New Studies in Practical Philosophy

Freud, Marx and Morals

New Studies in Practical Philosophy

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FREUD, MARX AND MORALS

HUGO MEYNELL

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Contents

<i>Editor's Foreword</i>	vii
Introduction	ix
1 Morality, Happiness and Epistemology	1
2 On Driving People Mad: Laing	24
3 Man as Animal: Lorenz	45
4 Corrupt Society: Marx	64
5 The Corrupt Individual Consciousness: Freud and Jung	104
6 The Objectivity of Value-Judgements	160
7 Conclusion	177
<i>References</i>	191
<i>Index</i>	206

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Editor's Foreword

A great deal of recent philosophical discussion about morality has turned on the following question. Are moral judgements, in the last logical analysis, grounded in principles of right or wrong, to which men simply decide that they will adhere; or, in certain facts about human nature, which necessarily determine what can, or cannot, count as its well-being? The schools of ethical theory called emotivism or prescriptivism incline to the former view and those called descriptivism or neo-naturalism to the latter.

In this book, Dr Meynell makes a distinctive contribution to the debate. He enters the lists armed with ideas which he has gleaned from various modern authors, most notably Freud and Marx. In all these writers he discovers a notion which he calls 'effective freedom'; and he contends that this conception takes us to the heart of the matter where morality is concerned. In seeking to elucidate it, he contends that there is a 'loose entailment' between what *is* the case concerning human nature and what *ought* to be the case in human conduct.

The attempt to show how the conception of human nature which we find in such popular authors as Freud and Marx can shed light on the fundamental issue about morality in analytical philosophy will, I think, interest all Dr Meynell's readers, whether they agree with his conclusions or not.

W. D. HUDSON

Introduction

Many people are only too eager to provide us with answers to the important question of how we ought to live our lives. But the answers which they give are, to say the least of it, various and conflicting. It is tempting simply to avoid undue attention to this awkward fact, and to plump for the answer which appeals to one's emotions, and, assuming its rightness, condemn without a hearing all rival claimants. Such a solution once adopted may last a person for a lifetime. Alternatively, he may move abruptly from one rival solution to another, repressing all doubts and difficulties during his periods of commitment.

But suppose someone fails to share the confidence of any one moral sect that all its rivals are absolutely and obviously wrong. He may then sincerely ask to which of the available general solutions it is most reasonable and responsible to give his allegiance. Or, having decided to adopt one position, he may notice that there are conflicting applications and interpretations of it, between which he wants to make a reasonable and responsible choice. Or again he may believe that one general interpretation and application of one overall viewpoint is clearly right, and yet wonder whether others may not have something useful to contribute on certain issues. How is such a person to proceed? It is this kind of problem that the present book is intended to clarify.

In many human societies and cultures of the past, it may have been not unreasonable to assume without question that one particular general account of what one ought to do and why was the correct one, and to be sure as a consequence of the wrongness of rival accounts. But in contemporary Western society a person has to be blind and deaf not to have constantly thrust on his attention general views on the matter which are radically discrepant with his own. He may allay his doubts by

assiduously cultivating the company of like-minded people, by refusing to attend to the arguments advanced against his own position, and by treating the alternatives with unreflective contempt, But however common such an attitude is in practice, it is difficult to see how it can survive sustained reflection. It would be a considerable mental and moral feat for a person to put it clearly and distinctly to himself, 'I assume my basic moral and political position without any serious consideration of the alternatives, and dismiss its rivals as unworthy of consideration just because they differ from the basic position I have thus arbitrarily and unreflectively adopted.' When this problem of ultimate justification is faced, it is apt to lead to moral scepticism and cynicism. The subject stands confronted by a number of accounts of what he ought in general to do, each convincing if he can bring himself to accept it uncritically, each extremely vulnerable if he starts bringing up awkward questions, and asking by virtue of what it is preferable to its rivals. He may well conclude that all overall moral and political views are equally arbitrary, 'right' for those to whom they happen to appeal, 'wrong' for those to whom they do not.

This book has been written in support of the conviction that moral dogmatism and moral scepticism are not the only available options; that the data are available on the basis of which a rational morality may be constructed and vindicated against opposing views. It summarises a number of influential accounts of the nature of man, and the moral conclusions which have been and may be drawn from them. It tries to bring out how these might be combined into a single consistent view. I hope it will give some pleasure and bring some comfort to readers who like to bring reasonable reflection to bear on their moral commitments. But if its effect were merely to give a little pause to those who are hostile to this sort of mental activity, it would to some extent have succeeded in its purpose.

What I attempt to establish may conveniently be summed up in the following four theses:

- (i) What is good depends to a great extent on what tends to promote the flourishing of individuals and communities;
- (ii) A number of influential modern writers have shed light on what constitutes or contributes to human flourishing;

(iii) There is a single thread running through their various accounts; namely, that what I shall call 'effective freedom' both is itself an aspect of human flourishing, and is a virtually necessary means of securing other aspects of it;

(iv) All that has been said can be reconciled with some trends in contemporary moral philosophy, and supply a justifiable corrective to others.