Reason Also Is Choice:
Reflection, Freedom, and the Euthyphro Problem

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January 21, 2002

1 Mechanism and value-positing

Milton’s God says “Reason also is choice” in one of those prickly asides in Paradise Lost in which he curtly replies to a skeptical reader (he is ostensibly addressing the Son, but in fact he is speaking over the Son’s shoulder to us) before rushing on to his main point. There is a “take that” quality about his remark, and a sense, on his part, that it settles the question so thoroughly that he need say no more about it. His immediate argument is that the rebel angels were not constrained by necessity to their revolt, and Adam and Eve will not be constrained by necessity to their fall, and that had either been constrained by necessity to obedience their obedience would have been meaningless, because not free. His subsidiary argument, which is the one that interests me here, is that even if obedience were the only reasonable course, the compulsion of reason is totally unlike the compulsion of necessity, and those who order their conduct as reason requires cannot be said to have sacrificed their freedom, even if reason dictates only one course, because reasons are different from causes, and persuasion by reasons is different from compulsion by causes:

I made him [Adam] just and right,
Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.
Such I created all th’Eternal Powers
And Spirits, both them who stood and them who faild;
Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.
Not free, what proof could they have givn sincere
Of true allegiance, constant Faith or Love,
Where onely what they needs must do, appeard,
Not what they would? what praise could they receive?
What pleasure I from such obedience paid,
When Will and Reason (Reason also is choice)
Useless and vain, of freedom both despoil’d,
Made passive both, had serv’d necessitie,
Not mee.

What does it mean to say that reason also is choice? The claim seems to point to something stronger than to the distinction between causes and reasons, to argue not just that freedom is the ability to follow a law one gives one’s self through reason, but also that the dictates of reason are somehow matters of choice. One is tempted at first to deny that: if reason really declares something, then it’s not a matter of choice, only the conclusion of a train of argument, perhaps in ideal cases the conclusion of a kind of deduction a machine can do. One doesn’t have a choice about two plus two being four, except if one means by “two” and “four” something other than what most people mean. (Lovers often say things like this: one and one is really one, not two.) Reasons may be different from causes, but neither are a matter of choice.
Does one have to imagine moral reasoning as being in crucial ways like calculation? Suppose one imagines moral reasoning (more plausibly) as something less mechanical, as something more phronetic, as something different not only in degree but in kind from calculation. Suppose we conceive of moral reasoning as something in which both thought and feeling are in play, something tied not only to regulative abstractions but also to implicitness (the sense that one’s values are never exhausted by one’s formulations of them and always retain that power to deliver rebuking surprises, despite our cleverness, that Socrates embodied in his *daimon*), and to situatedness (the sense that we can only understand a value in its implicitness once we have played it on the pulse of actual living). Although what the deliverances of a phronetic moral reasoning will be ceases to be totally predictable, even in this case one never quite wants to say that the deliverances of practical reason are subject to choice, else they cease to be deliverances.

On the other hand, a vision of the moral life in which choice does not matter, because reason dictates what one must do down to the smallest details, is in many ways unattractive, partly because the experience of choice is valuable, and partly because moral experiences are only made possible under circumstances where other people are recognized as having freedom. It matters that you love me, for instance, because it is possible that you might not, and unless I have somehow won your free assent what passes between us cannot be called love. Indeed, I can’t really call it love if I am sure that you are driven to me even by *inner* compulsions, never mind by outer ones. Even having persuasive reasons to love someone is a necessary but not sufficient condition of love, since the *choice* of giving one’s self to love is the crucial thing, and if one gives the trump to the reasons one has for loving one is bound to treat love as venal and interested (“I love her because she is good for me”) or a little bit unreal (“When I tallied up her moral attributes, I realized that she would be the person it would be wisest for me to love”). One may have reasons, but one loves from choice, not from reasons, and the gravity and depth of that choice sometimes remains even when the reasons dissipate. It’s easy enough to see in the case of love what it means to say “Reason also is choice,” because in that case reason and choice are so entangled with each other that they are hard to tease apart.

Can we say the same about other areas of moral experience? We think of the moral law as commanding, but we also expect that obedience to that law will be free, and we mean by “free” something stronger than merely “not extorted by threats or seduced by bribes.” We mean that following a moral law realizes expressive possibilities of freedom in the way that falling in love does. Which, again, means that obedience to that law must involve both reason and choice.

When we insist that others follow a course whose morality is clear to us but not to them (let’s suppose that the reasoning is so clear to us that it no longer seems to be a question of choice, for us or anybody else), we not only risk becoming a kind of moral tyrant, we also risk losing that respect for the freedom of others without which we cannot find meaning in our own freedom and in our own moral acts. There is an inevitable tension, which under certain circumstances rises to the level of a stark contradiction, between the fact that it is the work of moral reflection to give binding law, and the fact that the proper element of that reflection (and of that law) is freedom. Although I do not sacrifice my freedom but discover its meaning when I follow a law I have given myself through reason, I cannot exactly say the same thing about the act of imposing that law upon others against those others’ considered judgments. I may reason with myself, but I must persuade others, which is to say that I must woo their own free choice, not merely have at my disposal what seem to me to be trumping arguments for my views (or be able to win a verdict from an impartial spectator, say), and if I neglect the duty of persuading others, it scarcely matters that the reasoning may be sound that supports the course of action I compel them to. The moral life cannot long survive a state of affairs in which reason is not also choice.

But even here there are limits. There must be some positions which we cannot imagine any person reasonably holding, else there is no distinction between accepting the responsibility of persuading (which means also accepting the responsibility of opening one’s self up to persuasion), and accepting at face value any brutality or cruelty some other person proposes, merely because they have so invested themselves in doing it that they can’t be talked out of it; there must always come some occasion where the dictates of practical reason bind the self and demand the compulsion of others, else what we are talking about is neither ethics nor a theory of justice. And once one reaches that line, it would seem that reason no longer also is choice: there is at least one act X such that if you really insist on choosing to do X, you and I will have to engage in a contest of force. All too often, of course, when we draw in the sand the
line of a non-negotiable demand, we do that merely as a way of stiffening our own backs, impressing our allies or constituents, or bluffing down our opponents. But that is not to say that the occasion never arises when a line in the sand must be drawn. And where lines in the sand have to be drawn, we cannot say that reason also is choice.

Imagining that moral reasoning is like deduction might overstate rather than understate its rigidity, since deductions depend upon premises that might seem more neutral than they really are. In that case what practical reason would argue would be a matter of choice, insofar as the deliverances of practical reason reflect one’s choice of postulates. But that kind of choice is a pretty shallow instance of the term choice, and if that is what “Reason is also choice” means, what it means is that there is no reason, only choice. It is to be presumed that no intellectual adult would be satisfied to argue in this kind of circle, to rig up premises from which only the conclusions he or she already desires must follow, but no intellectual adult wishes to be the prisoner of his or her postulates either, particularly when those postulates seem to demand something monstrous. We must seek a way of subjecting our premises to reflection without opening ourselves up to an eternal regress, in which one must tie continuously back either merely to a still deeper level of principle or to an unprincipled act of value-positing. The Rawlsian method of reflective equilibrium, in which conclusions and premises mutually condition and correct each other, promises to free moral reasoning both from a mechanical infinite regress and from value-positing. But it can do this, as we shall see, only by re-imagining what the nature of moral reasoning is, seeing it as something not essentially akin to calculation, and seeing values as something not quite reducible to true propositions about ethical matters.

We have a habit of thinking of reason and choice as opposites. What is true or good or beautiful, if we mean those words with seriousness, is true or good or beautiful without our say-so. There are some circumstances, of course, where we suppose that these things do depend on somebody’s say-so: “You can’t dispute taste . . .” or “That’s what I think is good . . .” or “In New Guinea there exists a people for whom all lies are true and moral . . .” — circumstances, in short, where we have given our reflective powers as hostages over to voluntarism, to emotivism, or to cultural relativism. But when we speak in those ways we are not taking those terms “true, good, beautiful” seriously but treating — as modern academics are trained to do — the true as merely the conventional, the good as merely the polite, and the beautiful as merely the fashionable or the pleasant. If we really take those terms at their worth, we seek a sense of those terms which allows us to be rebuked by them, not a sense which serves our (ulterior or unconscious) ends. We may, of course, not in practice find a specific use of those terms that is free of our temptations to special pleading. But we mean by each of those terms to attend to something that does not depend merely on our choice, because it is the thing that is always in a position to rebuke our choices. One of the reasons we know that there is a difference between conventional and absolute senses of terms like these is that when we discover that one of our own uses of these terms is merely conventional we are disappointed and ashamed, and when we discover that someone else’s use of such a term is merely conventional we expect that person to be taken aback by the disclosure. Indeed, even the wholesale argument that “All values are conventional, and are constructed to serve the impersonal interests of power,” is usually wielded in the service of a devastating moral critique of prevailing mores. But if that claim were really true, it would also have no bite. We can imagine ourselves conceding upon reflection that we were mistaken about whether something was beautiful. If we can at all imagine conceding upon reflection that we were mistaken about whether something was pleasant, we nevertheless imagine a concession that takes place under very different rhetorical circumstances and under very different rules from the concession that we were mistaken about whether something was beautiful or not. Similar arguments can be constructed about aesthetic value and about ethical value.

We think of choice as having little to do with reason. In fact, it is our bad current habit to treat reason in the context of choice as a kind of compulsion: “This is why X must be done” is a disguised way of saying “Do X or else,” and a law is only a command backed up by a threat. Underlying this view is a stupid idea of what freedom is, an idea so characteristic of modern thought that one might call it the contemporary disease: freedom is only the unconstrained, and the only way to prove one’s unconstraint is to be irrational, since rationality of any sort can always be shown to be evidence of constraint. (How many sophomore Philosophy majors, or full Professors of English for that matter, imagine that, having done that trick, they have demonstrated that the categorical imperative is an instrument of repression and tyranny?) The free is a set of choices which make no difference and are guided by nothing — or at least one is not free unless one behaves as if one’s choices were like that.
“Reason also is choice” means two related things: first, that moral reason does not work the way deduction works but works instead the way reflection works, and second, that free choice is not arbitrary selection among indifferent ends, but the discovery, through the elaboration of rules, of the expressive possibilities of freedom. When the will holds itself responsible to a law given to it by reason it does not invent that law at will and it does not internalize a law imposed upon it from without by tutelage or by someone else’s will. At the same time the contents of that law do not declare themselves except in the unfolding of experiences which follow from the act of giving one’s self that law as a law. Values, this is to say, share with persons the attribute of implicitness. Knowing a person is different from knowing all the facts about a person; knowing is a species of recognition, not of cognition, since what what knows when one knows a person is that one will never know them all the way down. The implicitness of persons does not inhere in some set of facts which can’t be discovered but in the sense that knowing those facts deepens rather than forecloses further questions about that person. We know persons by opening ourselves to the experience of unknowing about them; we see someone as a person to the extent that we resist the temptation to see that person as someone whose story is already over. A value has implicitness of the same kind: we know in advance that every conception we formulate of that value is inadequate to its concept, that it will always be saturated with entailments and consequences that we cannot anticipate fully and that will continue to surprise and rebuke us as Socrates’ daimon rebuked him. Values oblige us, but they also remain implicit, and therefore, inexhaustibly, they unfold in ways we can neither anticipate nor satisfy nor evade. The live unfolding of a value from its implicitness, something which happens, as I will describe, at the exact limit of identity, and at the exact limit of will, is also the live experience of moral freedom, that freedom in which reason also is choice.

I don’t want to say, however, that reason and choice come together in the act of discovering one’s inner nature and destiny, for that is merely a way of saying that freedom is the illusion one feels when one fully gives one’s self over to one’s obsessions. And surrendering to one’s obsessions in the final analysis is neither reason nor choice.

The identity of reason and choice is something one aims for but never possesses — we are led to it intuitively by our very act of taking values, real values, seriously, and of imagining those values, those transcendentals, as concepts that inform but are not constrained or defined by what we do on their account. The identity of reason and choice is not a fact in the world or a truth of deduction. It is always not quite here but yet at hand, an intuition which inspires us once we begin to believe that there is a truth, and that we are never even in principle in full possession of that truth, that there is a good, but that at the same time our moral life is still an unsettled question, that there is beauty, but it is not captured in our own private tastes.

I have resisted the idea that freedom is a name for unconditioned arbitrariness because it does not seem to me that freedom and reflection are opposites. Indeed, each is the condition of the other. Any argument which imagines that there is one reason governed by a kind of iron logic and another region in which anything goes ultimately treats freedom in a decisionist way. If, for instance, with Weber I imagine a world rigorously organized by causality, and by instrumental reason (which is simply a redescription of causality in order to render comprehensible a world in which people have strategic intelligence but not practical reason), I place the human being in a world in which there is a complete rationality about the compulsions to which we are subject (and to which we subject others), but no rationality about ultimate ends, about the meaning and purpose of lives. As Gadamer complained about Weber, this methodological rationalism ends in crude irrationalism. But a similar devil’s bargain between rationality and irrationality applies also to the conviction that reflection applies only within some spheres of action and in other spheres reflection does not apply at all. Such an understanding is unfair to reflection (because it imagines it only as a brutally reductive kind of calculation) and unfair to freedom (because it imagines it only as nonsense and white noise). “Reason also is choice” means that people reflect about what they do in every sphere of action, and that reflection is a human assay, a playing on the pulse, of the infinite implicitness of values, not merely calculation from propositions.

2 The Euthyphro Question and the Fragility of Goodness

Milton’s God’s assertion is intended as a sweeping answer to what might be called the “Euthyphro Question,” the question of how much primary values depend upon free acts of will (whether the will of God or the will of the people),
and how much upon abstractions which exercise a compelling force from some depth to which will is irrelevant; it is the question of the vexed relationship between morally certain principle and moral freedom, between a vision of the moral life which imagines it as rational, capable of being captured in binding rules, and a vision of the moral life which turns on human capacities such as loyalty and gratitude, capacities which from a purely rational ethical standpoint seem only to offer temptations to heteronomy, temptations to love one’s own in ways very unlike how one loves humanity, and temptations to love an irascible and human God in a human way, rather than admire a philosopher’s God who contains all the perfections but who seems completely abstract.

When Socrates asks “Is what is pious pious because it is pleasing to the gods, or is it pleasing to the gods because it is pious?” he asks about the role of choice and the role of principle in mores and in morals. If something is pious just because the gods happen to like it, then it does not matter what that thing is; what’s more, we cannot tell in advance what those things will be. And we cannot rule out that the gods might demand something awful (indeed, the fact that that kind of demand is awful is evidence that it is in earnest: we don’t need a command from God to love our children, and it would take a command from God, if even that, to make us kill them). As Abraham learned, if not in Genesis then in Fear and Trembling, what God can demand can be anything, including not only destroying what one rightly loves and has a duty to protect (as Agamemnon was also required to do), but also breaking (as only Abraham had to) what God himself had set up as a law. If, on the other hand, piety is something we can understand a rule about, then piety can be subject to a kind of calculation which would enable us to give laws to the gods: Zeus is supposed to be pleased by this, and it’s his problem if he’s not. (Half of the comedy of Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone comes from the spectacle of Professor Kant lecturing God about what God had jolly well better honor if he wants anybody to think of Him as a proper God.) Indeed, if piety is purely a matter of rule, then there is no reason to imagine anything personal about Zeus at all, and there is no reason to see in piety any relationship to those precious things which have in them anything of the personal, whether values like loyalty and respect, or feelings like love and wonder. And there would be no room in the concept of piety for awe and terror, what Rudolf Otto called the mysterium tremendum et fascinans that seems to be an indispensable part not only of religious feeling but also of a fully human life. To give trumping power to only one side of the Euthyphro question, to argue that value must inhere in rules and that moral reasoning must be like calculation, is to argue that there is no place for these specifically human virtues in moral living.

That values must be applied through phronesis, and that phronesis is an accommodation to situatedness, to the partly heteronomous life we are already leading, is in my view the chief of the critiques of absolute morality proposed by Carol Gilligan in In a Different Voice, and it is to answer a critique like Gilligan’s that I seek to develop the related concepts of implicitness and situatedness. The problem is that situatedness seems to require both a step forward and a step back from absolute morality: it is awfully difficult to tell in particular cases whether the attempt to situate a moral theme is the attempt to play it on the pulse, or is merely the attempt to qualify away its prophetic criticism of practices by insisting upon maintaining an inside view of local mores. In the first case, one seeks the good, but seeks to deepen one’s allegiance to the good by bringing nuance to one’s understanding of it. In the second case, one seeks to abandon the good in favor of the nice by invoking the power of affiliation and connectedness in ways that are not far different from special pleading. The still unsolved problem raised by Gilligan’s book is that special pleading and respect for nuance are almost impossible to tell apart. My argument that the theme of situatedness is a consequence of the deeper theme of implicitness is an attempt to work out a solution to that problem: we must see our values in situated ways because crucial things about our values will always remain unknown to us in explicit abstract examinations of them, and examining them in situated ways is likely to bring to light some of the unarticulated features of our values, is likely to surprise us with what we didn’t know we were already committed to. That said, the theme of implicitness does not provide us with more than a rough and phronetic guide to telling the difference between respect for nuance and relativist special pleading.²

Gilligan’s argument about situatedness is related to the critique of Enlightenment ethics proposed by philosophers of the Romantic era. Gilligan’s critique of Lawrence Kohlberg’s stages of moral development is similar to Herder’s critiques of d’Holbach and Helvetius, in that both find the generality and abstractness to which their opponents are committed in some way brutalizing and less than fully human.³ Moral commitments at the highest level of abstraction,
while removed from special pleading and partiality, are too bare a thing to support a livable moral life: one does not
love humanity with the same warmth that one loves one’s family, or even one’s country, since one loves humanity only
in a rather skeletal way, but one loves family or country in flesh and blood ways (except if one abstracts one’s country,
in the fashion of high nationalism, which is inconsistent with love of country although sometimes hard to tell from
it — Virgil’s patria, Willa Cather reminds us in an aside in My Antonia, is his neighborhood, not his nation, obscure
Mantua rather than world-historical Rome).

The attachments that most matter to us ethically are not attachments that are the product of rationality anyway:
one does not love Dogs the way one loves Toto, and when Toto dies one can’t quite replace him with Lulu, even if
Lulu is a better dog in every way. Such an attachment only has ethical meaning because of its slight irrationality, and
to attempt to find a rational basis for it is to compromise fatally its importance.

Gilligan, like Herder (and like Martha Nussbaum), proposes to put flesh on the bones of moral convictions by
seeing them in the context of dense networks of affiliations. Both, in so doing, run the risk of using affiliation to
stampede judgment. Certainly the ideal of country that Herder invokes — I don’t use “nation” because “nation”, as
Benedict Anderson argues, turns out to be a possessing abstraction, not a network of local affiliations — has turned out
more often than not to be what people invoke when they wish to engage in special pleading of a more or less obviously
immoral sort, and even these concrete local affiliations keep sliding into horrifying abstractions, country into nation,
stittlichkeit into heteronomy, gemeinschaft into volk. Even internally fractured, self-consciously fictive, social-energy-
circulating, and restless self-undoing postmodern conceptions of the social frame resolve themselves under pressure
into drearily familiar forms of identity politics and loyalty politics, often in the very face of the explicit intentions
of the authors who develop those conceptions. The insistence upon seeing one’s values in a situated way slides all
too easily into the insistence on “me first, and people like me first, too.” There is no immediate and obvious way
of telling the difference between local attachments that are simply heteronomous, that cloud the moral judgment by
throwing loyalty politics and tribal identity politics in the eye, and local attachments that are the necessary furniture and
equipment through which moral commitments may be realized. One might treat with less suspicion local attachments
that make global promises — as for instance when deutero-Isaiah makes special claims for Israel, but makes those
claims not on the basis of simple tribal loyalty but on the basis of a redemptive mission aimed at everyone. But even
though the ethos of deutero-Isaiah is more attractive than the “kill the Amalekites because God commands it” morality
he displaces, one still has to be on guard against redemptive missions that have too coercive a feel: If I say that “all men
shall be brothers, and it is my mission to make them so,” you have reason to worry about what I will do, particularly
if I turn out to be in the habit, as we Americans all too often are, of making all men brothers at gunpoint.

A similar argument for concrete and contingent attachments not already given by reason is made by Martha Nuss-
baum in The Fragility of Goodness. Non-fragile goodness, such as in their different ways Kant and Plato strive after
(in Nussbaum’s reading of them), are also in some way non-human. Esteem for non-fragile goodness underestimates,
in her view, the tragic complexities of moral experience, because those who strive after durable forms of the good, in
their quest to provide an account of the moral life which enables them to solve all imaginable cases of moral conflict
(a rule by which one can reliably determine what is pious, for instance), produce a stunted and foreshortened account
of the entailments of different entangled allegiances (entangled allegiances such as one feels if one seeks to do what
pleases the many gods with their many different ideas of what is pleasing — the burden of Greek tragedy, although it
is treated only as a matter of low comedy in the Euthyphro).

The two arguments (that non-fragile visions of the good are non-human and brutalizing, and that non-fragile visions
of the good provide a false account of human allegiances to incommensurable values) do not necessarily imply each
other, since there is no necessity to the claim that high abstractions must be expected to sort with each other. Isaiah
Berlin, no less than Nussbaum, argued that we have no reason to believe that all of our key values sort with each other,
but that did not necessitate for him a retreat to a lower level of abstraction in which one cannot tell situated allegiances
from heteronomous ones. (And he was not driven by this recognition, as, say, Sartre was, to embrace an ethos of
value-posting.) Nor do we have any reason to believe that respect for the fragility of goodness will make our behavior
in the moral or political world less brutal. To recognize that we are always caught in a tangle of opposed demands and
that those demands are so embedded in situatedness that it is nearly impossible to get an abstract purchase on them
without playing them false may give us a more accurate sense of what it is to be human in a fragile and multifarious world, but it will not make tragic conflicts less tragic or in practice less brutal, since in concrete conflicts the narcissism of small differences has proven just as bloody as the titanic clash of opposed or mutually unintelligible world-views, particularly since closely-related cultures struggling over ways of being (to say nothing of water and land), know each other well enough to see each other with the kind of contempt that continued experience of each other only further ratifies. The hard part for such peoples’ is not to dispel their ignorance of each other but to get past their knowledge, since neither may know the whole story, but what they know of each other is in each case true enough and bad enough. Situatedness of Nussbaum’s kind may tempt one to see a conflict in terms of concrete allegiances — to “our kind” and against “their kind” — in ways which obscure rather than clarify the stakes of the moral tragedy, since if one knows that one’s claims are really only intelligible within the horizon of one’s own kind one still has no reason not to favor one’s own kind over any other. If we are ever going to stop killing each other, there has to be some way that you can show me that what I want to do to you really is wrong, and not just relatively. Hostility to the pretensions of world views with universalizing ambitions seemed to be an intellectual hallmark of the late years of the Cold War, when a little doubt about whether one really had God on one’s side might well have made one hesitate before pushing that big red button. In an era of vicious little ethnic conflicts like our own the idea that values are context dependent seems a lot less attractive.

Nussbaum also ties the quest for non-fragile good to the quest for a coherent notion of personal identity, which defines its integrity in its hard-spheres separateness from others; attention to the fragility of goodness is in her view a way of attesting to a less egocentric notion of identity, one which discovers its nature in investments and relatedness. Again, the necessity of the connection between a quest for a regulative abstraction and a hard-spheres notion of personal identity eludes me: Nussbaum can connect them by plausible retrospects made more plausible by the mid-1980’s hostility to both the concept of a stable and coherent personal identity and to the concept of regulative abstractions with absolute force, but this still seems to me more a case of guilt by association than of genuine necessity, and the relation of the themes could have plausibly been worked out in far different ways. And to lament the coldness and foreshortenedness of the available abstractions is not to make allegiance to the available concrete affiliations any less heteronomous in character. The constellation of antifoundationalist relativism about the incommensurability of values, hostility to the idea of the coherent and autonomous self, and attraction to heteronomous communitarianism, seemed a tightly connected one to thinkers of the 1980s, but in fact all three themes are independent; they appear bound together tightly only if situatedness is the deepest theme about values, but if, as I argue, situatedness is a practical consequence of implicitness, each theme is susceptible of a different development from the one that seemed so inevitable fifteen years ago.

Perhaps what tied these views together is the fact that they were the systematic inversions of the values of Ronald Reagan and his party: pugnacious and acquisitive individualism, dogmatism, and global ambition.

The repeated play in the history of philosophy between a quest for a regulative abstraction and the human warmth of situatedness — what Rawls calls “reflective equilibrium” — is an attempt to take both sides of the “Euthyphro question” (or for that matter both sides of the tension between Plato and Aristotle in play in Raphael’s famous painting “The School of Athens”) seriously. The traffic back and forth between the sides of the question resembles the traffic back and forth in levels of diction in the poetry of European languages. Poetic diction repeatedly travels in a circle, moving alternately up to a highly stylized speech to frame a sweeping vision of the work of poetry, and returning down to the language of common speech to be revivified by the lifeworld. The sacred texts of many cultures — ancient Israel, India, Russia, medieval Western Europe — are written in a special language no longer learned as the mother tongue of daily life. Public life, in Walter Ong’s account of it, requires access to the language of intuitive knowing-how into which long intimacy initiates one, what he calls the “mother tongue,” and the public, formal, and distanced language of critique, what Ong, with the culture of learned Latin in mind calls the “father tongue.” (Stuart Hampshire, independently, uses in Innocence and Experience, a similar metaphor — knowledge of a moral first language and knowledge of a moral second language — to describe the mutual dependence of a world of intuitive moral habits and a world of explicitly developed moral arguments.) Poetry too, in its moments of highest ambition, likewise invents for itself a formal language — such as Milton’s latinate non-English, or the high abstraction of Stevens. And poetry
also makes repeated returns to the springs of the vulgar tongue, as when Dante and Chaucer and Luther created new literary languages from the resources of their mother tongues, or when Wordsworth, or Whitman, or Ginsberg, each thinking they were doing something novel, repeated the same act. But in returning to the springs of the vulgar tongue, no poet does not transform that tongue into a new occasion for a special language for high aspirations. Harold Bloom points out, for instance, that for all Whitman’s insistence that he uses the language he hears about him, nobody writes in a more idiosyncratic and for that matter more hieratic style than Whitman does. Poetry moves back and forth, in Wallace Stevens’ phrase, between “the imagination’s Latin and the lingua franca et jocundissima.” The stakes, and the rewards, and the consequences, of these circulations in poetry are similar to those in philosophy.

The desire to honor the power of local affiliations may lead one in the direction of Burkean conservatism, which offers at least that one might be able to free one’s self the idea-madness which is completely imprisoned by its own take upon its obsessing abstractions and cannot see that when it has deduced some horrible consequence from those abstractions it is not duty-bound to carry them through. But this same conservatism pays for that sanity by imprisoning itself in unreflected allegiances. If what genuine freedom we enjoy must ineluctably seek a basis in reflection, this style of conservatism sacrifices that freedom; it buys warmth and safety at the price of conformity and loyalty politics.

But Burkean conservatism is not the inevitable or only course that that desire to honor local investments can motivate. For while it is possible to be invested in one’s own folkways so completely that one cannot imagine the case of others in other conditions, it is also possible that those investments can have a broadening rather than a narrowing effect: if I love my family it might seem reasonable for me to recognize that others love their own and therefore that they should not be made to sacrifice them to my family’s advantage, or perhaps even to the interests of Humanity (if one ever understands such a thing clearly). If I love my country I can possibly be brought to see that other people love theirs as well. I may never have a sufficiently lively appreciation of their condition to enable me to stand in their place. But I may have a lively enough sense of the vulnerability of my own position to know what I should hesitate to ask of them.\(^5\)

Rawlsian Liberalism is often understood as if it were motivated by a doctrine of the person which requires one to imagine that one is without affiliations: the liberal citizen is a generic person, on this reading, not a flesh and blood human with powerful attachments to fragile things. This is Sandel’s famous argument from *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, and the fact that it issues from a thorough misreading of *A Theory of Justice* has somehow not, in the current cultural milieu, prevented Sandel’s charge from sticking, perhaps because Sandel’s real target is not Rawls at all but a cruder although more common form of liberal culture and politics. The argument resembles the attack on Liberalism from the cultural left in the 1980’s in the name of “difference,” which treats Liberalism as a form of cultural homogenization which assimilates and evaporates humanly dense affiliations into a deracinated consumer culture. But it also resembles the attack on Liberalism from the cultural right, from Donald Davidson, say (the poet Donald Davidson, not the philosopher), or Wilmoore Kendall, in the 1950’s, which argued, for instance, that the price of remodeling the social ills of the South would be to destroy its southernness, creating a culture in which all American places are as alike and as sterile as their airports. While cultural homogenization is a force to be reckoned with and has a high cost, it is not the necessary consequence of Liberalism, and the generic person is not the ideal liberal citizen. (Properly speaking, cultural homogenization is a consequence of modernization, and modernization and Liberalism are not necessarily the same thing, as the recent history of China should demonstrate.)

The Rawlsian original position, in which one is required to imagine one’s self as standing behind a veil of ignorance which prevents one from knowing one’s specific place in a society one is examining (even as one knows what the range of possible places in that society are), is, these writers forget, only an imaginative construction, not a description of an ideal of human nature. From behind the veil of ignorance, we know that actual human beings are densely situated in affiliations; all we are prohibited from knowing is which affiliations will be our own. Rawlsian Liberalism neither requires nor promotes the homogenization of culture in the service of an ideal of abstract, generic citizenship. It requires only that one recognize that others are as attached to their own ways of doing things as we are to ours. (If there is a better way of putting respect for cultural difference into practice, I’d like to know what it is.) It does not require us to have no affiliations, no convictions, no history. It only requires us not to treat those things as stampeding obsessions in our dealings with each other. (This is not to say that Rawlsian Liberalism is or ought to be a doctrine
that is universally tolerant: it cannot tolerate views which can only be maintained by the repressive use of state power, at least if those who maintain those views are in a position to make good their demand for that repressive power.)

3 Rationality as Repression

Another matter at stake in the “Euthyphro question,” the question of whether at the deepest stratum our common moral and political life stands upon grounded principles or upon ungrounded choices, is the role of philosophy as a guide to life, as the love of wisdom. Both of the obvious alternative answers to the Euthyphro question are for different reasons unsavory. The examined life is a life in which one’s courses have passed through the refining flame of reflection, and the alternative seems to be a life dominated by power or by special pleading. But the examined life shades into the calculated life, the life that James Mill tried to impose upon his son and which John Stuart Mill found impossible to lead as a human being; rationality frees us from the tutelage authority imposes upon us, but rationality itself seems to have a brutalizing side, a side captured in Dickens’ Professor Gradgrind or Blake’s Urizen. Whatever wisdom is, it must be responsible both to principle and to freedom, both to regulative ideas and to the human lifeworld. Whatever wisdom is, it involves the recognition that the reasonable and the rational are not always the same.

For example: if, to protect ourselves from sophistry and illusion, we had indeed committed to the flames all of the books that David Hume told us to burn at the end of the Inquiry, we would have reason to complain of rationality as redeeming its promise of liberation only by inventing new varieties of repression, what Adorno and Horkheimer call the Dialectic of Enlightenment. One of the reasons we are so often driven to the distinction between wisdom and knowledge, or the related distinction between reasonableness and rationality, is that we do not want to suppose that the commitments reflection imposes upon us are so specific that experience cannot open us to new possibilities. One resists for similar reasons the supposition that the respect we owe to those who have taken other courses of life is only the respect we owe to those who have taken other courses of life is only the respect we owe to those unfortunate enough not to have had all of our advantages.

To concede that one must walk in another person’s shoes if one wishes to have the knowledge one needs to judge their acts is to concede that rules are not in themselves sufficient to provide a moral account for all of the practices of life, and that a fully human life cannot be plumed by constructions from first principles. But to make that concession is not to make the further concession that no course of action can be judged and that wherever constructions from first principles do not suffice all things are indifferently permitted and indifferently respectable. If the demand of rationality is for a world in which there is one area to which rationality applies (and therefore in which all questions are already decided, although we may not yet have come to know what that decision is), and another area to which rationality does not apply (and therefore in which anything goes), then it is fair to say that the demand of rationality is for a habit of life that is not the life of reasonable people.

To divide the world into one region, where our proper conduct is declared with apodictic certainty, and another region, where we are free because our actions in that region can only be arbitrary, is to get the nature of moral freedom exactly backwards. To see how wrong this is, we need to remind ourselves of what the great promise of the Enlightenment was, the promise of release from tutelage by public use of reason that Kant described in “What is Enlightenment?” Reason liberates even or rather especially when it proclaims law. For one thing, our sense of what we are required to do has a claim on us because it is at least in part the issue of a process of free reflection; the deliverances of practical reason have power because, ideally, left to ourselves and freed from the ulterior compulsions of Priest, King, Need, and Desire, we ultimately come to those deliverances under our own power. And for another thing, ethical rules seek also to express, not to repress, moral freedom, in the way the rules of prosody open new expressive possibilities in poetry or institutions like marriage seek to make possible a more variegated and meaningful experience of love and passion.

The founding claim of Liberalism is the claim Kant makes in “What is Enlightenment?” that convictions must arise from reasonable grounds rather than from tutelage. Reasonable grounds liberate because they enable one to construct an alternative to the dikta of those in power as the origin of conviction and the motor of action. Reasonable grounds are liberating to the extent that grounds for action depend upon something other than a big Somebody’s ipse dixit. (And that Big Somebody can as well be King Mob as King George. It can even be my needs and desires, if I am alone with
them an inclined to give them the upper hand. Someone who is, after all, capable of anything, is not really somebody who is free but somebody who just can’t help himself.) It is only because it depends upon something — reason — that enlightenment can provide an alternative to power’s *ipse dixit*. If reason did not dictate (if strong relativism applied rather than, say, pragmatism), there would be no alternative to the say-so of the strong, and conviction or action would be the outcome of a contest of force among authorities who have no common unit of measure other than force. Strong relativism is not only not a necessary part of Liberalism, it is a principle actively hostile to Liberalism.

Are the collective conformities of a culture merely a version of the *ipse dixit* imposed by force — a kind of tutelage we do not recognize as such because we have internalized it? Sometimes yes, of course, it can’t be denied. But clearly that claim itself cannot wholly arise from tutelage. Which means that there are some claims that arise from reason and are not merely the internal reflections of tutelage. And this in turn means that the burden is on those who would claim that a particular argument X is only the product of tutelage to show that it is so, given that X in other ways can be adduced from grounds that one would otherwise find persuasive. (In other words, to argue, against X, that it is merely the product of tutelage because *every* such proposition is the product of tutelage is empty.) If you attack all grounds in general as the product of tutelage (in the manner of ideology critique) your position is no longer a reasonable critique of X but a general refusal to engage in reasonable dispute. All in all that’s a suicidal procedure, and one that one only engages in if one makes one’s self a secret exception to its force.

Liberalism combines the Enlightenment faith in reason as a liberator with a sense, derived from the state of affairs at the close of the wars of religion, that matters of faith should not be subject to state compulsion because nothing done under state compulsion can possibly count as faith. This claim at first seems in some tension with the Enlightenment faith in reason, since reason after all does dictate (and may possibly dictate to the state that certain religious tenets are dangerous to the health of the state), and faith also, whatever it is, is not something which reason can develop from within reason’s own first principles, which is not to say that religious considerations are in every case and in every respect irrational. These two moments within the heritage of Liberalism, religious toleration and respect for the regulative power of reason, need not starkly contradict each other, since on the one hand one need not imagine faith as something about which reflection has nothing at all to say (as if it were a species of demonic possession or hysteria which can be tolerated only in the way other irrationalities can be tolerated, which is to say, only so long as it makes no difference to anything), and on the other it is not necessary to view respect for reason as requiring that it plumb every aspect of life with constructions from first principles. Indeed, the kind of rationality which could not coexist with faith (or at least with many kinds of faith) is the repressive kind, the kind which confuses the examined life with the calculated one. (This strain of enlightenment thinking was after all strong enough to richly deserve the rebuke Schleiermacher delivered to it in *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*.) But enlightened reasonableness can leave plenty of room for actual living, and need not treat what goes on in that room as arbitrary and so permissible (but only to the extent that it is trivial). Enlightened reasonableness differs from exhaustive calculation in that it can broadly recognize significant and non-trivial areas of spontaneity, one of which is the world of faith.

Tocqueville pointed out that in France respect for the regulative power of reason and repressive secularism — What Rawls calls “Comprehensive Liberalism,” which, in an imperial manner, demands not only liberal politics but liberal economics, liberal religion, and liberal forms of social association — ran together, because the force of the State Religion meant that liberalism had to be ant clerical and the clerks had to be antiliberal. But Tocqueville pointed out that the situation was dramatically different in the Jacksonian United States, where disestablishment gave the heterogeneous religious communities in the United States freedom from state repression by a dominant confession, and that gave those communities in turn an investment in democracy. The different faiths had to insist upon toleration and repress the other faiths. But the mutual support of democracy and religion Tocqueville found went beyond this merely practical consideration. Because it required different faiths to work out a *modus vivendi* with each other, the religious freedom secured by disestablishment was a school for political freedom generally. In return, disestablishment gave vitality to the religious life, freeing it from that staleness which seems to be an inevitable feature of state religion.

State religions, because they are instruments of state power, are subject to all of the resentments and mixed feelings
the people may have about state power. Even in purely religious concerns state religion cannot avoid having about it an air of coercion, and coercion is as deadly to faith as it is to love. In giving up the devil’s bargain of state religion, American religions gained both cultural prestige and spiritual vitality. Disestablishment ironically even turned out also to enable free religions to play political roles — as pressure groups, whether for voting rights for African Americans or against abortion rights for women — that state religions cannot play so skillfully. For one thing, Tocqueville argued, American religions help shape the mores necessary to sustain a democratic culture. Also, the institutional structures of disestablished religions provide some of the most important of the voluntary associations in which citizens learn those arts of dealing with each other and organizing common enterprises that are so crucial to democratic political life.

Where Tocqueville found in France that anticlericalism and hostility to religion were versions of the same thing, he found in America that anticlericalism was not only not antireligious but was in a foundational way religious, since anticlericalism both arose from and supported the respect for inward freedom upon which faith depends. Anticlericalism, this is to say, turned out to be a way of insisting upon the prophethood of all believers, and its provenance is as much in the radical Reformation as in the Enlightenment. This enabled religions in American to view toleration not as a second-best solution, with which they would have to suffice themselves in the absence of the ability to control the repressive machinery of the state, but as a first-best solution, as a way of religious life that was not available to state religions at all. What Tocqueville describes would seem to be limited to Protestant circles, but it has had profound effects on every religious tradition in the United States. Not least is the whiff of antinomianism that surrounds the personal religious lives of many Americans even from religious traditions far removed from the theologies of the Reformation, and the arminianism and perfectionism that are endemic in the practical faith of laymen even in those churches ostensibly most theologically committed to Calvinism. This shared inward turn underlies Harold Bloom’s remark in *The American Religion* that serious lay Americans have more religiously in common with each other than they do with their own co-religionists in other countries.

## 4 Crucial moral experiences and the limit of the will

It is not merely because it is a valid deduction from first principles we accept that a moral demand is compelling upon us; the force of a moral demand is not merely that it is valid but that it has a claim on us, and it has that claim upon us because it issues from our own freedom, and is so deeply rooted in our freedom that we cannot be ourselves or be free unless we meet that claim. The force of a moral claim is not merely “this proposition is valid; do therefore as it recommends.” The force of a moral claim is its ability to make us say, “Here I stand; I can do no other.” To say that the compelling force of a moral claim is different from the validity of an ethical proposition is not to say that moral compulsion is arbitrary, is the end product of what is ultimately rather amoral decisionism. For the ability to stand reflection is a necessary if not sufficient condition of moral compulsion. And the compulsion itself is not merely something arbitrary, like demonic possession or obsession. But the compulsion of a moral idea is still something far different from agreement with a proposition or recognition that a deduction is valid.

When a pious Jew keeps the halakhic laws, he or she comes to a deeper consciousness of the meaning of Judaism, and exercises the kinds of religious choice which would not have been available without submission to the Law. The refinement of the law is the refinement of the expression of piety, and the refinement of freedom, too, since it enables one to express things which, lacking the refinements of the law, one could not have expressed because one lacked the means of expression. Law enriches the field of distinctions from which expression derives, and each new layer of distinctions makes possible further layers of distinction and the richly articulated piety which those further distinctions make possible.

The compelling force of a moral idea is like the compelling force of love or of faith. It is compelling because it is an expression of freedom — not merely of the fact that we are free, but of the meaning of that freedom. The compelling force of a moral idea is not something that is totally beyond the will, but it is also not something that is totally subject to it. It arises neither from within nor from beyond the will: like all crucial things that have the air of a calling about them, it arises at the exact limit of the will. The most central moral experiences — falling in love, going through a religious conversion, discovering one’s profession — are as much things that happen to one as things
that one does. They are certainly not only things one does after calculating the alternatives, and indeed one would begin to doubt such an experience if it were too completely the subject of choice, as one doubts the act of someone who chooses to fall in love with someone just because that person’s love would be good for him. At the same time, one also doubts this kind of experience if it is obviously unreflected upon — as one doubts religious conversions that look too much like guilty obsessions or doubts whether the story is really all about love when his neurosis and her neurosis get up on their hind legs together and howl. A calling vitalizes the will, but it cannot itself be willed; it cannot be summoned up by main force, and its deliverances, however surprising, never seem arbitrary in retrospect but keep revealing new ways in which they are all of a piece.

This is not to say that callings are utterly unresponsive to the will. I can sometimes acquire a taste, over the long term, for instance, and certain kinds of spiritual exercise intensify and shape and differentiate the experience of faith. (Indeed, without such exercises, faith tends to remain amorphous and flabby and begins to lose its seriousness as faith.) The morally crucial things both are and are not chosen, both are and are not reflected upon, both are and are not prepared for. They happen, as I say, at the exact limit of the will, because they don’t happen without the will, but the will itself cannot make them happen by main force any more than you can will yourself to sleep by gritting your teeth and trying.

James’ paradoxical concept of the Will to Believe captures the sense in which deep exercises of the will happen at the will’s exact limit. What is the Will to Believe? Clearly it is not just a main-force overbearing of the intellect by the feelings: “I will believe X, damn it all, despite what I believe” (or: “You will love me, and of your own free will, damn it”). But willing one’s self into belief (perhaps by clicking one’s ruby slippers three times) isn’t really what William James meant by that term anyway. James was concerned to provide an alternative to W. K. Clifford’s evidentialism, which would have narrowed what one can affirm to a compass so small that the life lived on its basis would not be a human one. The question was not one of willing one’s self into a state of belief from a state of unbelief but was rather one of not rejecting beliefs out of hand simply because they are not already beyond question. James doesn’t seek to whip up belief from air. He seeks to restrain the empiricist habit of mind from laying waste to the human personality, to give one’s self license to follow out an intuition into belief (whose force one already feels) in order to see where it leads.

One of the attractions of the account of moral obligation I have been developing, which roots the power of moral obligation in a calling to make actual the meaning of one’s freedom, a calling which takes place at the limit of the will, is that it resolves one of the vexing questions of eighteenth-century philosophy, the question of whether the ground of morals is in the feelings or in the judgment. The Hutchesonian view, which grounds ethical impulses not in the feelings as such (not in mere pleasure, say) but in a special sort of pleasure one derives from benevolence, is that it explains why moral obligation has a specifically human warmth, is not merely the outcome of complex calculation. The price of this view is a concession that ethical impulses are reflexive rather than reflective, that doing good gives us pleasure just because it happens to do so, and there is no moral logic as to why one thing is good and another bad, although there may be a biological logic which only by the accident of pre-arranged harmonies produces the outcomes ethical argument proper would demand. The opposing view, a view associated with Thomas Reid, grounds morals in judgments, which offers the possibility of opening moral processes to the examination of critical reflection, but which can only incidentally explain the depth of moral claims. (It’s no accident that my account of this eighteenth century debate about ethics presents views that resemble one side or the other of the Euthyphro problem, with the attribute of “causing happiness” standing in the formal position of “being pleasing to the gods” in the Euthyphro, and the attribute of “being virtuous” standing in the formal position of “being pious.”)

The Kantian view, which grounds ethics in an understanding of freedom itself, is able to be responsible to both sides of the question, even if in Kant’s own exposition in the Critique of Practical Reason his own views seem closer to Reid’s than to Hutcheson’s. Kant’s romantic heirs, especially Schlegel and Schleiermacher, inflect the same equilibrium in the other direction. Kant speaks to both sides in the great chant, poetic even in translation, that opens the conclusion to the Critique of Practical Reason:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not merely
conjecture them and seek them as though obscured in darkness or in the transcendent region beyond my horizon: I see them before me, and I associate them directly with the consciousness of my own existence. The former begins at the place I occupy in the external world of sense, and it broadens the connection in which I stand into an unbounded magnitude of worlds beyond worlds and systems of systems and into the limitless times of their periodic motion, their beginning and their continuance. The latter begins at my invisible self, my personality, and exhibits me in a world which has true infinity but which is comprehensible only to the understanding — a world with which I recognize myself as existing in a universal and necessary (and not only, as in the first case, contingent) connection, and thereby also in connection with all those visible worlds. The former view of a countless multitude of worlds annihilates, as it were, my importance as an animal creature, which must give back to the planet (a mere speck in the universe) the matter from which it came, the matter which is for a little time provided with vital force, we know not how. The latter, on the contrary, infinitely raises my worth as that of an intelligence by my personality, in which the moral law reveals a life independent of all animality and even of the whole world of sense — at least so far as it may be inferred from the purposive destination assigned to my existence by this law, a destination which is not restricted to the conditions and limits of this life but reaches into the infinite.

We traditionally ask two contradictory things of moral commitments, things that tie them on the one hand to feelings and on the other to ideas. Feelings are not subject to will, but can be shaped by will. Of them we ask whether they are genuine, although that is a question that immediately places us in quandaries, because we don’t know how to assure ourselves of an answer to that question. Ideas by contrast are subject to critique, examination, thought: I can determine whether they are right or wrong, sense or nonsense, and so on, and I can rationally affirm or deny them. I ask about an idea not whether it is genuine but whether it is correct, whether it has grounds reason might respect.

Values seem to partake at once of feelings and of ideas. They have an inward quality—say “allegiance”—about which we can ask the question of whether it is genuine or not. And they have an outer quality — call it “truth” — about which we can ask whether it is correct or not. Adhering to one’s values both is and is not an act of will. A value does not simply seize the mind in an unmediated way. It is not something like demonic possession (always the unbeliever’s idea of what belief looks like). Indeed, I want to say about values that it is possible to be “partially invested” in them — to try them on, to see how they look, to see how the world looks illuminated in their light. Moral imagination is after all the ability to enter seriously if provisionally into other conditions, and exercising that imagination is the ethical work we expect art to enable us to do. It is possible to have some distance upon one’s values — distance enough at least to weigh different developments of them which all claim derivation from the same value concept, if not to enable us to enter moral worlds that are entirely foreign.

The double aspect of value — its affinity to feeling on the one hand and to thought on the other — is like the double aspect of legitimacy in politics, its affinity to will and consent on one hand and to judgment and integrity on the other.

Values as thoughts require the kind of analysis which sees human beings as purposive: we have ends, a telos, we act from grounds. But values-as-feelings tie us to the world of causality: we are driven by urges behind which we cannot go. When I treat the values of others merely as feelings, I manipulate them (“Use only positive images to shape the young,” or “If I change how people represent I change how they think.”). When I treat the values of others a thoughts, I reason with them. But neither reasoning nor manipulation quite captures what I mean by a living confrontation with one’s own values. (Political dealmaking, in fact, comes closer to it than either.)

When I treat values as thoughts, I ignore their necessary connection to felt life — a felt life that is in some ways prior to thought. The felt aspect of values is their tie to identity. Values are felt as mine in ways I do not necessarily think of propositions as mine. They tie to a “hot” sense of identity, to those things that seemed to be already part of me before I became fully aware of them (and of me), to the sense that my experience in some way that evades analysis is all of a piece and has meaning. A particular feeling may be fleeting. But a structure of feeling is not fleeting but more stable even than a thought, since a proposition is likely to be knocked over by the first person with a better argument. Values are lived-through, both in thought and in feeling. The “thought-through” aspect of values is their tie to a
considered identity, the “best self” we shape through reflection and analysis of our feelings. And the “felt-through” aspect of values is their sense that they belong together and are inevitable and inescapable. (They project this feeling of belonging together and of inevitability even when they are in fact in conflict with other equally inevitable values that seem to belong to the whole of our experience. The feeling that they all hang together is part of our investment in them, but that they provoke this feeling in no way means that they really do hang together.)

We usually think of sentiment as momentary and changeable. By contrast we think of rationality — and particularly of rational arguments, as less changeable, as more solid and more definite than mere sentiments. But rational agreements change under pressure of persuasion and circumstance. And although individual feelings are momentary, the drift of our feelings is much less so because it arises from the nature of my sensibility itself. The specific feelings I happen to entertain towards my mother (say) may change moment by moment from love to amusement to anger to longing. But the drift of those feelings remains the same as long as I am myself. This stratum of feeling is deeper and more stable than any rational agreement and often provides grounds for a critique of rational agreements. I can be talked into foolish agreements, perhaps, but it is harder to change the nature of my fundamental attachments. (This is why it is common for thinkers of the nineteenth century to ground democracy not upon rational judgments but upon structures of feeling that seem to stand behind and beyond as well as beneath rationality — when they speak of filial piety, or religion, or culture, or history, it is something like this they have in mind. They are as aware as Herder is that it is things like these that make moral commitments human, and they mean those things to be heteronomous or stampedingly sub-intellectual no more than Herder does.)

These morally crucial experiences that take place at the limit of the will may be non-propositional in nature. At the end of the Tractatus Wittgenstein describes how someone who has gone through a period of spiritual crisis which has resolved itself will often be unable to point to what that experience taught. What it taught may be shown, but it cannot be said. If such a person did put the meaning of the experience into words, he or she may well say something that probably could have been said just as well beforehand. Born-again Christians, for instance, knew and believed all the same things before their key experiences that they know and believe afterwards, but somehow their relationship to what they know has been changed by their experiences. Such a person does not believe anything that he or she did not believe before, but he or she lives in a different world. Something of the same sort happens when one inwardly experiences a renewal in an emotional relationship of long standing. This does not mean that one has not really learned anything, only that it is something that cannot be directly articulated in propositions. Nor does it merely mean that one’s emotions are aroused, that were quiescent. If I suddenly see something in my world with new clarity, I do not merely feel inspired; I feel in the presence of something that is worth the inspiration. If I lose that sight — the experience Coleridge describes in “Dejection: An Ode” — what I have lost is not merely access to the richness of my own feelings, but access to the non-propositional meaning that would have been the occasion of those feelings.

Consider the person who says, “Since I became ill with cancer, I have discovered that life, that this world, is wonderful, and I have learned to love it more deeply.” Is this discovery the discovery of a propositional truth? Certainly not. What the speaker has discovered is something he or she never disagreed with, or if he or she did, then it wasn’t an argument or a piece of evidence that changed the belief. That person has not come upon an argument but has opened to an experience, has discovered an existential, not a propositional, truth. Yet our most morally crucial experiences — and some of the grounds for the respect we have for each other as persons — arise from these non-propositional grounds. A similar sense of this inarticulate but urgent pressure of something meaningful inheres in all deep experiences. Something of this is what Emerson means by “being alive in the present.” It is this presence, not merely an emotional lift, which Emerson describes in his famous passage in Nature about crossing the bare common, in snow-puddles, and suddenly seeing himself as part and parcel of God.

Non-propositional experiences of meaning are not totally beyond argument, but they are not the creatures of argument. Arguments can provide the occasion, if not the substance, of such an experience (which is what we mean when we say that an argument has a poetic structure or a poetic persuasiveness), and argumentative structures can articulate, but not really establish, the meaning of crucial but non-propositional experiences. Argument can give shape to, can develop, can bring into flower, experiences of this kind, but argument does not rule them. Argument’s relation to experience is a poetic one, and logical rules have the same relationship to such experiences that prosodic rules do
to the meaningfulness of poems.

The God of the philosophers, seen only as the creature of argument, who has only the attributes the philosopher can prove him to have, is of course a stick figure. God is what itches the philosopher into philosophy, not the object of philosophical proofs. And divine philosophy is a way of experience, not a way of knowledge. Does the good have the same relationship to ethical philosophy that God does to philosophical theology? The only things that save theology from ridicule is its ability sometimes to face one with the living God. (It does happen, really.) Does philosophical ethics likewise have one foot in absurdity — the attempt to discover the moral life by calculation — but have the other foot in poetry, in the live experience of ethical vocation? Logic here is not the defining ground of truth and falsity but the ritual precondition of an experience (as prayers are the ritual preconditions of transubstantiation).

Somehow the openness to this kind of experience is crucial to our sense of being human and to our sense that being a human being is a valuable thing to be. Deep experiences impose on us a moral burden and a moral project and demand realization in an honorable habit of life. The problem is that deep experiences, as Emerson and Schleiermacher knew, lend themselves to immediate self-falsification; faiths become creeds, a shared moral project becomes a destructive national mystique, a god becomes an idol, a moral calling becomes operatic moral narcissism. But the fact that these experiences almost inevitably play us false does not in itself prove that they never have any truth in them.

5 The chaos of willing

The reader will notice that this account of the compelling force of moral obligations resembles my account elsewhere of what I called “visceral recognitions,” the experience of the Socratic daimon that underlies the sense that one has when one replies that “Your argument is consistent, but something still makes me gag at it.” If one ever breaks out of an imprisoning formalism, an explanatory universe so complete from within its premises that it is sealed against counterexamples (Marxism, Freudianism, Darwinism, and Classical Economics each are or can be imprisoning formalisms), it is only a “visceral recognition” which enables one to do so. In both cases of Socrates daimon, compelling moral second thoughts and visceral recognitions, a phrenetic know-how about our thoughts does not heteronomously overthrow the results of reflection but does prompt reflection to examine whether it really has probed to the bottom of the question. Although these versions of the socratic daimon have only regulative rather than constitutive force, their power should not be estimated.

Our strongest moral convictions are sometimes of this kind. For all of his professed skepticism, for instance, Socrates was powerfully certain of many things, and what he had the most certainty about were convictions which most of his interlocutors find so incredible that they barely take in what he means by them.⁵ None of Socrates’ convictions is more unshakeable than that it is better to suffer wrong than to do it, except perhaps his equally non-obvious conviction that the satisfactions offered by love of power are ultimately not only shallow and degrading but also not really satisfactions. Not even sympathetic interlocutors such as Adeimantus or Glauc on are ever brought fully to this view (here I am assuming that there is at least a shadow of the early Socrates in the middle books of the Republic, even if the style of argument in that text is wholly foreign to Socrates). And yet Socrates’ convictions are not irrational, even if they are not the rigorous consequence of his premises. They are not the fruit of moral calculation, but they clearly arise from somewhere only the Socratic daimon gives us direct access to: they do not positively circumvent reason (Socrates’ position is at least no more obviously irrational than Thrasymachus’ is), and they are elaborated using reason’s means, but they originate from somewhere in the shadows within reason, not from somewhere beneath it. They are not held as a consequence of premises, but they are responsible for the meaning of the arguments Socrates does make from premises. Unlike dogmatic or heteronomous convictions, they are not finally limitations upon freedom, for their function is to keep the mind detached from powerful attractions (such as love of power, or ethical skepticism, with its unearned claim to superior realism) in which the mind would otherwise be imprisoned. The function of this kind of conviction is not a heteronomous one, for it keeps open a question that the mind is subject to powerful temptations to foreclose prematurely, the question of whether anything matters other than power and pleasure. The workings of such convictions takes place at the limit of reason, as they do at the limit of the
will.

One consequence of the fact that morally crucial experiences take place at the exact limit of the will is that such experiences, so telling and unmistakable when one is in their grip, are hedged around always with doubts and ambivalences whenever one has upon them the purchase of distance. I will call this consequence “the chaos of willing.” Part of the experience of the chaos of willing is the experience of the will’s always failed sovereignty over itself. Arendt, first in *Between Past and Future*, and in more detail in *The Life of the Mind*, describes this experience, first articulated in Paul but most fully thought through by Augustine, who saw this opposition between willing and nilling as the endless stalemate between moral will and physical impulse, or between a will to do the right and a perverse but undeniable will to destruction and death.

The impasse is a function not so much of the strength of a contrary inner will (a nill, as it were), but of the fact that the one thing the will cannot will is to will itself a better will. What I want, Augustine cries, is to want better things; but that’s precisely the thing I can’t do simply by wanting to, since I may want better things for bad reasons, or have bad reasons for wanting better reasons. If I do find myself wanting better things, it can’t be because I have been able to make myself do so, but only because I have discovered that somehow I already did. (This is the paradoxical logic of Donne’s sonnet “Batter my heart, Three-personed God”: “For I, / Except that you enthrall me, never shall be free.”)

The transformation of the will happens only at the will’s exact limit — by grace, by the force of something both within and beyond us, an aboriginal self unknown to my psychological or social identity and yet intimately intertwined with it. The power of things that transform the will at the will’s exact limit will always be subject to second thoughts and will always raise unanswerable and paralyzing questions about authenticity and bad faith. In the heat of the moment the self-transforming power Emerson describes in “Self-Reliance” looks at best like antinomianism and at worst like narcissism. But, as Emerson himself remarks, “if anyone thinks this law is lax, let him try to live by it one day.” For if we learn, in Kierkegaard’s phrase, that purity of heart is to will one thing, the next thing we learn is that willing one thing is beyond us, that self-serving, self-dramatization, and self-deceit always displace our morally crucial motivations as soon as we catch sight of them, and our high profession turns out to be a kind of aria we sing on what Robert Penn Warren calls the high secret stage of self. And indeed the inability to face down the chaos of willing is the hallmark of the characters in Warren’s fiction who succumb to moral panic, behaving like fanatics not because they are in the grip of a transforming belief but because they suspect that they might believe nothing after all. “Power ceases in the instant of repose,” Emerson remarks in “Self-Reliance,” noticing in that moment how instantly the becoming and restless, endless, self-overcoming of vocation dissolves into the chaos of willing or hardens into dogmas that betray the faith from which they sprang and which they were an attempt to express. “Power ceases in the instant of repose,” falling either on one side into nothing or on the other into force.

There is a difference between opposing one’s impulses (Homeric heroes, after all, do that, and are placed in quandaries about it), and opposing one’s own will. The chaos of willing is a situation in which one’s own will divides and confronts itself as an alien being. What Augustine learns is not that he has bad desires but that he is sick in his will. He wills to have a better will, but that is not fully in the power of the will.

The will divides only under the pressure of an absolute but inscrutable moral imperative. The division in Augustine’s will is the division between the city of man and the city of God, which is to say not just between good and bad desires but between good and bad ways of seeing the world as a whole. The chaos of the will is the reflection of the pressure of a kind of ethical standard, a standard that is separate from the ethical commonplaces of a culture and which can criticize those cultures in a wholesale way, not merely as not living up to their values but as wholly devoted to mistaken values.

Conventional morality is consonance with the ruling commonplaces of a culture, alignment with the available structure of roles, duties, and responsibilities which shape a form of collective life. Prophetic morality is distinguished by its ability to stigmatize a conventional morality as *tout court* devoted to illusion. And the chaos of willing is the inevitable consequence of a prophetic morality, because prophetic morality is capable of asserting that not just conventional morality but our internalized habits through which we make our way in the world are fundamentally wrong and that the things we have most relied upon are fundamentally unreal.

The chaos of willing explains one of the paradoxes of poetic inwardness. Poets often write poems in which they
confront their own experience of becoming initiated into poetry. But these poems, poems of election, often bear an uncanny similarity to palinodes, those poems in which the poet turns against his inspiration and bids farewell to poetry, as Laura Quinney points out. So, for instance, there is a close resemblance between the poetic logic of Wordsworth’s poem of election, “Tintern Abbey,” and his palinode, “Peele Castle,” so Whitman’s poem of election “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” closely parallels his palinode “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life.” What makes these parallels possible is that the poet at the moment of election — Wordsworth or Whitman in the examples above, or Emily Dickinson in “There’s a Certain Slant of Light,” or Elizabeth Bishop in “In the Waiting Room,” — is not somebody endowed with power but somebody who feels a power he or she will never control, a power which is sometimes exercised against rather than for the poet. What the poet learns from the inward experience of election is not his or her inner greatness but erotic loss, death, longing. But the places where these things happen are also the places where greatness dwells — not the greatness the poet wields but the greatness the poet serves, before which he or she must remain humble. This is why the poetic sublime confronts the poet as alien and even non-human, why the poetic moment has joy and terror at the same time. The poet is not endowed with the ability to articulate great things, but feels the pressure of something great which demands but exceeds articulation, something before which the poet always feels preterite and in the face of which the poet’s consolations feel like whistling in the dark. The romantic poet does not speak the orphic word but registers the pressure that word exerts upon the language it deforms.

It is because the pressure of poetic inspiration is the pressure of something which demands but evades articulation that poetic inspiration is always subject to the paralyzing doubt that the poet is merely fooling him or her self. Imagination begins with the rejection of fancy, and it is the necessity of eluding self-deceit that makes imaginative power an austere thing, as the necessity of rejecting the idea that God is a louder-voiced version of one’s self underlies the ascetic rejection of religious language that marks the truly religious sensibility. The poet must reject narcissism because whatever poetry is it is debased by being put to the service of venal needs. Skepticism about putatively imagined experiences is an ascetic way of purifying the imagination of ulterior motives and personal limitations, and it is an asceticism that proceeds infinitely, since even asceticism can be the subject of self-deceit.

The muse is not a narcissistic projection. If it were, good poetry would be a lot easier to write than it is. The muse demands an unfolding process of relationship and engagement from the poet, and like all such processes — like intimacy itself — many of its steps are false ones, and even a successful one is the upshot of great many failures. The risk is that in rejecting narcissism the poet also rejects selfhood entirely — hence the association between inspiration and fatal varieties of intoxication.

The fact that the will is chaotic raises the question of what gets to count as an expression of my will. Every act issues out of a welter of intentions, some of them contradictory. Each intention is entertained at a different scale of time, and perhaps with different amounts of investment. What the upshot of my intentions is is something I can only sometimes describe with assurance, not only because of the scatteredness and ambivalence of my thoughts, but also because the implications of my thoughts are not all present to me at the same time, and when I see them fully I may well change my assessment of them, an act which speaks neither for my consistency nor for my inconsistency. “My will” exists only in virtual time, not in real time. It flourishes in that time out of time when the meaning of my intentions becomes clear to me and renders a comprehensive account of my fluctuating volitions, neither reducing them to an average nor weighing momentary impulses more heavily than they deserve. What gets to represent me should be neither my spontaneity, which does not sort out what I am durably invested in from what I am momentarily seized by, nor my considered self, which plays false all of the turbulent and contradictory things of which it is made. My will, what gets to represent me, exists only in a time out of time, a present with duration, which the real present does not have. In any real present my story is still untold and any account of me falsifies some potentiality or some implication or some allegiance. My agency issues from an implicitness that nothing ever makes fully explicit.

I wrote earlier of the paradoxical attraction that determinism holds for idealist sensibilities. One would think of determinism as a philosophy that encourages passivity, if only because it teaches that none of one’s actions make a difference since the outcome of one’s project is inevitable. Yet determinist theories have had an elan and a world-historical force that theories of freedom have been hard-pressed to match. Consider, for instance, the heroism older Marxists used to expend in the name of history, whose course seemed inevitable to them. My first thought was to say
that the sacrifice of freedom these causes demand is the price of the grandeur they offer — that my life is a larger thing if it is swept up in History than it is if it’s all spent getting pleasure and money. But that doesn’t fully explain the genuine heroism such convictions sometimes called forth, even in bad causes, because those who do this do not feel themselves to be sacrificing their freedom at all. Quite the reverse, they feel themselves to be discovering it.

What people discover when they embrace determinism is an inner will deeper than their own will and thus truly themselves. They are finding a source of will at the same time powerfully intimate to them and also unknown to them, a real me who is mysterious to me but more in possession of the meaning of my being me than any version of myself that is present to my experience (the reader will notice that this is the same language one might use to describe the experience of grace, which likewise cuts the Gordian know of the chaos of willing). Because the will is a chaos, because we do not want what we want to want, because nothing we know of ourselves satisfies our sense that we are selves, we reach through self to the intimate other — indeed, to the muse — that a theory of determinism proposes for us. Determinism is a way of resolving the chaos of will by, Heidegger’s phrase, willing not to will.

Is determinism the only theory which enables contact with the intimate other which grounds the will beyond its own chaos? No; theories of transcendence can also do this, and theories of transcendence are available even to Liberalism. But contemporary Liberalism is embarrassed by theories of transcendence, preferring to entertain them — as acts of value-positing — rather than to believe them. That is why liberals so often feel small in the presence of those who are in fact finally not much better than fanatics.

To demand the purity of heart to will one thing is to propose a test that nobody can pass. Acts of this kind are supposed to spring out of a lucid and intense present in which I am and I am, and what I am is known to me in a wholly satisfactory although perhaps wholly implicit way. But the first fact one knows about one’s own will is its ambivalence. What finally issues from me as an act is only what survives from a tangle of contradictory impulses, hesitations, and desires, some of which I recognize as transitory and “not really what I am about,” others of which may strike me as deep but also as obscure, as things which I do not fully understand but wish to see where they lead. No will can be wholehearted in the way the test proposes. In fact, the only time my will becomes simple is not when it springs hot out of my own immediacy but when I have reflected upon it and sorted it out: it is like the poem I write once I have crossed out all the false starts and wrong turns, a poem which represents my intentions more fully than the groping draft does, because even as I take these wrong turns I recognize that there is something off about them, something to be “cleaned up” later. And the presentness of a poetic speaker (to pursue the metaphor) is not the actual present in which the actual poet hangs fire over a word and walks about the room or the actual present in which a reader recites it haltingly aloud, but an intensely imagined present which either of them win through to only once the poem is complete. But this achieved presentness is exactly what the notion of spontaneous, wholehearted authenticity thought it was ruling out.

My own will, that is to say, is as mysterious and as incalculable as that great abstraction “the will of the people.” And the process of shaping an act is not much different from that of formulating a law in a heterogeneously divided legislature. It will reflect several different time-scales: the temporary equilibrium I have been able to work out over the time allotted to deliberation, and the longer-term homeostasis through which I shape by best self and discover what my momentary intuitions really come to.

If the necessity of standing the test of reflection distinguishes a calling at the limit of the will from arbitrary decisionism, it is still the risk of anything at the limit of the will that it can confuse the boundaries between calling and obsession, between finding one’s destiny and choosing one’s juggernaut. (Recognizing that risk is after all one of the things that makes the chaos of willing chaotic.)

The chaos of willing, if it takes on constitutive rather than regulative force, becomes a dark Dionysian quest for authenticity. Any theory of value which gives inwardness a constitutive power is an authenticity theory, a theory which grounds value by tying it to the dictates of a god within, who, being a god, can lead one anywhere (as the gods lead Euthyphro).

Authenticity theories resolve themselves into pursuit of an elân that possesses the mind but cannot be fathomed by it. They promise access to something deep and value-creating. But that deep thing retreats before us like the beloved of Shelley’s “Alastor.” Pursuit of such a source is pursuit of something which always eludes us, something which we
always betray, something about which every claim we make is not even a half-truth but already a lie.

Pursuit of a constitutive inwardness is a kind of demonic possession. Or rather, it is a longing for a kind of possession, but it keeps turning into fakery and hocus-pocus. It keeps promising the ability to leap into faith. But whenever we make that leap we discover not faith but narcissism. Pursuit of a constitutive inwardness is like being swept up in a movement: one cannot say what it means, one cannot hold it to account, one merely feels it as meaningful and goes where it takes one. How many steps is it, then, from the leap of faith to the will to power? (And how many steps is it from the will to power to the dance of Shiva?)

A regulative inwardness does not have the same force as a constitutive one, for its work is to produce second thoughts, circumspection, distance on one’s own intuitions, exactly the things a constitutive inwardness leads one to dismiss as signs of inauthenticity. Socrates’ daimon has a dispossessing, not a possessing force.

Those who sacrifice themselves in the name of a great dark vision of inevitable process also, after all, think of themselves as acting in freedom and in its service, and when one builds altars to the beautiful necessity that crushes us that building is usually done by the very self that discovers the purpose of its self-reliance in building the altar upon which it is to be sacrificed. Because in practice we never really know not only how our acts will turn out but also which act is finally the right one, even what issues in reflection has something of a wager about it. How many of us, for instance, have been made fools of by the certain political convictions of our youth? As long as it is in the nature of things that every “lesson of history” unfits one to learn the next lesson, as the lesson of Sarajevo in 1914 unfits much of Europe for learning the lesson of Munich in 1938, it is a fair bet that even the wisest political acts will be to some extent leaps of faith. But recognition of the fact that moral and political acts always remain moral wagers reconstructs the Euthyphro problem inside its very solution: is what is right what I could reason about in advance to seeing my way clear to do, or is it what merely happened, once I had weathered all of its unforeseen consequences, to come out right?

It is customary to think of the turn into the chaos of willing as an unambiguously bad thing. Arendt’s Robespierre (in On Revolution) is drawn into a death-spiral of increasing bloodshed in order to prove, not only to the multitude but to his own unanswerable self doubt, the sincerity of his anguish for the sufferings of the poor. The countercultural figures Trilling rebukes in Sincerity and Authenticity are caught up in the same self-defeating drama, and the depressing replacement Richard Sennett describes (in The Fall of Public Man) of the language of public deliberation by the language of intimate expressivity (the stereotyped language, I might add — “the intimate revelations of young men are largely plagiarized,” as Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway remarks) is an example of a similar dynamic. If, as Adorno claims, the jargon of authenticity obscures, perhaps strategically, what it professes to clarify, then perhaps the public world of deliberation and action, in which one plays out a persona which both is and is not one’s self (as “my Hamlet” both is and is not me) offers an alternative to the chaos of willing. “Enough of this navel-gazing,” one hears, “Go up into the public world of deliberation and action.” (“Do that which lies nearest you,” Carlyle’s Teufelsdrock chants as he comes out of the Eternal No in Sartor Resartus, “and the next thing will be that much the clearer.”) It is as if one were to reject the Thoreau of Walden for the Thoreau of “Resistance to Civil Government,” unaware that they are not only the same man but that the one Thoreau is the condition for the other. The chaos of willing is meant to be faced, not to be blustered down, and facing it as it is ought to produce modesty, pragmatism, generosity, and worldly realism, the moral constellation of Melville’s Rolfe, not Melville’s Ahab.

6 Freedom and Pattern

The least one can say is that Freedom is not the region that is left outside of reflection, a region to which nothing that happens in reflection matters. Quite the reverse: freedom is the medium in which reflection happens, and compelling principles that reflection discovers are compelling because they are freely discovered. The compelling force of reasons that reflection tests is a different thing from the compelling force of a man with a stick. The Kantian distinction between the “is” and the “ought,” contested recently (and unfairly, I hope to show) by Macpherson and MacIntyre, means nothing more than that a law of nature and a law of freedom exercise compulsion in strongly different senses of that word, that the force of reason is or can be a very different thing from the reason of force.
The division of the world into “the place where reflection has something to say” and “the place where we are free to do whatever we will” ignores the fact that un compelled reflection is the defining characteristic of freedom, and freedom of one kind or another is the element of reflection. But if that division misunderstands the world of Rule, it also, and about as deeply, misunderstands the world of Spontaneity. For the things we do freely, especially the things we do with a kind of virtuosity, are valuable roughly in proportion to depth of reflection out of which they proceed. That reflection need not be propositional, or even conscious — think of the subtle but intuitive sense of his or her art a great jazz musician has — but it is far from arbitrary. Freedom is not something which must be protected from the intrusive force of reflection; freedom is the water in which reflection swims, and reflection, in producing pattern (to change the metaphor), extends and deepens freedom.

One way to imagine the relationship between reflection and freedom is to consider the relationship between pattern and variation in works of art. Part of the experience of a work of art that unfolds in time (such as music or literature) is the spectator’s effort to construct a representation of it in an abstract space, the space in which one speaks of the “shape” of a story or the “overarching structure” of a symphony. A work of art continuously transforms, expectations about what that shape will be. When we notice a pattern opening, we form an expectation about how it will close, but that expectation is never satisfied in exactly the manner in which we formed it. For either that pattern is broken across a different pattern — as for instance when a story “takes a turn” or when, in Frost, the “sentence sound” of the ordinary human voice (whatever that is) plays out a kind of diffraction pattern with the regular tactus of the formal pentameter. Or our expectation of a closed pattern is transformed by our awareness of other patterns at different scales — as for instance when a little well-shaped melody begins to be seen as part of a set of variations that itself has a shape, or when one simultaneously sees a small stretch of narrative prose as part of an exchange, a passage, a chapter, an episode, and a novel.

Aesthetic experiences always happen only in those places where pattern and predictability are at odds. The retrospective sense one forms as one goes of “the story thus far” must never, for instance, be absolutely identical with the prospective sense one forms as one goes of “how this one’s going to end.” Or parts serendipitously fall into very different wholes at very different scales, so that the patternedness, not only the breaking of patterns, is also part of the novelty. My sense of aesthetic experiences here follows the theories the linguist Ray Jackendoff has proposed about the psychology of music. He has in mind merely our ability to recognize a series of tones as a melody, say, but also our ability to call a melody “interesting” or “novel.” Jackendoff’s very sophisticated model accounts not only for how musical affect is tied to the play of expectation and (not quite) satisfaction, but also how a piece of music does not lose its ability to seem meaningful to us once we already know it thoroughly.9

All this is not merely to motivate the old cliche that a life well lived is a kind of work of art. (Nor is it to motivate the revolting cliche that politics should resemble art — a cliche that in our century has been used, as Benjamin described it, to replace political thought by the stampeding force of mass spectacle.) It is to say that we do not recognize the merely random and arbitrary as a kind of freedom — what has more sameness to our ears than white noise, even if white noise is in fact totally unpattered? — but that our experience of freedom is an experience of living changingness in which pattern is always present but in which how the pattern will close is not predictable in advance. Another way of saying the same thing is that we value other people’s freedom partly because we hope that their stories will make a kind of sense to us and because upon close examination we always learn not only that their stories are not only not “the kind of thing we’ve heard a thousand times before” but are also never quite over. If there is any kinship between the aesthetic world and the political world it is that both seek to give an expressive realization to freedom through the continuously opening development of patterns. (This is what Kant seems to have in mind in the Critique of Judgment when he says that what one artist learns from another is not to imitate the first’s technique but to imitate the first artist’s freedom.)10 If I respect a work of art, I know that there is some depth in it not captured by my summary accounts of it. If I respect a person, I know that the more I know about that person the less likely I am to regard his or her story as already done with. Whatever else Spontaneity is, it is not mere randomness, but the sense that there will always be more to something than one has already been able to account for. Spontaneity is not the opposite of pattern but the live development of pattern. If laws of freedom are the fruit of free reflection, they are also, ideally speaking, the conditions of possibility of new kinds of spontaneity. Which is what I mean (although it may not be what Milton
meant) by “Reason also is choice.”

7 Calling and Justice

One of the things that lends freedom its dignity is that deep uses of freedom commit it to courses that sacrifice some
of that freedom, as any deep passion forecloses other passions or any deep task exacts a discipline in which sacrifice
and reward are intertwined. It is not only that every calling sacrifices other callings to itself, but also that every deep
calling, from love and poetry to teaching and politics and whatever, sacrifices some expressive possibilities to the
internal discipline of that calling, but in so doing reveals new expressive possibilities that could never have been made
available without that discipline. The severe discipline of a calling is not only the price but also the instrument of that
calling’s expressive possibilities, and a life vitalized by a calling is one image of how principle and freedom can be
reconciled, how the Euthyphro question can be answered.

Whatever freedom is, it is not something which exists only in arenas where the mind has no judgment to make.
And whatever reflection is, it is not something which imagines freedom as a kind of nuisance or exception; reflection
matters to us because it helps us to understand the meaning of our freedom, which implies that freedom neither repels
reflection absolutely nor is dictated to down to the smallest particulars by reflection. Whatever a discipline is, whatever
a worthy practice is, it is something that is responsible to both sides of the “Euthyphro question” to both principle and
choice. This dual responsibility, to principle and to choice, is part not only of the moral life of individuals as they seek
a calling, but also of the common life citizens shape together in a republic which is on one hand more than a joint
stock company for trade in pepper and slaves and less than the City of God (where I get to say what God has in mind).

This wisecrack at Edmund Burke’s expense obscures the ways in which the argument I am developing both is
and is not Burkean. Like Burke, or like Oakeshott, I see that naked abstractions are not enough to invent a society
with or to revolutionize deeply embedded social practices. But it does not follow for me, as it does for Burke or
Oakeshott, that the embeddedness of those practices, and their entanglement with the many implicit threads of living,
should shield those practices from critique from an abstract point of view. I concede that sometimes when we pull on
the loose thread of an injustice we find ourselves unraveling the garment in which it is tangled, since that thread has
unanticipated and unanticipatable connections with other things, fragile things, that matter to us. At the same time I
argue also that it is a mistake to treat embedded practices as the widest horizon within which critique can take place.

The widest horizon of critique, the horizon of transcendent first principles, is not fully available to us, since those
principles tend to be slippery and abstract in the first place (so that what their dictation amounts to in particular cases
is not always certain), and in the second place reaching after them has a way of maddening the moral personality. But
access to that absolute horizon is not the only alternative to imprisonment in the world of practice, because even from
within the world of practice one keeps running up against unanticipated resistances, that sense that “there is something
the matter here” with which the Socratic daimon is always tripping one up. The unanticipated, and unanticipatable,
resistances keep forcing one out of the horizon of accepted practices, even if they do not yield one access to the
absolute. My view is ultimately not Burke’s, but Channing’s and Bushnell’s, the view that although we learn what
our morals mean from the relationships in which we are already embedded, those morals themselves force us to take
a critical stance toward those relationships. The critical ties of mind and heart from which moral critique proceeds,
although arising from this situatedness, from the ethical accident of being brought up in a particular time and place,
are not merely ethnic accidents but also guides (if only for a few steps), into a wider region of thought and life not
fully captured by ethnic accidents.\(^{31}\) We may not have easy access to values utterly detached from arrangements as
we know them already. But we do have the urging of the Socratic daimon to keep us uneasy with those arrangements
and on the lookout for a better way.

In American circumstances this concession, that we never have access to values that are completely free from our
implicit practices, means that I read the American revolution, with Arendt in On Revolution and with Habermas in
Theory and Practice, as distinguished from the French revolution by its ability to call upon concrete political traditions
which were already a part of the political experience of the founders. (This argument too is made in different ways
by Burke and by Tocqueville, and indeed the distinction is a commonplace of nineteenth century political thought on
both sides of the Atlantic.) To make this claim is to say that the founders’ doctrine of inalienable rights declared in self-evident truths was not an insight into an absolute order of being which yielded them political imperatives which they had to impose upon a completely resistant social order (as the doctrine of rights was for Robespierre), but an insight into a political life they had already lived their way into, in town government, and in colonial legislatures.

I call the founders’ doctrine of inalienable rights an insight, however, and not a commonplace. If Jefferson’s insight into self-evident truths about inalienable rights were a commonplace, it would make a claim that would be so obvious as not to require stating, a claim that, while perhaps itself unprovable, would be so strange to deny that one would not know what to make of someone who denied it. To declare a self-evident truth is not merely to notice a commonplace; it is to proclaim an insight. To proclaim an insight is at once a constative and a performative act, for it is performative insofar as the proclamation is meant to have force and is meant to make something happen (a revolution in mores and politics), and constative in that it claims that the insight captures the meaning of practices and institutions in which even those who deny it are already thoroughly imbricated. When I declare a self-evident truth I tell you that you have already made certain kinds of promise, even though you may not know it in any explicit way and may deny it if asked about it. I have had a powerful, if contestable, insight into the meaning of what you and I are already doing, and in proclaiming it I promise to bend myself (and maybe you, to the extent that I can persuade you) to fulfill those promises.

Jefferson’s self-evident truths are insights, pinpricks of the daimon, not commonplaces, because although the founders’ practices had put them in a position to apprehend the power of Jefferson’s doctrine, it was far from being a doctrine they were fully willing or able to put into practice (or that their descendants have been fully willing or able to put into practice either). The founders were, after all, violators of those self-evident truths about rights, and so are we. In fact, by proclaiming them as self-evident truths they conceded that there are many who would not find them to be so, conceding not only that they themselves have failed to live up to the promise they are only now aware of having already made, but also that many among them might not concede that they have made this promise at all. Arendt is particularly alive to the pathos of declaring something to be a self-evident truth. She sees Jefferson’s act as one of proclaiming to the world — and of reminding himself as well — a truth implicit in its practices but disavowed in those same practices. (Indeed, proslavery writers like Thomas R. Dew, or William Harper, or James Henry Hammond, routinely singled out Jefferson’s doctrine for ridicule.) But Jefferson did not invent those rights, and those self-evident truths, out of whole cloth. Although, as MacIntyre insists, there is no language for rights in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, or Arabic before the 15th century, the founders saw that they had already lived their way into a world of rights and duties, that before they had made themselves explicitly aware of them, they were already thoroughly bound up in them, even if now as well as then they (and we) did not fully understand the entailments they engender.

The crucial claim is that investment in received practices is not under all circumstances submission to the heteronomous tutelage of habit, for those practices are haunted by insights into depths of meaning and obligation that are beyond habit. A critical insight into the meaning of practices is the only thing that can bridge the gap between a human but thoroughly heteronomous world of habits and a morally compelling but inhuman world of principles. Such an insight is a route to a transcendent value, not because that transcendence declares itself in so many words in the insight, but because one cannot tell in advance just how far that insight will lead. Jefferson’s insights arose from the republican habits of life in which he was already initiated, but they led him and us far from the hierarchical and racist society in which he had that insight, however phronetically, and intermittently, and imperfectly. And for all the phronetic messiness, Jefferson’s insights remain in contact with both sides of the Euthyphro problem, with both the human lifeworld and the critical and liberating but inhuman absolute.

Habermas’ formulation is telling to me:

The revolutionary act itself cannot have the same significance, when in the one place [The United States] it is a matter of setting free the spontaneous forces of self-regulation in harmony with Natural Law, while in the other [France], it seeks to assert for the first time a total constitution in accordance with Natural Law against a depraved society and a human nature which has been corrupted. In the one place, revolutionary force is mobilized for the restriction of despotically unrestrained power; in the other, for the construction of a natural order which cannot count on a natural basis which will meet it halfway.

Although the sanity of the American doctrine of inalienable rights is rooted in its derivation from the “rights of
Englishmen,” those rights are not only or merely a version of the rights of Englishmen, although they are not the Rights of Man and Citizen either.

Because Robespierre could not count on an already naturalized tradition of self-rule, he had to assume that the public habits of the people he sought to rule were completely corrupt. He therefore had to adopt a strict view of the contaminating power of interests in public life, a view very different from that of the American founders, who assumed that citizens would of course have private interests, that interests are not inherently shameful, and that fair dealing among worldly persons who have interests but are not prisoners of their interests is a better image of public life than mystified talk about the public interest or the general will. The Americans were free to adopt a relaxed view of interests because they did not have to invent a theory of the public good from whole cloth. Their ability to maintain this relaxed view was not a function of their rampant materialism but of their already sturdy moral consensus and of their traditions of public negotiation with each other over interest issues. They did not see interest and virtue as opponents because an ethos of fair dealing is not scandalized by the fact of interest. They were, in Bruce Ackerman’s telling phrase, neither Public Citizens concerned only with the glory of the state, nor Pure Privatists concerned only with getting and spending, but private citizens who knew how to make promises and keep them, and who valued a culture in which the making and keeping of promises is a form of public life.

When Arendt argues for the separation of “the political” from “the social,” she is often taken to mean that political institutions must not concern themselves with the material conditions of life. This view of her claim is shared by those who reject her thought in wholesale ways and by those who have some qualified sympathy with her thinking, by Pangle, say, or Kateb, or Whitfield, or, most recently, Hanna Pitkin. Indeed, Arendt herself seems to suggest (with a certain snobbish incomprehension of American politics that always clouded her view of current events) that politics should be above grubby things like getting and spending and that welfare-state liberalism should be regarded as venal. But surely Arendt’s claim is motivated not by a desire that governments keep their hands out of economic matters but by a desire that governments not be so panicked by the spectacle of urgent human misery that they trample the institutional basis of fair deliberation. Arendt invented the distinction to make clear her sense of how Madison’s view of politics differed from Robespierre’s, and certainly Madison’s politics has a great deal of concern with the social and economic life of the people. The difference is in Madison’s relatively relaxed view of interest politics: he does not seek to solve social problems by repressing thought about interest in the desire to make the General Will clear to itself, but to enable people with interests to deal with each other in a fair but thoroughly worldly way. Arendt’s anxieties about “the social” were anxieties about a particular kind of political panic which urgent human needs make us liable to, a kind of panic which not only winds up subjecting political institutions to the metabolism of necessity and force, but which usually undo the attempt to meet those urgent needs which motivated the panic in the first place. Arendt is no apologist for Lochnerism, although modern Lochnerians may cite her and modern anti-Lochnerians may abuse her.

Lacking a developed tradition of self-rule, Robespierre and his like had to assume that interest only had a contaminating force, and therefore had to resort to tyranny in the interest of purity. Again Habermas’ formulation is perspicuous:

[Robespierre] held fast to the principle that the establishment of Natural Law by means of the power of an internally coercive sovereign guaranteeing freedom and equality, was possible, only on the basis of virtue and not on that of interest. Consequently, the problem of a successful completion of the Revolution was posed for him in the following form: how can the sentiments of virtue be generated among the mass of the population? “The society would bring forth its crowning work if with respect to moral concerns it created a vivid instinct in men, which would induce them to do good and avoid evil without the additional aid of thought.”

I do not believe, as Hegel does, that the excesses of the French Revolution are somehow the consequences of Enlightenment as a whole. But it is easy to see how the belief that a new kind of virtuous citizen would have to be created from whole cloth by means of coercion, a belief that follows immediately from the idea that virtue and interest are irreconcilable opposites, can motivate almost anything. It is this specific claim, not the more general claim against the Enlightenment, that Habermas argues Hegel had in mind in his famous denunciation of the revolutionary Terror:
The relation, then, of these two [the ideal of universal freedom and the actual freedom of individuals],
since they exist for themselves indivisibly and absolutely and thus cannot arrange for a common part to
act as a means for connecting them, is pure negation entirely devoid of mediation, the negation, moreover,
of the individual as a factor existing within the universal. The sole and only work and deed accomplished
by universal freedom is therefore death — a death that achieves nothing, embraces nothing within its
grasp; for what is negated is the unachieved, unfulfilled punctual entity of the absolutely free self. It is
thus the most cold-blooded and meaningless death of all, with no more significance than cleaving a head
of cabbage or swallowing a draught of water.

A public insight like Jefferson’s has some of the features of a calling. Like a calling, it reveals to us what we
already were, even when we denied it. Like a calling it demands of us that we continue to become, that we continue
to transform ourselves into better keepers of those promises we had already made before we saw them. But, also like
a calling, a public insight remains disputable. A calling is disputed always by the chaos of the will. But even in the
midst of the chaos of the will, a calling lends itself to moments of pure and indisputable clarity, in which I do will one
thing and one thing purely. This never happens in the case of public insights (except in moments of mass hysteria,
where what seems to clarify the will is some intoxicating confusion). There is after all no such thing as a public will.
There are only the promises made by public institutions by people engaged in persuading each other about things they
both agree and differ about.

Autonomy and discipline are in harmony is the concept of a calling, but the common life of citizens, particularly
under conditions in which they find themselves in profound moral conflict even as they are also profoundly tied to each
other, cannot be brought under the concept of a calling without transforming that calling into something repressive
and heteronomous. Whatever citizenship is, it is, like a calling, something responsible both to freedom and to the
constraint of principle, but it cannot bind freedom and principle into the tight unity a calling demands. For callings
are the hallmark of voluntary associations, and societies are not voluntary associations: we are born into them, we are
thrown into their midst. Yet on the other hand, we have a stake in each other, and a stake in our common life, even
if that stake is not the same thing as a calling. The difficulty of the problem of citizenship is to define a concept that
binds freedom and principle more weakly than a calling does, but does not bind them only so weakly as a mere modus
vivendi would bind them: there is more to liberal society than the mere promise to make as little trouble for each other
as we have to, but whatever moral investments citizens of a liberal society have in each other, they must not include
the ability to enlist the repressive machinery of state power on behalf of a vision of the meaning and purpose of life
merely because its adherents think of a particular such vision as an especially good one.

The questions raised by the problem of “calling” are transformed versions of the question of what relations liberal
societies, for whom a primary value is fairness, should have to communal visions of the good. The traditional vision
of Liberalism as the rule of fairness, a vision developed in Kant’s political writings but articulated most recently and
forcefully by Rawls and Ackerman, which requires public neutrality between competing visions of the good, has come
under heavy fire in the last twenty years, although in my view not all of that fire is accurate. A defensible conception
of liberal neutrality need not require citizens, when acting in their capacity as citizens (nor even the state, so long as its
means are limited) to adopt a position of complete indifference on all disputed questions of value, nor need the state
treat conflicts over values merely as a slightly less rational (less rational because less concrete) version of conflicts
over interests.

Critics of Liberalism such as MacIntyre, Sandel, Macpherson, Wolin, Unger and others criticize it first for being
neutral, and therefore in their view amoral, but also for being not neutral enough, in not being able to stomach every
imaginable point of view. A similar cleft stick has been argued from within the horizon of liberal thought by William
Galston. This cleft stick argument, never very telling to begin with, has been successfully met by several strains of
liberal argument, such as Galston’s own straightforward denial that strong neutrality was ever a liberal postulate; or
Ackerman’s vision of a “dualist democracy” which establishes a procedural separation between ordinary lawmaking
and higher lawmaking which, without drawing lines in the sand, functionally separates what liberal societies must be
neutral about from what they must not; or Rawls’ distinction between metaphysical and political Liberalism, and his
argument that even the latter, while not requiring assent to liberal values in every sphere, nevertheless requires and
generates an overlapping consensus of values that gives the adherents of different comprehensive doctrines, different visions of the meaning and purpose of life, reasons to deal with each other fairly, reasons that are ethical in nature, rather than merely prudential. The Rawlsian overlapping consensus, while a weaker motivation than a calling or a stirring vision of the good, is nevertheless the basis of a kind of Liberalism which is not a mere modus vivendi which people with different views might be willing to settle for as a second-best solution, given that they can’t exterminate their enemies, but rather a first-best solution which expresses deep insights into the common moral life of persons in a political society. One way of expressing the issue is to see the Lincoln-Douglas debates not, as Sandel does, as an argument between a Liberal Douglas and a Republican Lincoln, nor (more persuasively) as Greenstone does, as an argument between a Humanist (Democratic Party) Liberalism represented by Douglas and a Reformist (Republican Party) Liberalism represented by Lincoln, but as an argument over where Liberalism can safely argue on the basis of an overlapping consensus, and where it must retreat to arguments which assume only a modus vivendi.

Acknowledging an overlapping consensus is perhaps as close as a liberal society can come to discovering a calling. It is still an open question to me whether an overlapping consensus must take the form of a set of highly abstract core values to which all sides must subscribe (a view Rawls sometimes hints at but does not commit himself to); or whether it is instead a looser and more general allegiance to maintaining a world of political bargaining and engagement, in which all sides are bound together by their complicated relationships of agreement and disagreement, with many parties contending across many different and mutually entangled lines of division even if no particular claim is held by all of them in common. Or maybe, with Charles Larmore (and with Stephen Douglas) the best we can hope for is a modus vivendi, or maybe a modus vivendi and the hope of something more.

Notes

1 No, this paper is not going to worry the old theological questions, except perhaps to notice how far Milton’s God continues to haunt the contemporary intellectual life, disguised as Darwin or Marx.

2 The reader may be startled to notice that I take the point of Gilligan’s argument but don’t apply it to the question of gender, which is of course a subject of great interest to her. The reason is that I think that implicitness poses moral burdens for both genders, and while sensitivity to implicitness may or may not be a special province of one gender — the jury is still out on this, I think — the dual requirement to preserve faithfulness to nuance in moral argument without substituting the nice for the good applies equally to women and to men, although the moral challenge that dual requirement poses may, accidentally, present different sides to different people or kinds of people.

3 My argument here owes a great deal to the treatment of Herder in Charles Taylor’s Sources of the Self.

4 That said, I should make it clear that I don’t put Gilligan and Nussbaum in the same boat or identify the claims of the one with the claim of the other. Indeed, in most ways my project is similar to Nussbaum’s, and my key terms — situatedness, phronesis, implicitness, complexiveness (of which more later) — are recognizably akin to many of Nussbaum’s key values. Where we differ most sharply is in our evaluation of Kant. Nussbaum’s Kant is, together with Plato, the key exponent of non-fragile values, and the Kantian dualism that separates laws of nature from laws of freedom is for her a brutalizing distinction that ignores our imbrication in both worlds and the ways in which — as for instance in the case the development of children from a state of unconscious and abject dependency to reasoning adulthood — the two states are strongly dependent upon each other. This is the stern Kant of the second Critique. My own Kant is the Kant of the third Critique, a Kant who could imaginably be, like the elderly Plato in Nussbaum’s reading, more open to views rather like hers about the fragility of goodness. At the end of her life, Hannah Arendt sought to construct a Kantian vision of politics by seeking the bridge Kant’s political essays — also crucial texts for Rawls — and his Critique of Judgment.

5 Rawls increasingly treats the resort to the original position as something that happens at several levels, to regulate the relations among individuals, among comprehensive doctrines, and among peoples. Rawls does this, rather than imagining a once-and-for-all use of the original position, because he is looking for way to use the means of justice as fairness while also giving full respect to such things as comprehensive doctrines, nations, and so on, without which no vision of human life seems to be fully human, even though many of these things are given rather than chosen. Sandel’s claim in Democracy’s Discontent that Rawls’ philosophy cannot treat the given with the same respect it treats the chosen is simply false. Indeed, the work both of Political Liberalism and of The Law of Peoples is to accommodate justice as fairness to a vision of human life in which crucial features of our lives are given ones, brute but identity-giving facts such as the religion or nation into which we are born. It is still an open question to me whether it is reasonable to expect to be able to elaborate all of the occasions, as one seeks to adjust the relationships of ever-larger units, under which one might wish to imagine what one would choose from behind the veil of ignorance. One can only hope to do this if one has a much but exhaustive list of the kinds of givenness to which human beings are subject and whose quarrels have to be adjusted. But not much in Rawls’ philosophy stands or falls with this, because dealing with any kind of givenness we are inclined to quarrel with each other about, even those that are entangled with other kinds not at the same level of abstraction (as say in the case of class quarrels conceived of as crossing national lines or gender quarrels that can’t be separated from religious ones) still requires us to imagine something very like the Rawlsian original position if we are going to feel our way to any adjustment of that quarrel at all.
6 This argument first entered politics considerably earlier, in the famous “No Man Shall Compel” decree issued by Jan Sigismund at the Diet of Torda in 1568. But it’s fair to say that not much of the rest of Europe followed the example of that short-lived King of Transylvania.

7 I’m using the term “liberal” here loosely, not in the precise sense it had in France in Tocqueville’s day, where it represented a somewhat conservative political philosophy, a philosophy, associated with Constant and Tocqueville himself, which respected divided governments with modest powers— akin to Federalism and Whiggery in the United States of the same period — to be distinguished from insurgent and sometimes bloody-minded Republicanism. Whether the distinction between Liberalism and Republicanism in the Anglo-American world recently cried up by the followers of J.G.A. Pocock has anything to do with the Liberalism and Republicanism that contested each other in nineteenth century France is to me an unanswered question. Indeed, I am all but persuaded by Mark Hulliung that Pocock-style Republicanism, as a political formation distinct from and opposed to Liberalism, is probably a fantasy.

8 For a powerful analysis of the things that Socrates — as opposed to Plato — is certain about, see Gregory Vlastos, Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher.

9 Jackendoff’s theory is summarized in his brief book Languages of the Mind: Essays on Mental Representation, which also discusses many other versions — not just language, but also “social cognition” — which represent meaning in terms of the states of a combinatorial system which can, in Chomsky’s phrase, make infinite meaning out of finite means.

10 There is another link too, in that both depend upon an unfolding initiation of opinion in what Kant calls “enlarged mentality.” This is the link between the world of informed spectatorship of art and the world of public deliberation in politics that Arendt describes in Arendt’s Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy. Arendt’s earlier speculations on this subject are in Between Past and Future.

11 My reading of Channing here follows that developed by Daniel Walker Howe in The Unitarian Conscience.

12 This argument comes not from On Revolution but from Between Past and Future.

13 See Drew Gilpin Faust, The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830–1860 for telling selections from these writers.

14 Stephen Holmes’ delightfully pugnacious “The Permanent Structure of Antiliberal Thought” fairly characterizes this cleft stick argument as internally contradictory, and irrational on both sides. In fairness, however, I should note that many of the people Holmes attacks do not strike me as antiliberal.

References


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