good thing from the moral point of view, the point of view of society, if you will, that all individuals be moral but it does not follow from that that prudentially speaking it is a good thing for any individual that she be moral, though it is wise (prudent of her) that she at least seem to be.

I believe that that neither an individual classist immoralist need act irrationally nor need the members of their class (taken as a whole) act irrationally if she or they act on their class interests rather than on the interests of everyone alike. In opposition to this, Hund believes that reason requires that such classist immoralists extend their interests to a disinterested concern for the interests of everyone alike. In other words, he believes that they must cease being classist immoralists. But that is a mistake. The thoroughly rational classist immoralist, if she is consistent, will not extend her caring beyond her in-group (principally her class) and further she will agree, as Hund rightly stresses, that it is immoral not to so extend her interests. But morality or at least modern morality, as distinct from moral ideology, requires that the interests of all human beings be equally the object of societal concern and respect. Such a person clearly sees that her classist immoralism is indeed an *immoralism* but she says in effect to herself, and perhaps to her close classmates as well, "So what? The thing is to protect our

class interests and thereby in the large, though perhaps not on every issue, our individual interests as well."

Hund claims that such a person must be irrational just in virtue of not doing what she recognizes morally speaking ought to be done. But that merely begs the question unless we can show that it is always in a person's interest to do what morally speaking is the thing to do. But we have already seen that this is an unjustified belief. It is particularly obviously unjustified for the classist immoralist where his class, and he with it, is, for the foreseeable future, in a very strong and stable position. Thus a capitalist, who is also a classist immoralist, when his class is firmly, and predictably over a considerable time, stably in control, while working class movements are weak, need not be acting irrationally if he exploits his workers even beyond what the systematic requirements of capitalism require. In so acting, he plainly acts immorally but not necessarily irrationally.

These are my responses to Hund's major criticisms of my account, criticisms which, if sound, would go to its heart. However, in each instance I have given grounds for believing them to be unsound. Hund, in the tradition of ethical rationalism, wants to forge tight links between being rational and being moral, and being irrational and being immoral, but he has not been able to show that the immoralist, classist or individualist, must be irrational. Of course, many of them, perhaps nearly all of them, are remember *The Last Exit to Brooklyn*—but so are not a few people of decent moral convictions. However, all that is not to the point. What is to the point is that there is no intrinsic connection between immorality and irrationality. Uncaring and unprincipled people, I am sorry to record, need not be irrational or even people with any marked failings in rationality.

3

Given that we have at least good Hobbesian reasons for wanting moral institutions (practices) to prevail and given that there is nothing irrational or unreasonable in an individual abiding by her moral commitments, morality being in accordance with reason without being *required* by reason, why then should the question 'Why should I be moral?' be of any philosophical interest? It has to do with the history of moral philosophy and with trying to get a proper picture of the respective scope of reason and sentiment in the moral life. Moral rationalism has been, in its various forms, the dominant tradition in Western philosophy. In one way or another it gives to understand that a person, if she is through and through rational and has a good sense of her own good, will unequivocally commit herself to morality and strive never to be a free-rider or a classist immoralist. I have been concerned to show that this is a myth, though understandably an attractive one. But I

have also been concerned to show that its being a myth has no nihilistic or unsettlingly subjectivistic consequences. Most people—indeed perhaps all people—given the values they actually hold, will, if they are rational and the least bit informed, be committed to the moral point of view. What is actually worrisome about some rational people is what they believe about the world and what they believe about what options we have in it and not that they might—just might—turn out to be brutish, though still rational, immoralists utterly indifferent, beyond the requirements of prudence, to morality.⁷ But it still remains possible that, given certain attitudes and a certain personality structure, a person, while making no intellectual mistake, could remain indifferent to his own moral commitments and indeed be just a person of good morals rather than a morally good person: a “fair-weather man” so to say. This, against moral rationalism, tells us something important about the scope of reason in morality.⁸ But this failure of moral rationalism is nothing to go into Camusian-Sartrean dramatics about, given the social importance of morality, the way we are socialized, the way it is rational as well to continue to socialize people (indeed we could hardly be people without being socialized) and, finally, the plain fact of the social necessity and desirability of the institution of morality. We can, in this respect, be “happy positivists” with Michel Foucault, free from the worry that the very possibility of there being a few uncaring but not unintelligent people around will cause morality to totter or justify our trying to totter it. It shows rather that it is folly to try to ground morality in pure practical reason.⁹ If a person is sufficiently uncaring there is no reasoning him into morals.

The University of Calgary

⁷Andrew Collier, “Scientific Socialism and the Question of Socialist Values”, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume VII, (1981), pp. 121-154.

⁸Kai Nielsen, “Reason and Sentiment: Skeptical Remarks About Reason and the ‘Foundations of Morality’” in Theodore F. Geraets (ed.), *Rationality Today* (Ottawa, Canada: The University of Ottawa Press, 1979), pp. 249-279.

⁹Kai Nielsen, “Against Ethical Rationalism,” in Edward Regis Jr. (eds.), *Gewirth's Ethical Rationalism*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 59-83.