



Shunning the Light

by Christopher Pulte

Abstract

This paper speaks of morality in the broadest of terms, but in generalities derived from one of the most fundamental of phenomenological doctrines. It is proposed that a polarization exists which corresponds to the epistemological divide that can be found between idealism and empiricism. Our morality harks back to Platonism, the arrival of which immediately provoked a response which resulted in a competing paradigm, its polar opposite: the embryonic Aristotelian doctrine of what Merleau-Ponty termed “induction”. Interpretations to this day waver between adherence to the material world and the ideal. What is maintained in this paper is that idealism and empiricism are both epistemologically inadequate. Given, however, that our morality is one of moral universals, the reader is asked to reflect on what induction must mean for it, and to consider the shadow that induction, being far from benign, must cast in a society which rests on a belief in moral absolutes.

While acknowledging that this may raise eyebrows, given Nietzsche’s reputation, the author contends that Nietzsche (1886, 1887) was the first to break with this duality and to speak from a place which was on neither side of this metaphysical divide. While scholars often ignore that part of Nietzsche’s philosophy which is affirmative, focusing instead on his “nihilism”, it is argued that the evils which his philosophy is said to foster mostly exist in a style of thought which he explicitly rejects. Although Nietzsche was hostile to modern ideas, perceiving in them a threat to our spiritual health, and hoped to “translate man back into nature” (Nietzsche, 1886/1989, p. 161) – which those sympathetic towards liberal values will take issue with – it cannot but be agreed with Nietzsche that in modernity the moral landscape has changed. Morality has been rationalized in a way that the ancients never knew; mind has been introduced into what primordially was the domain of instinct (Nietzsche, 1888/1990, p. 43). While for Nietzsche himself, however, rationality was more a symptom, the contention of this paper is that it is the source of the change in the moral landscape of modernity.

The good deed shuns the light as fearfully as does the bad deed: the latter fears that detection will bring pain (in the form of punishment), the former fears that detection will bring a loss of pleasure (namely the pure pleasure in oneself that ceases immediately when vanity is satisfied).

[Nietzsche, 1878-80/1996, p. 183]

The Morality of Mores

Society is a surface under which matters are concealed even as they are being revealed, and even though public accounts may bear a rough resemblance to lived experience, these are domains the twain of which will never meet. Culture exists in its representations and these, as such, never completely correspond to the things that they represent. In most things we prefer the testimony of others to that of our own eyes; but, when it comes to moral acts, we are especially careful to avert our gaze from our world of unspoken experience to find community in the beliefs of those around us. In what Nietzsche called “the morality of mores”, the unseemly and questionable are pushed into the shadows, and the givens of human existence are dressed up, reinterpreted, and presented in a form that flatters the dictates of community. Public morality is fundamentally attention to appearance, and, as such, when up before the tribunal of private reflection, it stands forever guilty of falsehood and hypocrisy. Although morality often exists in the winking belief that the public interest is served by stretching the truth, with every such action there is a negative reaction. The wilful embellishment of the realities of life results in a scepticism that finds its reality in the opposite. In the laying of this surface of beauty and light, darker realities are still discernable underneath, and distrust of the smiling assurances of the moralist gives rise to his antithesis.

Make no mistake, we live in an age of scepticism rather than enlightenment, and the unfortunate truth is that this makes us no more than enlightened by half. We have been taught to regard with scorn the veil that is drawn over our understanding, and, even though we smirk at society’s fictions, the unfortunate truth is that we have not found anything to take their place. The traditional way of resolving conflicts of public and private has always been to throw oneself ever the more fully into society’s fictions, to run away from thought and embrace the fancies, contradictions, and outright fabrications of the public domain. And perhaps it is time to recognize that, while an affront to reason, myth¹ is not only one of our most loved creations, but also an inescapable necessity. In our science, we imagine that we have ripped the veil from things and stare reality directly in the face, but life among others always places us on the surface, and, in

¹ I do not think I’m too far from Nietzsche, in that I see myths as a surface reality, public fictions that are a part of life among others. But I also see them as being a way of making things seen: a way of putting a face on things which would otherwise go unseen.

discarding the myths of tradition, science only substitutes ones of its own. As Nietzsche often said, “whatever is profound loves masks” (Nietzsche, 1886/1989, p. 50), and for private life to find expression at all, we somehow must respect public forms without losing ourselves in them. If we choose to be with others, then there is no life except at the surface, and this surface will be bogus even when it is underpinned and maintained by an unnamed something that is quite real.

Concern for surface appearance in “the morality of mores” exists wherever community exists; however, morality takes on other permutations that are less public and more unfathomable. Life in the morality of mores is lived in the vague, nagging fear of our authentic self running afoul of the law, public standards of behaviour, or, most terrifying of all, the wagging tongues of neighbourhood gossips! Community places us under the strain of putting our best foot forward, and traditional moralities all demand a single-minded conformity to community standards. Modern moralities – idealism, romanticism, and all the other palpitations of earnest would-be doers of good deeds; and, on the other hand, while not necessarily incompatible with public decency, in general all forms of liberalism – do not seek correspondence to public standards, but rather to satisfy a different kind of moral impulse. Traditional moralities are unrelentingly austere and unforgiving of human frailty, but modern moralities seek release from the pressure of conformity. Morality has always been directed at the transgressions of individuals against community, but modern moralities are directed against the transgressions of community against individuals.

The Idealization of the Ideal

An investigation of where the values of modern life originate is beyond the scope of this paper. For our purpose, it is enough to recognize that these concerns have something to do with alienation from community, and feelings of helplessness and dread of being crushed under the machinery of state. This alienation in itself is an indication that modern moralities are not of community, but of the mind. In lieu of life among others and the obedience to dictates of community, some of us choose to cast our lot with our ideals, a different kind of chimera than myth, but still of a quite different order from life as experienced! In myths we flee the truth and seek comfort in the fictions of community, while in our ideals we seek the truth and flee community to meditate on the life we live among others. In this

particular kind of unreality of the ideal we roam unencumbered by the laws of gravity which rule our corporeal lives – and this is as much to say the laws which govern our social lives – and in our thoughts we are free to imagine the world as we would have it be. Our good and bad are extracted from world as lived and run through the prism of private thought, and, in removing them from the arena where they naturally occur, this good and evil takes on a peculiar life of its own.

As Nietzsche clearly was aware, pride in intentions is hardly less false than pride in appearance. Good intentions do not always guarantee good acts, and the imagination is a different canvas altogether from that which we put our hands to while out in the world. Too often this self that aspires to morality is symptomatic of an insularity that is destructive to those who come into direct contact with it. There is a liberalism that would offer all for humanity but withhold its hand to its neighbour, an ego which has its eyes so fastened on its ideal that it is unconsciously cruel to all who come into direct contact with it. Although there are apparatuses in place for putting into effect our dreams of a better place – institutions, private and of the state – the moral domain of modernity exists in a netherworld that is often strangely alienated from the world that we know from everyday experience. While involved in this morality of the mind that would restore to health the unfortunates of society, we often fail to attend to our own moral health and that of others around us. In our love of humanity, we often learn to despise others.²

Our morality is founded on ideals that have been distilled from experience, but in it can be detected the glimmer of a metaphysics as incorporeal as anything found in Plato. This is to say that our morality – not to mention law – is based on an illusion that nobody really quite believes in. We live in a peculiar twilight world somewhere between the ideal and “the real”, and our dedication to both is in eternal renegotiation, especially when our ideals prove to be too much of a burden. We believe that it is wrong to lie, but, as Nietzsche often observed, we engage in it all the time. Few of us are much attached to truth when it proves to be an inconvenience, and most of us know when to compromise with what Nietzsche termed our “intellectual conscience”. The “Thou shalt not kill” of

² Examples of such personalities abound. Two who come to mind would be Charlie Chaplin, or perhaps Tolstoy: dreamers of a kinder world who were difficult, even cruel, in their personal lives.

the Old Testament was purely conditional, with parameters understood to extend no further than the needs of community, and to this day it resists attempts to make it absolute. When at war – which is still all too common – soldiers enjoy a special exemption from this particular “thou shalt”, and, in the time honoured exercise of institutionalized cruelty, societies – some of the more barbaric ones at least – still execute their criminals, although they do so now in the face of a general revulsion at the thought of state sponsored murder.

Still, our morality is founded on thought, and, in the words of Ortega Y Gasset, “thinking is too easy”³ (Ortega Y Gasset, 1935/1962, p. 160). The suspicion that thought distorts even as it illuminates is an insight that propelled much of 20th century philosophy, most notably so in Kierkegaard. And post-Newtonian science, most notably in Einstein, operates on the principle that nature cannot be expected to obey laws of reason, and reason must thus be made to fit empirical evidence. Phenomenology, most pointedly in Merleau-Ponty, has resisted the tyranny of thought, and, even though it has very good reason to distrust the ideal, it should resist the conclusion that this means that thought is a luxury that we can, in fact, do without. The manner in which thought deceives is so subtle as to be almost beyond human understanding, and it is difficult to see how a doctrine so arcane and slippery can sustain an intellectual movement. But phenomenology is not anti-intellectual or even anti-rational – as Merleau-Ponty, himself, is on record as saying – but is, rather, reason that is aware of its own limitations. Thought is the sightedness that gives direction to our actions, and the recognition that eyes cannot always be trusted does not justify their being plucked out!

The world has never been a hospitable place for the ideal; it debuts to a society predisposed against it, and it contains within itself the seeds of its own negation. Just as, centuries later, Descartes’s idealism happened to occasion British empiricism, idealism’s first appearance on the world stage in Platonism immediately provoked opposition in the person of Aristotle.⁴ From time immemorial society has, in

³ “The so-called spirit is an all too ethereal agent, permanently in danger of being lost in the labyrinth of its own infinite possibilities.”

⁴ Although it was Descartes’s idealism that occasioned British empiricism, an embryonic doctrine of induction can already be found in Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics* of circa 330BC. He speaks of “faculties which are neither determinate and fully developed nor derived from other developed faculties on a higher plane of knowledge” but

Nietzsche's words, existed in "thinking under the spell of custom, for which there was nothing but established judgments, established causes, and no other reasons than those of authority" (Nietzsche, 1881/1997, p. 218). Whereas community is hostile to anything which is not of community and lives in uneasy détente with thought, idealism would make private reflection sacrosanct. Tradition, as can be expected, takes a dim view of innovators, and reserves a glass of hemlock especially prepared for those who would lead its youth away from mindless obedience to social norms. Idealism, however, proposes a withdrawal from these said norms and a taking possession of public life in private consciousness. Aristotle's ill-humoured intolerance of the "twittering"⁵ (Aristotle, trans. 1960, p. 121) of Platonists, might express something of a communal backlash to what must have been a radical innovation – but in this could there not be something of a testimony to the premise that there is something fundamentally indecent about this flaunting of the ideal (Nietzsche, 1886/1989, p. 14)?⁶

Liberalism, Victor Hugo's romanticism, Tolstoy's humanism and the like are Platonic in that this is a morality not of the world, but of the mind. It is enlightened to the vulnerabilities of the human condition, and this is to say that it is founded on thought. The ideal must be a kind of chimera, but there remains in it something of our original nature, and locked in the lonely domain of reflection, cut off from the cruelties of the world, perhaps it could even be said that in it there is a heightened sense of good. Idealism is abstraction in thought, but there remains in it something of an understanding of the givens of the human heart. The ideologies used to counter idealism, on the other hand, are generally cold, sterile and often malicious abstractions that exist only to deny that which is heartfelt. The ideal is an abstraction removed from reality by half, but it is generally countered with beliefs that are twice removed from the reality that they ostensibly represent. Idealism is based on an understanding of a genuine human need, but materialism, relativism, fascism, atheism and other such forgeries of doubt often seem to exist only to defy the ideal.⁷

"arise from sense-perception" (p. 259).

⁵ In Aristotle's exact words, "The Forms may be dismissed ... they are mere prattle."

⁶ Nietzsche believed that Epicurus shared Aristotle's malice. He interpreted his reference to Platonists as "Dionysiokolakes" to mean that "they are all actors, there is nothing genuine about them."

⁷ Nietzsche had little respect for idealism, but neither could he stomach empiricism. Accusing Hobbes, Hume, and

The Phenomenological Body and Nietzsche

Just as there is a perceptual world among things that is prior to thought, there is a moral world among others which is not of mind but is known through the body. As with perception among things, the parameters of our moral world are not discovered in thought, but through participation in the greater world among others. Just as our daily contact with things defines our perceptual field, our daily contact with others determines our good and our bad. This morality, known through the body, is as palpable as the flush of excitement, the blush of embarrassment or tightening of the throat. In our thoughts we are free, but out in the world among others, just as with things, we are bound to our corporeal existence. The body provides all of the givens of life as lived, and our so-called feelings, sexuality, love between man and woman, and between mother and child – in fact, every fraternal, maternal and carnal connection – is part of our corporeal world. Wherever there is thought, there is direction; and wherever there is direction, there is freedom. While it is therefore difficult to draw a line where freedom ends and our corporeal nature begins, what is certain is that instinct remains an overwhelmingly powerful force.

An understanding of the body goes a long way towards explaining how Nietzsche equated goodness with health and moral with physical decline, and why he was suspicious of all forms of idealism. For him, goodness is discovered not in the netherworld of thought, but in action among others. While a rather misleading snapshot of a phenomenon much too broad for framing in such meagre words, Nietzsche's "will to power" is not knowable outside of a world of the weak and the strong that our body instinctually knows in relation to others. The "will to power" and "morality of mores" can be viewed as interchangeable terms⁸ (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 175; 1886/1989, p. 111). And who is to say in what exact way Nietzsche conceived the two? But he was nevertheless quite correct that good and bad were interpreted in ancient

Locke of having signalled "a debasement and lowering of the value of 'philosophy'", he suspected that in this style of thought could be found "the mistrustfulness of a disappointed idealist" and "a self-deceiving instinct for belittling man".

⁸ Nietzsche often argued that, in modern man, the will has been domesticated out of him, and, while this may make this point difficult to make, he clearly saw that "herd instinct" is primordial. "Herd instinct" is that which makes the crowd receptive to "the will to power". Command does not exist without obedience, and it takes a community for this.

times in a way that would scandalize people today. Furthermore, in reporting on “the will to power” Nietzsche is not necessarily an admirer of it – as if an irrepressible drive was in need a champion – but, rather, he quite explicitly names the “free spirit”, whom he most clearly identified with, as the rare exception who renounces (the usual avenues of) power (Nietzsche, 1880/1996, p. 134). The Pharisees of modern life, on the other hand, whether of tradition or of the ideal, are scandalized by all talk of power because they are among those most involved in its pursuit.

Nietzsche chose to speak in such vitriolic terms because he believed himself to be speaking to posterity, and he did not wish to be mistaken for his contemporaries. But consider his premise that, while “the will to power” does evil to enemies,⁹ it also bestows good on its friends (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 86). And is not goodness in its non-idealized corporeal form expressed by providing benefits to those we come into contact with in our daily lives and whom we love? But this love discovered in the body is a conditional love. We can only find it in our hearts to love what is whole, healthy and beautiful. We feel an instinctive aversion to the flawed, diseased and misshapen. Nietzsche’s “will to power” proceeds from health, and this earthly good that would share its abundance with those deserving of its love is highly selective. Idealized love, on the other hand, is not of the body, but is an enlightened love, a love of the mind. Idealism attempts the alchemy of turning conditional love, the love bestowed on us by the body, into an unconditional love that loves regardless of the merit of its object. And, difficult though it may be to say whether there is wisdom to this or, as Nietzsche insists, naïveté, this kind of love gives thought – as God must – to human frailty and looks down on human imperfection and believes that it sees worth hidden underneath.

“The will to power” is a given of our social existence, and, as Nietzsche realized, it is here in the interaction of the weak and strong that nature’s good and bad plays itself out. And perhaps he is not too far off the mark to assert that personal limitations and an inability to leave a mark on society is determined by a hereditary lack of vitality; but, in positing will as a given rather than a product of circumstances, he ignores all other contingencies of life. Idealism can quite rightly point to the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” and the vulnerabilities inherent to

⁹ “Benefiting and hurting others are ways of exercising one’s power upon others.”

our corporeal existence. Our knowledge of the flesh is generally of the limitations it places on us. Whereas the will can, and sometimes does, overcome, we all know from experience that circumstances can be overwhelming, and surely even a superhuman will is subject to the contingencies of fate. It is in the understanding of what might have been, in defiance of the cruelties of chance, that the ideal attempts to love. Though our corporeal nature teaches us to love our neighbour, our reason tells us that it is possible to love our enemy; that the differences that separate men are often accidental; that, under different circumstances, rather than aiming down the barrel of a rifle, we might be sitting down with them to share drinks.

This love of the enemy, actually, is not love at all, but is grounded in a melancholy circumspection and insight into potentiality. Disengaged from life, and withdrawn to the cocoon of thought, there is no love. And, even though thought interfaces with experience, the sightedness of thought is a different kind of sight from the sight of perception. It sees into the human condition, but does not participate in it. This love of the enemy runs contrary to all that is natural. It is quite impossible to fasten the eyes of thought on an object and find love there, because love knows only what it perceives. Genuine heartfelt love is bestowed on us not by the mind, but by the body. The love of liberalism, as Stendhal confessed, is a cold kind of love that cares for the common man only as long as it does not dirty its hands by direct contact¹⁰ (Stendhal, 1890/1995, p. 168). We often idealize a romantic love that is blind and accepts flaws in its object, but the sad truth is that the heart has eyes only for the whole and the healthy, and cannot find beauty in an object that is not immediately perceived. It loves only what is, and not what might be, and, as Stendhal observed, it is often fickle and can turn on the most trivial of circumstances (Stendhal, 1822/1975, p. 81).

Society is no longer a community that can be known through the wisdom of the body, and, in the construction of a society devoid of fraternal ties, we fabricate a different kind of love, a love that does not perceive and can never take the object of its love into a flesh and blood embrace. This love of the mind is a peculiar kind of love that is only apprehended by extending the cold antenna of the intellect. As a thinking animal, mankind has the choice of employing his intellect in either enlightened benevolence or calculated self-interest. If modern man has lost his “moral compass”, it is because the

¹⁰ “I love the people, I detest its oppressors; but it would be a constant torment for me to live with the people.”

good that is experienced in domestication in community, as well as the savagery while roaming free of its borders, are no longer known. Instinctual life is a dichotomy of domestication and cruelty, but our intellectual life is one of idealism and materialism. Community in modern life is nowhere and everywhere: insofar as the world is everywhere it is of the ideal, and insofar as it is nowhere, it is of the material.

The modern state is a dead thing in which fraternal ties have been replaced by laws and regulations, and, as functionaries of modern life, we live in a vacuum in which the heroic ego finds little opportunity to find direct satisfaction. We have paved corridors of power, and created a system of artificial credit which is laid away and turned into a medium of exchange that is accumulated and traded for profit, and which at every turn seduces us to place our private interest over that of the public good. There is a hole at the heart of modernity where community ought to reside, and aspiring to goodness is one way of trying to fill this void. But from this same hole all manner of darkness proceeds, and one of these is what is generally known as “the will to power”.¹¹ Where community exists, the heroic ego satisfies the needs of community as it satisfies its own needs – virtue in the classical sense, which was fulfilled by deeds on the field of battle – but, in the absence of community, it is the nature of the ego to do harm. Primal life is neither benign nor malignant, but alternates between domestication at camp and savagery in the field. But modern life has no true home and hearth, and for those who do not reside in community, self-interest diverges from the interest of community and they cannot help but waver between doing harm and doing good.

Shunning the Light

As thinking animals, for us mind overrules body, and such is the legacy of scepticism that we deny in theory the existence of things that we all very well know from everyday experience. Mind convinces us of the absence of a moral dimension to our lives even as body silently protests. Primal morality is not of the mind, but is discovered out in the world among others, and although surface forms may differ from culture to culture, they are sustained by the same corporeal needs. We all know the conditions for being with others, and few of us take issue with them. Human nature is fickle, and reputation is false and

¹¹ My belief is that the “will to power” of solitude is an anomaly, a darkening that occurs when community has been lost.

ephemeral. Ultimately, we cannot be satisfied with the surface, and when solitude visits us in the still watches of the night, we discover the need to create a new good out of it. There is a good that takes pleasure in itself only as long as it shuns the light. There is a kind of good without the posing, a nobility of the soul that pursues its good without any wish to be paid for its efforts. And, even though the very hint of such a good sends sceptics into a snickering fit, this is the one thing that scepticism cannot come to terms with.

In this most sceptical world, a Cordelia¹² will be an object of suspicion, and the mean-spirited will depict her virtue as pride. But genuine love looks with contempt on pretenders, just as genuine courage despises bluster: which is not to say that either love or courage are products of pride, but only that what is genuine is aware of that which is false and does not want to be mistaken for it. This “pride” that shuns outward show has come to an awareness that is removed from primordial existence in that it realizes the falsehood of public forms, and though such pride may seem more like revenge on the pretentiousness of the world, that does not make it any the less genuine. Moralists are going to abhor Nietzsche, because in him they stand accused of fraud; and, in truth, in their allegiance to a surface that is noble and pure, they show little faith in the existence underneath of anything other than what is base and corrupt. Nietzsche, on the other hand, believed that (some) men can appear in public, as they are unadorned and unashamed. Nietzsche, that moral monster who took every opportunity to provoke outrage, was, in fact, a believer in a good that takes pleasure in itself. He was the apostle of an ancient faith in nobility of the soul, in virtues that exist before moral self-consciousness.

The morality of mores would have us believe that nothing decent occurs off the public stage. But there is a good which reaches for expression not only in the presence of others, but in withdrawal from them. The shame that is felt in the presence of others is something that everybody recognizes, and although perhaps we all know the shame that is felt in front of oneself, few of us – other than Nietzsche – would dare to confirm this as a part of our experience. And while this good of the light has numbers on its side, is not this good of the shadows less artful and more

¹² As in the youngest and only true-hearted daughter of King Lear, but loser in the contest with her sisters for best declaration of filial piety. A remarkably similar scenario is also found in *Coriolanus*, where Shakespeare’s tragic hero loses the consulship and is turned into a pariah by his reluctance to participate in the traditional showing of scars received in battle in the service of Rome.

genuine than the good that manipulates the surface? It is reasonable enough for society to expect the general public to accept public norms and dress appropriately before going out in public, but it is absurd to imagine that conduct dictated by what is authentic in us is a threat to morality ... as if the surface were all that mattered. Moralists cringe at the thought of the moral chaos that they imagine will ensue when the whims of the individual overrule the dictates of community. But have they considered the moral atrophy that occurs when individuals lose sight of the source of their beliefs?

This good of the shadows is a self-conscious rejection of the artifice of the surface. While such a good has more in common with the ancient virtues of generosity, valour and self-possession than with modern virtues of compassion, it is not necessarily incompatible with the latter. It is an austere good that shuns gratification and looks with contempt on profit, and, in this age of gratification and profit, it has few friends. We live in a culture in which things that have always been matters of pride have been turned into matters of compulsion. And even though we might admit that good is no longer good when it is turned to profit, this has not kept us from basing our moralities on it. Modern morality and law are built on compulsion and reward, and it is precisely these things which deprive moral acts of any satisfaction we might take in them.¹³ The stick and the carrot may work wonders with donkeys, but nobody imagines that that makes them moral! Given that a good is truly good only when conducted freely, how can such a morality thus be moral at all? And is there not something in it more like scepticism?

Modern morality operates on the belief that what is bad avoids the light and what is good seeks it. It does not recognize the wrong that disturbs our solitude, or the right that is ashamed to show its face in public, and in this it is every bit as naïve in its cynicism as is scepticism. Scepticism, moreover, is not just an interpretation, but a prescription for life. It teaches that, if we comply with public mores, we are free to indulge in every kind of secret misconduct as long as

¹³ The morality most representative of our times is not morality at all, but behaviourism, which would understand our good and bad purely in such a polarity. But secular theories such as this have a precedent in Christianity, and, needless to say, this demonstrates a deep distrust of human nature. The notion of heaven and hell is incompatible with any finer moral sense, and if Christians avoid evil out of a fear of punishment and do good out of desire for reward, that makes them hardly any more moral than B. F. Skinner's laboratory rats.

we are not found out! We study the gestures, the dance steps, the language and all of the other nuances of culture in order to put our best foot forward. In self-conscious awareness of this face that we present to others, we learn to manipulate it in thought, and too often we mistake this artifice with being moral. It was against this falsehood of the surface that Nietzsche spoke, and against this smugly calculating pharisaic manipulation of appearance that he directed his scorn. And this is to say that he championed the uncalculating virtues of a nobility who were guided by their hearts rather than by their heads.

What this Means for Phenomenology

Since phenomenology would appear to be a banner under which colours of all stripes fly, it is probably presumptuous to try to speak for all, although it can nevertheless be said that phenomenology is above all an epistemology. Merleau-Ponty said, "I have tried, first of all to re-establish the roots of mind in its body and in its world, going against doctrines which treat perception as a simple result of the action of external things on the body as well as against those which insist on the autonomy of the consciousness" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1964, p. 3). As I have tried to show, our morality is infused with qualities which can be traced to two competing paradigms, and it is my belief that phenomenology offers a way out of this duality. To be sure, it is difficult to imagine a general population conversant in the subtleties of this middle ground, and even more difficult to imagine what may become of a society in the wake of such a paradigm shift. But perhaps it would be enough if our intelligentsia, such as they are, were to refrain from this polarized either-or, this endless back-and-forth of extravagant claims and equally implausible counterclaims.¹⁴

My belief is that to "re-establish the roots of mind in its body" is a very similar enterprise to Nietzsche's attempt to "translate man back into nature". It seems to me to be the first step in coming to grips with corporeal givens of human existence that have long been denied. But I feel that there is a danger in this that phenomenology should be aware of. Recognizing body is, in many ways, to become its advocate, and in the end I believe that this is what Nietzsche was guilty of. Realizing that we are condemned to our animal nature, he saw no other choice than to side with it. In what he termed "love of fate" (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 223), he grew determined to find

¹⁴ An example of this is the polarization one sees in psychology in mentalism and behaviourism.

beauty even in that which is objectionable in existence. I, however, would propose an “*amor fati*” of another sort. While there is no denying our animal nature, as a thinking animal we in some ways transcend nature. To borrow a metaphor from Nietzsche (1881/1997, p. 146)¹⁵, man is the animal who, on rising up on two legs, thinks himself a god. To be sure, he is no god, but, as unnatural as this going about on two feet might be, it is no longer an option for him to return to walking on all fours.

As Nietzsche said, “what distinguishes human beings from animals, and the higher animals from the lower” is that “the former see and hear immeasurably more, and see and hear *thoughtfully*” (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 241). With all due respect, I would say that human beings see and hear no better than animals do, but they certainly are more aware, and this is achieved through the agency of thought.¹⁶ As evidence that conscience can be ruled by mind, I would point to that great existential fact of death. Please consider that, death being something which nobody alive has ever experienced first hand, anxiety about death must be something of an abstraction. Other animals do not feel dread about death because they have no insight into their condition and cannot conceive that their days are numbered. As thinking animals, on the other hand, we are capable of experiencing fear not only about that which is present, but also about that which is imminent, and who is to say whether or not anxiety cannot even be felt about things that are merely potential?

Far from being a moral compass that, as in Aristotle’s reference to Platonism, is “derived from other developed faculties on a higher plane of knowledge”, if “the conscience” can be said to exist at all, it is the phenomenon which occurs when public and private are in opposition, and it is no wonder that Nietzsche considered its “bite” to be “indecent” (Nietzsche, 1888/1990, p. 33). There is plenty of evidence to support the conclusion that any compunction that we feel occurs only when we are at odds with our

¹⁵ “Oh, I know thee beasts! To be sure they like themselves better when they stalk around on two legs ‘like a god’ ... but when they have fallen back on their four legs I like them better; this posture is so incomparably more natural!”

¹⁶ And if this man-animal is sick it is precisely because of a sightedness into the human condition. But what psychologist alive ever turned to his patient, commended him on his feelings of insecurity and anxiety, and told him that he feels these precisely because he fully appreciates the terrors which surround him!?

fellows. We feel guilt not only when we judge ourselves to be wrong, but guilt can be felt even when we are demonstrably in the right! And as long as behaviour is deemed acceptable by our peers, it is also part of human nature to commit evil, even the most outrageous atrocities, with nary a blush.

Those guilty of human rights violations often confess that, while in the act, they feel no remorse whatsoever, and feel pangs of conscience only afterwards, when public opinion turns against them. It is doubtful that the framers of American doctrines of equality, many of whom themselves were slave owners, lost any sleep over that most terrible of institutions, slavery. And although Tolstoy suffered a crisis of conscience and felt compelled to liberate his serfs, this occurred only as the winds of social change were shifting. As Nietzsche clearly realized, conscience is more a morbid brooding that comes when a particular action cannot be brought before the tribunal of public opinion without condemnation. But what if anxiety can be experienced not only about what is at hand, but also about things which we judge to be foreordained to pass? Could not thought enter into conscience?

The body knows in ways that mind is scarcely even aware of, and, in acting out our thoughts in the environment of the body, we continuously come up against our corporeal limitations. We are never as pure and brave in act as we are in thought. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak, and on entering into intercourse with others, we are never as fully in possession of ourselves as we are within the cocoon of private reflection. But, in employing thought, we receive an insight into the human condition that infuses our moral life with a quality that cannot be found in body, and in the end it leaves us dissatisfied with the legacy of the flesh and longing for something better. In the final analysis, we judge nature to be immoral, and, as with the Greek philosophers of old, the unavoidable conclusion of mind is that it cannot be ruled by instinct.

Nietzsche’s “will to power” is the first thing that comes to mind in illustrating this point. How does one live in such an awareness? If dominance is an irrepressible drive, on the satisfaction of which our psychological, and even physical, health depends, how can we come to any conclusion other than that it is something that we indulge at the expense of others? That life is a zero-sum game is a thought which many probably reject for no other reason than that it is just too terrible. But is not the secret awareness that life comes at the expense of life the insight that propels

all of the world's great religions? Christianity would despair of finding a way out of our earthly circumstances and would seek a solution in the afterlife. Buddhism seeks escape from corporeal necessity, the tyranny of the body and its inevitable suffering, through mental discipline. And is not the recognition of a defect in our nature that which leads liberal democracy to seek a rational escape? And rather than Nietzsche, is it not the liberal democratic solution which is the most radical (Nietzsche, 1886/1989, p. 202)?¹⁷ Is the most radical not this belief that reason will somehow deliver us from unreason, that sightedness into instinct gives us power over it, and that we can institutionalize our way out of what is in reality an inescapable condition of life?

In morality, human existence is processed and served up in terms suitable for public consumption; still, this hardly means that nothing palatable lies underneath. Though private existence may not bear close public scrutiny, and comes up short of our ideals, there is still something there for description that might be termed good. It is most problematic, this stripping of good conduct of moral interpretations to portray it in its naked splendour, but morality must be rooted in the body, because the body is the source of everything genuine. Society is a place where much is kept in discreet darkness, and there might not be any need for light in these places at all if it were not for scepticism. Above all, modern thought is dominated by natural science, and this science is shamefully indiscreet. Because science observes that society at large conceals that which proves to be an embarrassment, science is unconsciously biased towards interpretations that are an embarrassment to society. This is not to say that science is the same as scepticism, but that, in our naïveté, scepticism easily passes itself off as science.¹⁸ Science considers itself objective and free of moral judgment, but it is a community, and, like any community, it has an *ethos*, and it cannot help but pass moral phenomena through the filter of its values.

¹⁷ Nietzsche accepts inequality as an unavoidable condition of life, and if one accepts his "*amor fati*", this makes perfect sense ... to a point. Consider Nietzsche's words: "a good and healthy aristocracy ... accepts with a good conscience the sacrifice of untold human beings who, for its sake, must be reduced and lowered to incomplete human beings." The question is whether institutional inequality is any more natural than institutional equality?

¹⁸ A prime example of "a self-deceiving instinct for belittling man" which tries to pass itself off as science would be behaviourism.

In the absence of moral interpretations – that is, interpretations of phenomena that serve society – other interpretations arise, and much mischief is worked in their name. We benefit from a more nuanced understanding of morality because, for us, thought matters, and in our ignorance we misinterpret the world in ways that justify actions that can, in fact, do us harm. If we, ourselves, do not peek underneath society's petticoats to find what decorum keeps hidden there, we will have to rely on less reliable accounts. Morals are of the surface, and this surface is endlessly manipulated. Those who run afoul of public standards of decency will attempt to cast doubt on their legitimacy, and the world is overrun with those who, having come up short of their ideals, cannot tolerate the sight of themselves, and believe that the best way to rid themselves of their thoughts is to unburden themselves of morality. Although phenomenology cannot support the hypocrisy of idealism, it should not tolerate the slanders of materialism. And, while it may not embrace liberalism, perhaps it can appreciate the danger posed by fascism. Phenomenology has seen through idealism, and, although it cannot accept moral universals, its perspectivism is still the best answer to moral relativism.

Conclusion

Nietzsche would be the first to dispute the sovereignty of mind, but, if mind did not exist as something distinct from body, what we think would not even matter. Much of 20th century philosophy has engaged in the attempt to demonstrate that mind ultimately follows the dictates of body, and, in some ways, this must be true. And at this point, if it is not acceptable for us to speak of thought, then it will be difficult for us to come around to the notion of mind and body in opposition. To assert the independence of mind from body is nevertheless not to dispute the fundamental priority of perception – that mind has no content in itself, and that for thought to think it must employ perceptual givens which are prior to it – but only to hold that, in withdrawal from the world in thought, we are granted sightedness of a different sort. Recognition of mind is not to succumb to the siren call of idealism, but rather to assert that, by a better understanding of mind, we will come to a better appreciation of the role of body.

This is not to argue for an instinctive morality, but simply to contend that our morality has divorced itself from body and that, in it, thought runs roughshod over instinct. Because mind does not know body, in its cold-blooded calculations it often ignores its own

needs, and chooses its own destruction. For example, it could be said that we choose promiscuity because we have lost sight of the human consequences of this behaviour. And yet, man is the animal who sees ahead, and in his projections he lays out a mental picture of the world that he lives in. But this world that he conceives in his mind's eye is a different realm from that which he embodies while out in the world. Thought is always directed at an action to be taken, and in taking possession of the world in thought, the world is stripped of its corporeal elements. When thought turns to morality, it does the same as it does when it turns to nature. It tries to take possession of it and would have it adhere to laws of the mind. When thought turns against public morality, as it often does, it rebels against nature, and this is true whether it seeks to improve on instinct in its ideals or whether it despairs of that possibility and seeks to provide for its material needs.

Our intellectual life has long been a hidden struggle in

which the ideal and material take turns in ascendance; but, in both, human nature is misunderstood. Both the light and the shadows can play tricks on our eyes, and both in the pretensions of the ideal and in the insinuations of scepticism we are in error. This realism that we legislate onto the world is a romanticism of the dark that is just as false as a romanticism of the light. When the ideal becomes our public morality, it – as with everything on stage – is no longer genuine, and this leaves it open to every sort of unkind accusation. Nature is fickle and unjust, and, increasingly, our society is being modelled on its cruelty. And, surrounded on all sides by scepticism, if we are to find any respite from despair, it will be in a secret rebellion against the ways of the world and a resolve to hold onto our ideals. In the end, we must place our ideals alongside the rest of our nobler impulses as things to be kept in the dark. If they are to have any effect on the world among men, they must be things which work from out of the shadows and shun the light.

About the Author



Christopher Pulte received a BA in Phenomenological Psychology from the University of Dallas, and a Master's degree from the University of Texas in Austin. He has since been engaged as a lecturer at Yokohama Soei College in Yokohama, Japan. A lifelong Nietzsche enthusiast, his interests furthermore run both to languages and to a wide range of writers, from Alexis Tocqueville to Ortega Y Gasset.

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